
The EU agricultural policy – delivering on adaptation to climate change

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The fight against climate change and its likely impacts is one of the major political priorities at global level and has been retained by the European Commission (EC) in its “Europe 2020 strategy”.

EC is preparing a European Adaptation Strategy (to be launched in March 2013). The objectives are to: improve and widen the knowledge base where gaps have been identified and enhance dissemination of adaptation-related information; support and facilitate exchange between Member States (MS), regions, cities and all other relevant stakeholders; develop initiatives for a more consistent and comprehensive integration of climate change adaptation into EU policies, including the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); and make further the case for public and private action on adaptation.

The current CAP contributes to adaptation by providing a basic level of income security to farmers, by shifting to decoupled support, which enables adaptation to market and agronomic conditions, as well as to climatic conditions, and by providing a basic framework for sustainable management of the natural environment (cross cross-compliance).

In addition, the support within the rural development policy provides possibilities for targeted support to a wide array of adaptation measures involving building adaptive capacity and implementing actions. However, planned adaptation measures are currently at a relatively early stage of development in the ongoing rural development programmes (RDP) for the period 2007–13. Large uncertainties of the climate effects remain for the time horizon of 2020–2030, particularly at detailed spatial scale, which makes planning difficult in many regions. The current focus is on actions that provide adaptive capacity (training, demonstration projects, information), rather than operations that either seek to reduce the risk or reduce the exposure. Most of the expected impacts on agriculture will come through water. All present discussions on adaptation in the EU involve water management as water is already a scarce resource in some catchments and risk of water stress is a key driver for change.

The CAP for the period 2014–2020 is currently being negotiated in the Council of the EU (which gathers MS) and the European Parliament. Today, the CAP needs to respond to some very new challenges, some of which are external ones. These are economic, environmental and social.

- The economic and financial crisis has exacerbated several economic challenges, relating to food security, income viability and severe price fluctuations, and squeezed margins owing to higher prices for inputs such as feed and energy. The variability of crop yields has indeed increased over the last decades as a consequence of extreme climatic events. European farmers will need to define their strategies for production, farm management and investment in the face of increasing uncertainty.
- The environmental challenges traditionally faced by agriculture are being exacerbated by climate change. Now, more than ever, farmers have to contribute to climate change mitigation; they have to face climatic changes that are also impacting the natural environment on which agriculture and livestock takes place.
- And thirdly, there is the territorial challenge, which is an important objective of the EU to ensure that rural areas remain vital, through making agriculture more diverse and reversing the demographic trends. The uneven effects of climate change are expected to amplify regional differences and exacerbate economic disparities between European rural areas.

The new CAP aims to achieve three basic objectives of the European Union: to make our agriculture more competitive; to make it more environmentally sustainable; and keep vital agricultural activities and rural areas across EU territory. On the environment front, the aim of the next CAP will be to manage natural resources more sustainably, to strengthen mitigation of GHG emissions and enhance farmers' resilience to threats posed by climate change and variability. This is therefore the first time that the concept of resilience explicitly enters into the CAP objectives.

The slide presentation gave an overview of changes proposed in the CAP by focusing on how adaptation would be further promoted. The EU intends to further pursue and support adaptation in the agricultural sector with four types of instruments:

- Measures for sustainable management of natural resources (new "green" payment as part of income support, enhanced cross-compliance for climate change; enhanced environmental and climatic focus for support within rural areas). One of the key changes proposed for rural development policy is to structure forthcoming RDP around "priorities" (and associated "focus areas"). Six priorities have been set, of which two relate to environment and climate, such as promoting resource efficiency, with a focus in particular on increasing efficiency in water use by agriculture, and low carbon and climate-resilient agriculture.
- Financial support (continuation of agri-environment-climate measures, enhanced support for risk management instruments, such as insurances, mutual funds).
- Research and innovation (proposed support for research and innovation (from Euros 1.9 to 4.5 billion) and a new European Innovation Partnership on "Agricultural productivity and sustainability" to help reconcile agronomy and ecology).
- Knowledge transfer and information actions (improved Farm Advisory instrument covering climate-related issues).

Some final considerations were made to point out that:

- There is global warming, but impacts are local – the adaptive potential of farmers and rural areas is very different across the EU and a “one size fits all approach” is not feasible.
- Adaptation planning is challenging (e.g. projection uncertainties, complex interactions, climate/agronomic factors, long planning horizon) but can also bring opportunities to build more resilient agricultural systems in climatic and economic terms.
- Focus needs to shift from uncertainty as a barrier to step up action. Building resilience encompasses a broad range of actions, not necessary climate-specific, but which can help to cope with climate variability and change. This can obviously help to shift focus from uncertainties as a barrier to other objectives such as management of farms for overall socio-economic-ecological resilience.
- It is very likely that, in the next years, autonomous (bottom-up) adaptation driven by farmers as a continuation of traditional risk management will prevail over planned (top-down) adaptation responses. This idea has also been put forward by some speakers who pointed out that adaptation to long-term climatic changes starts with managing current climatic variability and environmental problems.

