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The CAP & Wildlife

Wildlife

Farmland covers almost half of the EU[1] and plays a key role in providing habitats for wildlife. Biodiversity has evolved around farming for centuries, with traditional agricultural practices providing crucial breeding habitats and feeding sites. Some species, such as the barn swallow[2], white stork[3] and the larks[4] have become virtually dependent on appropriately managed farmland[5].

However, the focus on increasing production in the past 50 years - partly driven by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) - has caused a shift to large scale, specialised and high-input/output systems. This shift has led to the loss and degradation of many important habitats and the increasing isolation of remaining habitat fragments. This loss is responsible for widespread biodiversity declines across the EU[6], with documented negative impacts on farmland birds, mammals, invertebrates and arable plants.

In new EU Member States, relatively healthy populations of plants and animals still exist due to the retention of many High Nature Value farming systems. However, this form of farming is under threat from intensification, non-agriculture development and abandonment. As the market does not reward biodiversity, public intervention is required to support farmers to farm with the needs of wildlife in mind.

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Facts & figures

- In 2010, the EU failed to meet its target of halting biodiversity decline in Europe. EU leaders have agreed a new 2020 target with agriculture identified as a key area for action[7].
- Farmland bird populations across the EU declined by 49% between 1980 and 2008[8].
- Due to significant and widespread changes in farming practices in the 20th century, seven species of arable plants are considered extinct in Britain and a further 54 are threatened[9].
- Roughly 25% of the EU's terrestrial network of protected Natura 2000 sites is farmland[10] and requires appropriate agricultural activity[11].
- Only 7% of agricultural habitat types in Natura 2000 sites are in favourable condition, compared to 21% of other – non agriculture - habitat types[12].
- Losses of grassland butterflies and other pollinators have been particularly severe. The European grassland butterfly indicator shows a decline of some 70% since 1990[13].

Recommendation

The CAP needs profound change to support the kinds of farming Europe needs in the 21st century. Public money must support public goods. Taxpayers must see real value for the billions they invest in the CAP. Those who farm sustainably must be effectively supported while those who harm the environment should receive no public money.

If politicians are serious about saving wildlife biodiversity they must support a fundamental CAP reform now.

For footnotes, please refer to separate reference sheet

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pic1: © Jackie Cooper (rspb-images.com) pic2: © Vincent Brassinne

Farmers stopping extinction- the aquatic warbler in Poland

The aquatic warbler is the rarest migratory songbird found in mainland Europe. Once widespread in fen mires and wet meadows, the aquatic warbler has disappeared from most of its former range due to drainage of its habitats. Poland boasts magnificent natural areas like the Biebrza Marshes and High Nature Value farmland across large parts of the country. This results in a high diversity of farmland birds, including 25% of the total world population of aquatic warblers.

Supported by an EU LIFE Nature grant which started in 2005, the BirdLife Partner in Poland (OTOP) has undertaken a comprehensive conservation programme for the aquatic warbler. The programme, which covers 42,000 hectares, has helped farmers to restore the species' sensitive mire habitat.

Well designed and targeted CAP measures (such as agri-environment schemes) can also be used to deliver wildlife benefit with wider rural development but 'best-practice' schemes are few and far between across the EU.

The common hamster brought back in the Netherlands[15]

Once widespread across Western Europe, the common hamster became extinct in the Netherlands in 2002. Conservationists trapped the last 15 and took them into a captive breeding programme to try to save the population. A number of hamsters were reintroduced later in 2002, and agri-environment scheme trials began to make the environment more hamster-friendly.

The first agri-environment attempts were not at all successful as the management contracts appeared to be too complicated and unpopular with farmers. As understanding of hamster requirements increased, management prescriptions could be changed accordingly. Currently, the schemes are in place in especially designated areas and require delayed mowing and restricted harvesting, provide food and cover in summer until hibernation.

Thanks to these schemes, the population grew rapidly between 2002 and 2009, and continues to increase, benefitting thereby not only hamsters but also other species like wintering birds[16].

Distorted subsidies work against public goods in Olive groves[14]

Olive groves represent one of the iconic landscapes of the Mediterranean. In traditionally managed groves, biodiversity tends to be high as structural diversity (trees, natural vegetation, dry-stone walls, etc.) provides a variety of habitats. The low use of pesticides allows rich flora and insect fauna to flourish; they in turn can support a high diversity of wildlife.

However, in recent decades many groves have undergone rapid land use change through intensification, heavily subsidised by the CAP. This led to the large-scale destruction of biodiversity rich olive groves, often featuring ancient trees, and their replacement with intensively managed, highly irrigated systems.

Although production-linked subsidies have been phased out of the CAP and ancient olive trees can now only be cut with permission, many of these valuable natural assets are in a state of neglect across the EU because the non-market benefits of traditional groves are not recognised nor rewarded.

Prepared by: