REFORMING THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY (2023 – 2027) – GOALS AND NEW SYSTEM SOLUTIONS –

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ABSTRACT

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is crucial for ensuring the future of agriculture and the rural development in the EU. The shortcomings of CAP in the previous period, challenges related to the global economic and geopolitical situation, the increasing need for environmental preservation and the necessity to mitigate climate change have led to CAP reform for 2023-2027. The subject of this study is to analyse the general and specific goals of the new CAP reform, as well as the adopted systemic solutions. The aim is to present the key goals, objectives and elements of the reformed CAP, particularly the most significant innovations – national strategic plans, various forms of direct payments and new environmental solutions within both pillars of CAP. The results show that strategic plans and new system solution provide a good starting point to ensure the fulfilment of the specific needs of EU farmers and rural communities, using CAP measures and instruments set in the strategic framework. The new environmental solutions have caused concern among some EU farmers and are subject to revision.

Introduction

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) represents a sophisticated system of legal regulations, budgetary support, and other public interventions related to agriculture and rural areas in the EU (Božić & Papić, 2017). The goals of CAP include: ensuring income for the rural population, stabilizing the market, and increasing the productivity and competitiveness of food production. Later, the sustainable management of natural resources, climate action, and rural development were also incorporated.

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The CAP was established in 1962 as a policy to promote agriculture through product price policies, the abolition of tariffs on mutual trade, and the introduction of a unified foreign policy. In the first decades of its existence, support for farmers was realized through high guaranteed prices for agricultural products and high import protection, i.e. market interventions. Price support, as the core concept of CAP, created a range of positive and negative effects (overproduction, waste, and increased public spending). Therefore, this policy had to be reformed and adapted to changes in the environment.

The MacSharry reform of 1992 marked a significant shift in the CAP. The reform aimed to reduce market distortions and provided direct aid to farmers (tied to production levels like the area farmed or the number of livestock) as compensation for reduced price support for agricultural product. With Agenda 2000, rural development policy was named the “second pillar” of CAP, which combines various measures, while agri-environmental measures (AEM) gain particular importance.

The Fischler reform from 2003 introduced a complete change in the support mechanism, which was decoupled from production. The most significant element was the Single Payment Scheme (SPS), a form of direct payments detached from production, based on previous payments in period 2000 to 2002. Eligibility for SPS direct payments depended on compliance with specific standards such as environmental protection and animal health. The reform continued in 2008 with the Health Check.

The reform for 2014-2020 included further market deregulation, transitioning to a new, more targeted system of direct payments to producers. This system includes mandatory direct payments such as: the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) per hectare, the Young Farmers Scheme, greening (ecological) payments and several forms of voluntary payments (redistributive payment, natural constraint support, coupling aids and small farmer scheme). The most significant change was the introduction of greening. These required meeting three conditions: the maintenance of permanent grasslands, crop diversification and reservation of at least 5% of arable land for areas of ecological interest, such as hedges, ponds or fallow land (Božić & Papić, 2017).

However, the European Court of Auditors found that greening has not effectively improved the environmental and climate sustainability of agricultural practice. This is mainly due to the lack of measures offered to farmers, allowing them to only marginally modify their agricultural practices to benefit from green payments (Bourget, 2021).

In general, the CAP development has been marked by increased attention to certain ecological principles, food safety, and animal welfare. Farmers are obliged to fulfil these conditions to be eligible for direct payments and agri-environmental measures.

The CAP reform also included changes to market policy, specifically to Common Market Organizations (CMOs). Market interventions are in a process of continuous deregulation and serve as “safety nets” to encourage farmers to better respond to signals from the market. Given the disruptions of global agricultural markets, worsening effects of climate change, and volatility of agricultural prices, the abandonment of CAP market regulation instruments has gone too far (Bourget, 2021).

The shortcomings of CAP in the previous period, EU expansions, diversity of agriculture in member countries, challenges related to the global economic and geopolitical situation, and increasing need for environmental preservation and concern about climate change have led to a CAP reform for 2023-2027.

The purpose of this paper was to reviewed changes in the latest CAP reform and to have insight into the impact of these changes on the future of agriculture in EU. The aim is to analyze the general and specific goals, and to emphasize the most important changes in the new adopted systemic solutions. In order to pursue this aim two research hypotheses are posed. H_1: The decentralization of CAP, which takes place through the adoption of national CAP Strategic Plans, contributes to a greater appreciation of the national specificities of farmers and rural areas. H_2: The CAP reform 2023-2027 continues the greening policy, but new required environmental solutions are too demanding, especially for small farmers, and may be subject to revision.

Materials and Methods

The analysis of the overall and specific objectives, and adopted systemic solutions of the CAP 2023-2027 reform, was conducted using desk research of relevant literature in support with compilation methods and content analysis.

Literature sources include scientific papers and studies as well as legislative acts, reports, strategies, and other official documents of the EU institutions: the European Commission (EC), European Council and European Parliament.

Results and Discussion

Legislative Framework, Strategic Plans and Goals of CAP 2023 - 2027

The first proposal from the EC titled "The Future of Food and Farming" was presented in July 2017 (EC, 2017), while the agreement on the new CAP reform was adopted in December 2021.

The new legislative framework, which took effect on January 1, 2023, sets the foundation for a fairer, greener, and results-oriented CAP. It aims to ensure a sustainable future for European farmers, provide targeted support to smaller farms, and allow greater flexibility for EU member states to adapt measures to the particular circumstances of their territories (EC, 2021).

There are three major ideas in the EC proposal for this reform: *simplification*, *increased subsidiarity* and *heightened environmental ambition*. Subsidiarity is well-established as the EC common framework and must be implemented in each member state through a national strategic plan (Barral & Detang-Dessendre, 2023).

The legislative framework for the CAP Reform 2023-2027 consists of three EU regulations, which have been in effect since January 1, 2023:

1) CAP Strategic Plan Regulation – The future CAP will be implemented through national CAP Strategic Plans, tailored for each Member State, outlining the key parameters for executing all CAP instruments, including direct payments, rural development, and sectoral interventions (EU Regulation 2021/2115)[4];

2) Common Market Organisation Regulation emphasizes the importance of maintaining and enhancing the market orientation of EU agriculture. The EC has not proposed any specific changes to market intervention but instead focuses on key areas where there is potential to boost the sector's competitiveness and/or simplify existing regulations (EU Regulation 2021/2116); and

3) Horizontal Regulation is related to adapting the financing, management and monitoring of CAP rules with an aim to increase subsidiarity and simplification and to give more responsibility to member states (EC, 2020b).

The most significant innovation is that each EU country develops a national CAP Strategic Plan (CSPs). This plan must implement CAP measures and instruments in alignment with the EU strategic structure while also addressing the specific needs of farmers and rural communities (EU Regulation 2021/2117).

The new operational approach simplifies administrative processes so that each country submits a single strategic plan, rather than numerous individual programs, covering all forms of support. However, national variations through strategic plans do not guarantee simplification of measures, moreover the complexity of the policy has significantly increased (Runge et al., 2022)

The CAP strategic plans provide guidelines for the support for farmers and rural population. After the EC approve these plans, countries implement policies, and provide monitoring using a set of common indicators and reporting.

The approved Strategic Plans are designed to include increased environmental ambitions and make a significant contribution to the goals of the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy (EC, 2020a), and the Biodiversity Strategy (EC, 2024b), while also taking into greater account specific local conditions and needs of individual member states.

This reform also sets different environmental targets. However, setting ambitious environmental goals is not sufficient; it is equally crucial to provide the necessary resources to achieve them. One of such goals is to establish certain limit for agricultural area under organic farming (25%) and areas under high-diversity landscape features (10%) (Barral & Detang-Dessendre, 2023). However, allocating 25% of land to organic farming could lead to market saturation, as organic goods are typically more expensive than conventional ones (Bourget, 2021).

In addition to the novelties such as creating specific strategic plans for each country and further work on common agricultural market, this new CAP reform is deeply engaged in economic, ecological, and social spheres through three general objectives: (1) to

4 Full titles of the listed regulations are given in the literature at the end of this paper.

ensure food security creating resilient and diversified agriculture, (2) to emphasise the environmental and ecological issues and (3) to further develop rural areas (EU Regulation 2021/2115). These three broad objectives are realized and simplified through ten specific objectives (Figure 1).

It can be concluded that the reformed CAP aims to provide support to smaller farms; enhance the contribution of agriculture to the ecological and climate goals; strengthen the socio-economic development of rural areas; and ensure greater flexibility for member states to adapt measures to local conditions and needs (through national strategic plans).

Figure 1. Ten specific objectives of CAP 2023 - 2027

Source: EC (2024a). Key policy objectives of the CAP 2023-2027

In conclusion, new CAP seeks to support small farms, enhance agriculture's contribution to ecological and climate goals, and strengthen rural areas, while at the same time gives more freedom to each EU country to create supportive measures according to it needs.

Funding of CAP 2023-2027 and Support for Farm Income

In the context of climate and geopolitical uncertainties, rising input costs, and ecological and social challenges, farmers and rural areas in the EU require stable support from the CAP. These include support through direct payments, interventions for specific market sectors, and support for rural development. The CAP retains its previous structure in two pillars:

- Pillar I covers direct payments and the common market organisation, and is completely funded by EU funds, and

- Pillar II includes rural development instruments, which are co-financed by the EU and member states from national funds.

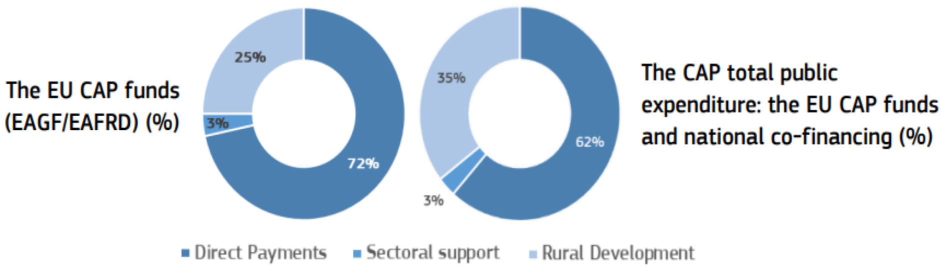
Strategic plans are financed on the basis of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2021-2027, which is the long-term budget of the EU, and includes funds for financing the whole CAP (in the total amount of 378.5 billion Euros) (EC, 2023b). Of this amount, the MFF has allocated €264 billion in the 2023-2027, through two funds:

1) *European Agricultural Guarantee Fund* (*EAGF*), which constitutes about 75% of the CAP budget (€198 billion). This fund primarily finances measures under Pillar I (about 72% for direct payments and around 3% for support to stabilize internal agricultural markets); and

2) *European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development* (*EAFRD*), which finances measures under Pillar II (rural development) and makes up 25% of the CAP budget (€66 billion) (EC, 2023b).

Including national co-financing, the CAP mobilizes a total of €307 billion for the period 2023-2027, of which direct payments make up 62% while support for rural development reaches 35% (Ecorys, Metis & Agrosynergy, 2023) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distribution of planned expenditures within the CAP, %, 2023-2027



Source: EC (2022). Common agricultural policy for 2023-2027: 28 CAP strategic plans at a glance

In the structure of the total CAP funds, direct payments account for 62%, while the rural development support share (EAFRD) increases to 35% (EC, 2022).

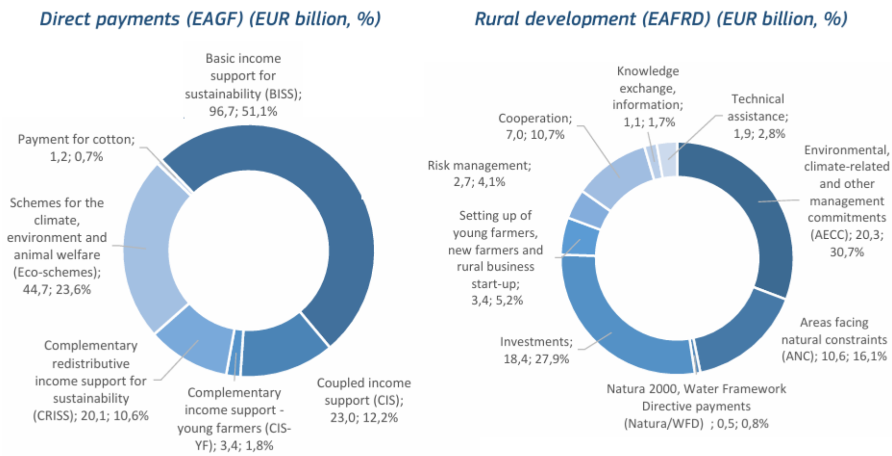
The idea behind sustainable farm income is to support income of EU farmers, while providing food security on the long run and economic sustainability of agriculture. Although farm incomes in the EU are lower than the economy average, the gap is gradually narrowing due to structural changes, primarily the outflow of labour from agriculture. On average, farmers' gross income amounts to 49% of the average EU salary (2021), compared to a third a decade ago (EC, 2022).

The new CAP provides greater flexibility for member states to choose how to allocate subsidies within their national strategic plans, facilitating alignment with specific national needs. The support for sustainable farm income is primarily achieved through direct payments (Figure 3).

Member states define in their CAP plans which farmers qualify as "active farmers" and are eligible for direct payments. The most significant support to farmers is provided through *basic income support per hectare* (about €19 billion annually), with an additional €9.6 billion planned for income support for specific groups and needs of farmers. Direct payment also includes income support for small and medium size farms and eco-shemes for climate, environment and animal welfare.

The second pillar is co-funded by the EAFRD and national sources and includes wide range of rural development support measures. They focus on land (agricultural and forest) suitable for environmental and climate management; animal welfare; and compensations for areas with natural and other handicaps (ANC); investments, and more (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Planned distribution of EU funds for direct payments (EAGF) and rural development (EAFRD), 2023-2027



Source: EC (2022). Common agricultural policy for 2023-2027: 28 CAP strategic plans at a glance

In the previous period the differences in direct payments for farms in different countries was significant. So, one of the aims of the new CAP is also to achieve a more fair distribution of income support. In addition to this, support should be more focus on small and farms of medium size. It also seeks to improve working conditions and future prospects for the new generation of European farmers.

The *mandatory redistribution of support* requires all member states to allocate at least 10% of national envelopes for direct payments to redistributive payments, aiming to enhance support for smaller farms. Approximately €4 billion annually is planned for complementary redistributive payments (compared to €1.7 billion in the previous period under CAP 2014-2020). Thanks to redistributive payments, direct payments per hectare for the smallest farms can increase by 7 to 10% (EC, 2022).

The capping and degressivity mechanism can be used for redistributing support. The idea behind it is to distribute direct payments so that farmers with greater needs have more support.

Capping allows a Member State to limit the amount of basic income support granted to a farmer per calendar year to EUR 100,000, reduced from the previous threshold of EUR 150,000. Every country is free to choose will it apply reduction of payment or capping (or both or neither) to achieve this goal.

Degressivity is based on progressive reduction of payments above a certain level. So, if the total amount of income support received by a single farm is more than €60,000, each country can reduce it up to 85%. Savings from the reduction in direct payments stay in the CAP budgets of that country and can be used for other purposes such as redistributive payments. The voluntary approach to this measure remains unchanged.

The race to increase farm sizes will continue, potentially creating challenges for young farmers starting new farms, despite the increase in the share of direct payments allocated to young farmers from 2% to 3% of national envelope for direct payments (Bourget, 2021).

The new CAP will continue to reduce the disparity in direct payments between and within member states. The differences between levels of direct payment received by countries are huge, where some receive below 90% of the EU average. In the next 5 years the difference between their current level of payment and EU average will be halved. In other words, payments in countries with above-average payments should decrease in favour of countries with below-average payments. This process is called *external convergence*. This measure is complemented by *internal convergence* within member states. Under this system, direct payments per hectare based on historical levels will also be re-evaluated so that more fair system is created by 2026. By then, all basic income support payments within the member state must have a per-hectare value of at least 85% of the average (*internal convergence*) (EC, 2023b).

In November 2023, the EC published a report on the collective efforts of all CAP strategic plans during the first year of implementation (EC, 2023a). As these new measures are still young, their effects are hard to evaluate, but some general ideas are underlined in this document. It was particularly highlighted that CAP is still focused on food security and aim to provide fair distribution of support, especially for 377,000 young farmers.

Increasing Competitiveness and Productivity

Agriculture is facing several important challenges: global demand for agricultural and food products is rising, while resources remain limited and climate conditions continuously deteriorate. In such circumstances, agricultural productivity is of vital importance. Enhancing productivity in European agriculture will contribute to develop market orientation and ensuring greater competitiveness for farmers, thereby strengthening their position in the food supply chain.

Improving the Position of Farmers in the Chain Value

After decades of deregulation, the organization of European markets of agricultural products is getting new foundations. The instability of global agricultural markets causes significant price fluctuations and creates problems for farmers, especially in conditions of overproduction (Bourget, 2021).

New interventions in the CAP are aimed at protecting EU farmers and strengthening their market position. Market interventions primarily have a stabilization function and play a role in ensuring food availability. For market interventions, 3% of the CAP budget for 2023-2027 is allocated (approximately 9 billion Euros) (EC, 2023b). Strengthening the position of farmers in the market chain is also achieved by enhancing the role of producer organizations, encouraging cooperation among farmers, promoting research and innovation, increasing market transparency, and ensuring effective mechanisms against unfair competition (Bourget, 2021).

Improving Environmental Sustainability and Climate Resilience

Agriculture is more sensitive to climate change than most other economic sectors, yet it is also a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. Farmers have a key role in environmental protection and biodiversity conservation by efficiently managing natural resources such as water, soil, and air. Furthermore, agriculture plays a crucial role in fulfilling the commitments of the Paris Agreement on climate. It is no surprising that three of ten specific CAP goals are directly related to these issues: mitigating climate change, managing natural resources, and preserving biodiversity.

Under the new CAP, farmers have the opportunity to further contribute to environmental protection and will be rewarded if they exceed the set criteria.

The new green architecture of CAP, as termed by the EC for measures related to the environment and climate, is based on enhanced conditionality; eco-schemes within the pillar I and environmental and climate measures in the second pillar, and must be included in the national strategic plans (EC, 2023a).

The *cross-compliance* is an element of the reform focused on increasing accountability for sustainable farm management. The new conditionality system includes enhanced Statutory Management Requirements (SMR) and standards for Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC) that go beyond SMRs, GAECs and the greening rules applicable within the 2014-2020 CAP (Guyomard et al., 2020; EC, 2023a).

Big farmers in the EU must comply with given measures. One of these measures is the obligation to implement crop rotation to improve soil health. Small holdings (under 10 hectares) and farms with large areas of permanent grassland may be excused. Organic farmers are automatically considered to meet cross-compliance obligations.

Another measure, within the eco-scheme, designed to preserve biodiversity is the conversion of at least 4% of arable land for non-productive purposes. In addition to this, 3% of land should be dedicated to nitrogen-fixing crops, which farmers can further "top up" to 7%. There is also an exemption for holdings under 10 hectares of arable land. The purpose of these measures is to maximise the benefits for climate and the environment so each country has significant flexibility in implementing the conditionality system in a way that suits its specific conditions.

Eco-schemes, along with certain types of payments in the second pillar of the CAP, will support many voluntary actions that go beyond conditionality. Member states must make available eco-schemes in their plans related to at least two areas of action.

These ecological goals of CAP are new and require significant changes in designing agricultural and food production. No analysis has been provided on potential negative economic implications of such changes. Therefore, all adverse consequences must be addressed to develop adequate policies that will ensure acceptable measures and transformations related to agricultural production, food and nutrition, as well as trade and innovation (Barral & Detang-Dessendre, 2023).

These viewpoints were confirmed during the first year of implementing CAP strategic plans, leading to farmers' protests concerning compliance with certain ecological requirements. In response, the European Parliament and Council adopted a targeted revision of the basic CAP regulations in May 2024 (EU Regulation 2024/1468).

Numerous exemptions were provided. These measures can be excluded in case of unfavourable weather conditions. Small farms with less than 10 hectares are also exempt from controls and penalties related to environmental compliance. This applies to 65% of farmers receiving CAP support, who manage only 10% of the land. Since strategic plans should be tailored to the needs of a specific country, each member states can review its strategic plans twice a year, instead of once as previously required.

Strengthening Socio-Economic Development of Rural Areas

One of the important issues related to rural areas is the level of income per capita, which is lower that EU average. In this sense, CAP has an important role in alleviating unemployment and poverty in these regions.

Rural development measures remain similar to those from the previous period (2014-2020). Member states are required to spend at least 35% of their rural development budget on environmental, climate, and animal welfare measures, with half of the payments for areas with natural constraints (ANC) counted towards this amount (Guyomard et al., 2020).

Support for Generational Renewal

The number of young farmers in the EU is constantly declining. Only 11% of farmers in the EU are under 40 years (EC, 2021: 10). Therefore, generational renewal in agriculture is defined as a new CAP goal. Young farmers receive increased support to at least 3% of each Member State's envelope for direct payments. This support is provided through complementary income support, start-up aid for new young farmers, or investment support (EC, 2023a). Budgetary expenditures for income support for young farmers during the previous period (2014-2020) ranged from 1.5% to 6% for most member states (EC, 2021: 10).

Young farmers and generational renewal will be a supported with at least EUR 8.5 billion. New CAP has, for the first time, gender equality as one of the objectives. Gender imbalance is a key concern in the EU, including the gender gap in farming and rural areas (Ecorys, Metis & Agrosynergy, 2023). Some member states dedicate additional resources to promote farm succession, enhance gender equality in rural communities, and empower women in agriculture (EC, 2022).

Social Conditions: Linking Support to Compliance with Farmers' Rights

Novelty in the new CAP reform will be mandatory starting from 2025. They have social dimension which focus primarily on season workers, but also to other workers employed on farms. This includes the implementation of penalties for farm managers who do not comply with directives related to predictability and transparency of employment conditions, as well as the safety and health of agricultural workers (Bourget, 2021).

This is related to social conditionality, meaning that all forms of support are linked to complying with rights of farm workers. Transparent and predictable employment conditions are guaranteed, requiring employers to ensure the safety and health protection of employees, including the proper use of agricultural machinery, equipment, and protective clothing.

Conclusion

The paper examines the evolution of the Common Agricultural Policy from 1962 to 2023-2027 reform, which is analyzed in detail. Changes in the CAP across various phases and preceding reforms have rendered this policy exceptionally complex. The forms of support have evolved from the initial idea of establishing a common market and policy with high guaranteed prices and market intervention for agricultural products, introduction direct aid payment, to the introduction of rural development policy as a "second pillar," followed by agri-environmental measures. Subsequent developments included food safety, greening payments, and income support for areas with natural constraints, culminating in special schemes for vulnerable groups such as small-scale and young farmers.

Keeping this in mind, it is hardly surprising that simplification is one of the three key objectives of the latest CAP reform. In order to achieve this, national CAP Strategic Plans are introduced. In these documents, each EU country has the possibility and freedom to create and adopt measures tailored according to local conditions and specific needs of their farmers. Of course, national plans are created in accordance with the set strategic framework at the EU level.

Although these changes are created aiming to simplify CAP, it seems that it is even more complex than before. However, some progress has been done on sustainable management of natural resources, farm income and economic sustainability. Further attention should be aimed at reinforcing skills, training and advisory capacity, reducing the administrative burden and monitoring their implementation and results including adjusting national Plans where necessary (EC, 2023a).

It could be concluded that the latest reform of the CAP is to minimize the common elements of the EU member states, while more and more freedom in solving various issues in agriculture is given to national bodies. Therefore, the first hypothesis is confirmed.

For a fairer distribution of support, redistributive payments, previously voluntary, become mandatory for all member states. This measure is supported by 10% of the total amounts for direct payments, in order to shift the support from larger to smaller farms. However, the upper limit and gradual reduction of direct payments for large farms is left for individual countries to determine. This means that the possibility of achieving savings for direct payments and redistribution of support in favour of small farms is significantly reduced.

The introduction of agri-environmental measures dates back to 1992, and since then, these measures have remained among the most important. These measures remain highly significant in the latest reform. Farmers must comply with these conditions to qualify for other types of support. This confirms that the second hypothesis is also confirmed, especially considering the limitations and challenges faced by small-scale farmers. On the other side, environmental organizations evaluated these measures as insufficient. Even so, they were extremely demanding to implement in the first year and used great concern to farmers and led to their protest. As a response, there was a revision of the basic legal acts of the new CAP, which gives the possibility of deviations from the adopted rules as well as exemptions from some environmental requirements, especially for small farms.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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