

The CAP & Water Quality

Water Quality

Pollution from sewage has been reduced but agriculture is still a major source of diffuse pollution to European waters. Nutrients which leak from fertilisers into fresh and coastal waters is decreasing the amount of oxygen present in those waters. This can have impacts ranging from plant and wildlife loss to devastating blooms of algae which can wipe out life creating so-called dead zones.

Soil erosion is also a big problem: sediment build-up in rivers and lakes can smother invertebrates and fish eggs that rely on oxygen. These soils can also carry pesticides and nutrients into our waters.

Diffuse pollution is not just a problem for wildlife, it can also threaten domestic drinking water supplies, driving up costs of treatment and even causing some sources to be abandoned.

If applied appropriately, the Nitrates Directive¹ greatly reduces pollution but as agriculture is still a major source of pollution it must be tackled if we are to reverse biodiversity decline, supply safe drinking water and meet the targets of the Water Framework Directive² (WFD).

Existing CAP safeguards are inadequate to protect our waters from these impacts and forthcoming reforms are a vital opportunity to address them.



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Facts & figures

- Wetlands help to filter damaging nutrients and other pollutants. In many European countries, wetland loss exceeds 50% of the original area³ which significantly reduces the capacity of the natural environment to cope with increased nutrients⁴.
- Farming is responsible for over 50% of nitrogen in water and is a significant source of phosphates⁵. Excess levels of these fertilisers in water bodies lead to eutrophication which can lead to the loss of many species.
- Pesticides can have a devastating effect on aquatic biodiversity. There are also considerable clean-up costs to ensure drinking water standards are met.
- In England, diffuse pollution is the second most common reason for 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest' (many of which are part of the Natura 2000 network) being in unfavourable condition⁶.

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 water quality they must support a fundamental CAP reform now and the full implementation of the WFD.



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Consequences for EU water customers

The cost of treating nutrients and pesticides in drinking water, necessary to meet vital environmental and health water quality standards, is ultimately passed onto water customers through their water bills while the cause of agricultural diffuse pollution is not tackled at the source and polluting farming continues to be heavily subsidised.

This means that citizens are paying both as tax payers and water customers to support polluting farming practices and address the

impacts caused by it. This situation is typical of many Member States. In England, water companies spent £189 million removing nitrates and £92 million removing pesticides from their water supplies between 2004-05 and 2008-09⁷.

The CAP must ensure that the impacts of farming on drinking water and the aquatic environment are minimised, making farming more sustainable. Citizens do not want to pay the bill twice.



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Dead zones choking the Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea is home to seven of the world's ten largest marine dead zones, where the sea's oxygen has been depleted by algae blooms caused by the build up of nutrients (eutrophication) – literally suffocating the sea. Due to its location and the way its waters flow (enclosed sea with limited water exchange with the Atlantic Ocean), the Baltic Sea is very sensitive to oxygen depletion⁸.

Agriculture is responsible for a significant proportion of the nutrient load in the Baltic Sea and, when combined with the discharge

of sewage water and drainage of wetlands in coastal areas, the impacts on the marine environment are severe, leading to large scale fish deaths and beach closures, for instance.

Dead zones can be reversed if diffuse pollution is tackled. The CAP must seek to encourage practices that minimise the loss of nutrients into the aquatic environment. Agriculture based on the principles of ecological recycling could lead to a decrease in the calculated nitrogen leaching by half as well as a significant reduction in the loss of phosphorus, an essential plant nutrient⁹.

Well managed peatlands supply clean water to UK consumers

Peatlands provide a variety of ecosystem services such as habitat for biodiversity, carbon sequestration, recreational opportunities, as well as regulating water supply and purification. Often these services can be provided simultaneously.

The Sustainable Catchment Management Programme (SCaMP)¹⁰ in the UK has developed an integrated approach to catchment management within two key areas of upland England. Both areas comprise

largely open ground habitats, such as rough grassland and heather moorland.

The SCaMP project has been undertaken by the water company United Utilities, in partnership with the RSPB (the UK Partner of BirdLife). Although primarily set up to deliver government nature conservation targets and enhance biodiversity, it has also encouraged more sustainable farming practices among the company's farming tenants and contributed to water quality.



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Prepared by:

