

The CAP & Water Scarcity

Water Scarcity

Throughout the EU, irrigation for agriculture has a major impact on the status of our waters and wetlands. These impacts are significant in Mediterranean countries where agriculture consumes more than two thirds of the total water used. The expansion of irrigation has been promoted by the CAP, through support for water intensive crops and funding of new irrigation infrastructure, often in water stressed areas.

While irrigation can raise productivity in the short term, it is often unsustainable in the long term and has caused significant impacts on the environment, especially groundwater where it can lead to depletion, pollution or salinisation of the water source.

Irrigation is often the main reason for insufficient water left to sustain rivers and wetlands. These valuable habitats deliver critical services such as water for drinking and industry, sustainable flood control as well as supporting tourism and leisure. The issue of water availability will increase in importance due to demographic shifts and climate change.

We must take the opportunity provided by the CAP reform to ensure water is used more sustainably in the future for the benefit of both people and the environment.



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Facts & figures

- Agriculture accounts for around 24 % of total water use in Europe. This can reach up to 80% in some parts of Southern Europe¹.
- Water abstraction for irrigation is the second most important cause for low flow regimes in rivers and lowered groundwater levels².
- In Spain, around 13% of the irrigated area extracts water from over-exploited aquifers or those in danger of saltwater intrusion. Water abstractions by unregistered irrigators have contributed considerably to this problem³.
- Water scarcity affects at least 14 EU Member States and concerns around 100 million inhabitants in the EU⁴.
- The direct and indirect costs of drought can be very high. In Barcelona for example, the total losses of the 2007-2008 drought are estimated at 1,661 million Euros (for a one-year period), almost 1% of the Catalanian GDP⁵.
- Due to climate change, annual rainfall is likely to decrease by up to 20% in the southern Mediterranean⁶.

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 sustainable water use they must support a fundamental CAP reform now and the fun implementation of the WFD.



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Daimiel National Park

Daimiel National Park is an iconic Ramsar⁷ wetland in Spain. Its environmental value is underpinned by the rich vegetation and bird populations which rely on water supplied by the aquifer in the Guadiana River basin.

For decades, this aquifer has suffered from over-abstraction of water because of the increasing irrigation (the maximum irrigated area was reached in 1989 with 208.000 ha and a water abstraction up to 550 hm³/year) supported by CAP funding.

Uncontrolled and illegal irrigation of crops, such as sugar beet, have dried out more than 80% of the flooded area, causing a serious drop in groundwater levels and threatening the water supply the human population in the area.

To address the problem, water transfer and use of CAP tools to support traditional rainfed crops were tried. However, none of these measures have led to a reduction in water use. This problem can only be addressed through an in-depth reform of the CAP that prioritises the protection of water resources.



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Unsustainable irrigation in Portugal⁸

When it is orientated towards sustainable practices, funding measures can bring environmental benefits by improving the efficiency of water use in existing irrigation schemes.

However this is rarely the case and often money from the CAP is used to encourage unsustainable practices. Out of over €790 million invested in irrigation in Portugal, only €80 million is ring-fenced to improve the sustainability of existing irrigation systems, and no resources are allocated to the implementation of the Water Framework Directive.

Most of these funds will be used for the expansion of the irrigated surface, thus increasing water demand. For example, the Alqueva dam development (receiving €534 million of public support) will create 200,000 ha of new irrigated area in the Alentejo region, destroying EU priority habitats in the steppe (vast semi-arid grass-covered plains) and heavily transforming high nature value farming systems.

The new CAP must ensure money is spent on making current practices more sustainable rather than funding environmentally damaging practices.

Reconciling wetland restoration with extensive farming

The lakes of Nava, Boada and Pedraza in Northern Spain used to flood during the rainy season to form 5,000 hectares of wildlife rich wetlands. These valuable wetlands have now disappeared due to farming intensification and widespread irrigation supported by the CAP.

Since 1990, the Fundación Global Nature has undertaken a project to reconcile wetland restoration with extensive farming. The project includes land stewardship agreements with farmers to recover some parts of the wetlands and to create buffer strip

areas with thistle crop. These actions directly benefit farmers as they get free grazing for the livestock and biomass production. The restored wetlands now support 200 species of wildlife.

This alliance between farming and wetland conservation has not just benefited the environment but also slowed down rural depopulation and allowed job creation (eco tourism etc.). It reinforces the idea that rural development based on nature protection should be promoted through a new CAP.



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