Partnership for nature and people

The untapped potential of eco-schemes

An analysis of the use of eco-schemes across 12 countries and their impact on biodiversity

NABU

BirdLife INTERNATIONAL
EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

Abbreviations

ANC	Natural or other area-specific constraints (Article 71 of Regulation (EU) 2021/2115)
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
Eco-scheme	Schemes for the climate, the environment and animal welfare (Article 31 of Regulation (EU) 2021/2115)
ENVCLIM	Environmental, climate-related and other management commitments (Article 70 of Regulation (EU) 2021/2115)
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GAEC	
LSU	Livestock Unit
SO	Specific Objective (Article 6 of Regulation (EU) 2021/2115)
SPA	Special Protection Area
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Country codes

Belgium	BE	Greece	EL	Lithuania	LT	Portugal	PT
Bulgaria	BG	Spain	ES	Luxembourg	LU	Romania	RO
Czechia	CZ	France	FR	Hungary	HU	Slovenia	SI
Denmark	DK	Croatia	HR	Malta	MT	Slovakia	SK
Germany	DE	Italy	IT	Netherlands	NL	Finland	FI
Estonia	EE	Cyprus	CY	Austria	AT	Sweden	SE
Ireland	IE	Latvia	LV	Poland	PL		

Lead Authors:
Maximilian Meister, NABU, BirdLife Germany | Tatiana Nemcová, BirdLife Europe

Co-Authors:
Blaž Blažič, Katarina Denac, DOPPS, BirdLife Slovenia | **Bernard de Jong**, Vogelbescherming, BirdLife Netherlands
Macu Ferriz, SEO/BirdLife Spain | **Laura Henningson**, NABU, BirdLife Germany | **Adriana Hološková**, SOS/BirdLife Slovakia
Aleksandra Pępkowska-Król, OTOP, BirdLife Poland | **Zsuzsanna Kurucz**, MME, BirdLife Hungary | **Federica Luoni**, LIPU, BirdLife Italy | **Irina Mateeva**, BSPB, BirdLife Bulgaria | **Gaëtan Seny,** Natagora, BirdLife Belgium - Wallonia
Emil Todorov, SOR, BirdLife Romania | **Václav Zámečník**, CSO, BirdLife Czechia

Contact:
Maximilian Meister: maximilian.meister@nabu.de
Tatiana Nemcová: tatiana.nemcova@birdlife.org

Cover photo: Buffer strips under Slovakia's eco-scheme, covering 88% of farmland in 2023, helped increase populations of birds, insects, and game species in large, intensively farmed fields with uniform landscapes. Photo by Andrej Chudý

Published: December 2024

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

This report evaluates the uptake and implementation of eco-schemes across 12 EU Member States in 2023, the first year of the 2023–2027 CAP period. Introduced as a novel tool under the CAP, eco-schemes aim to promote biodiversity, climate resilience, and environmental sustainability. Yet, their potential remains largely untapped due to persistent challenges in design, funding, and implementation. In addition to analysing 2023 enrolment levels, the report identifies the barriers contributing to low farmer participation, highlights successful examples of good practices—particularly those focused on biodiversity—and offers targeted recommendations to enhance their impact and foster greater farmer engagement. The report also briefly examines the implications of the 2024 CAP simplification, providing further context to the challenges and opportunities for eco-schemes moving forward.

Key findings

- On average, eco-schemes achieved their planned area targets, but enrolment varied significantly between Member States and measures. There was a high uptake of eco-schemes with limited added value, such as nutrient management schemes, in contrast to poor adoption of biodiversity-focused measures in many countries.
- Administrative challenges, inadequate promotion, and unattractive payment rates limited farmer participation in biodiversity-targeted schemes. Smaller farms faced higher relative administrative challenges, reducing their participation rates.
- Design flaws in some schemes incentivised status quo practices with limited environmental benefit. Innovative approaches, such as Slovakia's buffer strips introduced as part of the whole-farm eco-scheme and Poland's water retention initiatives, show promise. In the case of the latter, as with many other biodiversity schemes, more attractive payment and improved targeting are needed.
- Countries with regionally tailored schemes, higher payments, and flexible menus (e.g., Spain and the Netherlands) experienced higher engagement, although these often prioritised less ambitious measures.
- Adjustments to national CAP plans following the 2024 CAP simplification often led to a dilution of environmental ambitions, with several countries reducing the areas dedicated to nature or fulfilling the obligations only in a formal sense.
- There is lack of systematic and targeted monitoring of eco-schemes which hampers the ability to evaluate their effectiveness in achieving biodiversity goals and identifying areas for improvement.

Recommendations for Member States and the European Commission

- Increase the ambition of eco-schemes to maximise environmental benefits, shifting from supporting existing practices to incentivising the adoption of more impactful, forward-thinking measures.
- Design payment structures that effectively reward farmers for implementing beneficial practices, ensuring payments are attractive and tailored to regional conditions and farm types.
- **Leverage the flexibility within the CAP to optimise scheme design,** tailoring eco-schemes to regional needs and farm characteristics while upholding high environmental standards.
- **Encourage long-term commitments and multi-annual payments,** recognising the time needed for ecological benefits to materialise and providing greater certainty for farmers investing in long-term sustainability practices.
- **Provide targeted support for small and disadvantaged farms,** addressing the specific challenges they face and ensuring equitable access to eco-scheme benefits.
- **Expand and strengthen measures for climate resilience and biodiversity,** recognising the interconnectedness of these challenges and promoting practices that address both.
- **Integrate innovative technologies for efficient monitoring and implementation,** leveraging technology to streamline processes, reduce bureaucracy, and enable result-based payments, while ensuring that systematic and targeted monitoring of biodiversity-focused eco-schemes is put in place.
- **Ensure active stakeholder engagement throughout the process,** fostering collaboration among farmers, NGOs, and policymakers to create more effective and widely accepted eco-schemes.

In conclusion, eco-schemes have the potential to support sustainable agriculture, but their success hinges on addressing key challenges outlined in this report. To maximise their impact, it is essential to improve their design to meet biodiversity and environmental goals, tailor them to local conditions, make them financially appealing to farmers, and streamline participation processes. With three years left in the current CAP cycle, focusing on practical improvements rather than legislative changes can provide farmers with greater planning security and build a solid foundation for more ambitious and effective environmental schemes in the next CAP.

1 INTRODUCTION

Image © Tatiana Nemcova

1.1 Background

Eco-schemes are a new instrument introduced under the 2023-2027 EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and are central to the policy's 'green architecture.' Complementing conditionality and environmental and climate commitments (ENVCLIM) under rural development, these schemes aim to support climate, environmental, and nature conservation objectives in agriculture. When thoughtfully designed and effectively implemented, they can play a crucial role in strengthening ecosystems and enhancing the conservation status of widespread habitats and species. Notably, they hold the potential to encompass a greater share of agricultural land than ENVCLIMs, with at least 25% of direct payments dedicated to their support.

In their 2021 report 'Will CAP Eco-Schemes Be Worth Their Name?', BirdLife Europe, the European Environmental Bureau, and WWF EU catalogued and assessed the proposed eco-schemes across the EU.[1] The results provided a bleak picture[2] and hopes for improvements during the approval process of the CAP Strategic Plans went unfulfilled.

In 2023, NABU (BirdLife Germany) analysed[3] the level of ambition and potential environmental impact of eco-schemes of all 28 CAP Strategic plans. The report concluded that, despite most Member States' focus on protecting and promoting biodiversity, the budget, the scope of measures, and the level of ambition were low and not well-targeted.

This report aims to reveal how the on-paper potential of eco-schemes has been translated into on-the-ground action by examining the first year of implementation. Were farmers interested in taking up eco-schemes for biodiversity? If not, what were the underlying reasons? What improvements are needed? These are some of the questions that guided the research presented in this report. Undoubtedly, the first year of implementation of eco-schemes has been challenging on many fronts. Beyond the complexities of introducing this new instrument, derogations from conditionality[4] have affected its integrity and stability. It is clear that the ongoing war in Ukraine and extreme weather events have further impacted the rollout of eco-schemes.

Furthermore, the report briefly examines the impact of the 2024 amendments to the CAP rules on eco-schemes. Instead of building on the lessons from the first year of implementation and addressing the identified issues, the European Commission—backed by the Council and Parliament—rushed to adopt a 'CAP Simplification Package.' This was in response to the farmers' protests across the EU at the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024. This decision, made without proper consultation or impact assessment, has had significant consequences for the CAP's green architecture.

Despite being underutilised in planning and further diluted by the 2024 reforms, eco-schemes remain important for supporting biodiversity and environmental goals. With three years left in the current CAP cycle, there is still time to improve their design and implementation, laying the groundwork for more effective environmental schemes in the next CAP.

This report seeks to enhance eco-schemes' ability to deliver on biodiversity and climate targets, making them a win-win for both farmers and the environment, and in turn, society at large.

1.2 Scope and structure of the report

The first section of this report provides an overview of the design and scope of eco-schemes across the EU. Building on this introductory information, Chapter 3 evaluates the level of enrolment in eco-schemes across 12 countries after one year of implementation within the new CAP period, which began in 2023. The countries include Belgium (Wallonia), Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. The analysis focuses on eco-schemes that support biodiversity such as birds, pollinators, extensive grasslands, soil biodiversity and landscape features. It further identifies problems and barriers that farmers across the EU face in adopting these eco-schemes and proposes improvements to their overall design. Chapter 4 looks at legislative changes introduced under the 2024 CAP Simplification Package and their impact on eco-schemes. Next, Chapter 5 explores what monitoring and evaluations tools have been put in place by Member States for eco-schemes, with a particular focusing on biodiversity. Finally, Chapter 6 provides conclusions and recommendations for the improvement of eco-schemes drawing on best practice cases from several Member States.

1.3 Methodology

The data for this report was collected using a survey questionnaire created to gather input from BirdLife Partners. These experts relied on publicly available information or data provided in Monitoring Committees. The survey covered several elements, including the planned area for eco-schemes coverage and the actual area covered in 2023. By comparing these values as percentages, the survey identified cases where eco-schemes are either under-subscribed or over-subscribed. Additionally, qualitative data was collected from each analysed Member State regarding the reasons for both good and poor adoption by farmers, along with recommendations for changes to the respective eco-schemes.

Following the CAP simplification in 2024, additional data was requested from national experts to assess the changes made to the CAP Strategic plans. The survey also gathered information on the plans of Member States for monitoring and evaluating eco-schemes.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, relevant reports were consulted during the drafting process and have been referenced in the qualitative section of this report.

1 BirdLife Europe, EEB, and WWF, 2021. Will CAP eco-schemes be worth their name?
2 Only 19% of eco-schemes were deemed likely to deliver on their stated environmental objectives, 40% would need significant improvements to be effective, and 41% are completely misaligned
3 NABU, 2023. Europäischer Vergleich der 28 GAP-Strategiepläne
4 Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1317 of 27 July 2022 providing for derogations from Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards the application of the standards for good agricultural and environmental conditions of land (GAEC standards) 7 and 8 for claim year 2023

2 General overview of eco-schemes

2.1 Design models of eco-schemes

There are four basic models of how eco-schemes are structured, which can be combined to a certain extent:

Model A

All participating farmers must adhere to a uniform set of standards based on land use categories to receive the premium. This approach is similar to greening requirements from the 2014-2022 CAP period. The standards may be differentiated by farm type. The subsidy is the same for all farms within the Member State and is based on each hectare of eligible land (e.g. CZ, SK)[5]. This model allows for easier planning of fund distribution in the short and medium term.

Model B

Farmers can choose from a menu of measures; each assigned a specific point value or unit amount. To get payments under eco-schemes, the farm must score above a set reference value (total points divided by the eligible area). Payments can be granted in one or more stages. In each stage, all farms within the Member State receive the same payment per hectare of eligible land in that year (e.g.: NL, IE, FR). This model ensures funds are effectively distributed and remain flexible. If fewer farmers than expected join the payment per unit can be increased to adjust.

Model C

The eco-schemes offer measures with a one-year commitment period and a fixed premium amount per hectare. The premium amount differs between the measures and the premium is provided per hectare (e.g.: DE, ES, IT, PL, RO, EL, BG, PT, DK, LT, BE (Wallonia and Flanders), AU, SI, HR, LV, EE, CY, LU, MT).

Model D

The last model is a variant to Model C, but instead of receiving a set payment per measure, there is a fixed overall budget for the entire eco-scheme. The individual measures only receive a point value. The budget is then distributed to farms based on the points they have earned (e.g.: HU, and partially PL). Similar to Model B, the amount allocated to the farms can be easily adjusted by depending on the point value or payment per hectare.

In contrast to Model B and D, where the outflow of funds is easier to plan in the short and medium term, estimating the budgets for Model C is more difficult. The design of the measures, weather conditions, or changes in market prices can significantly influence participation in eco-schemes and lead to major changes in funding requirements.

2.2 Focus of eco-schemes

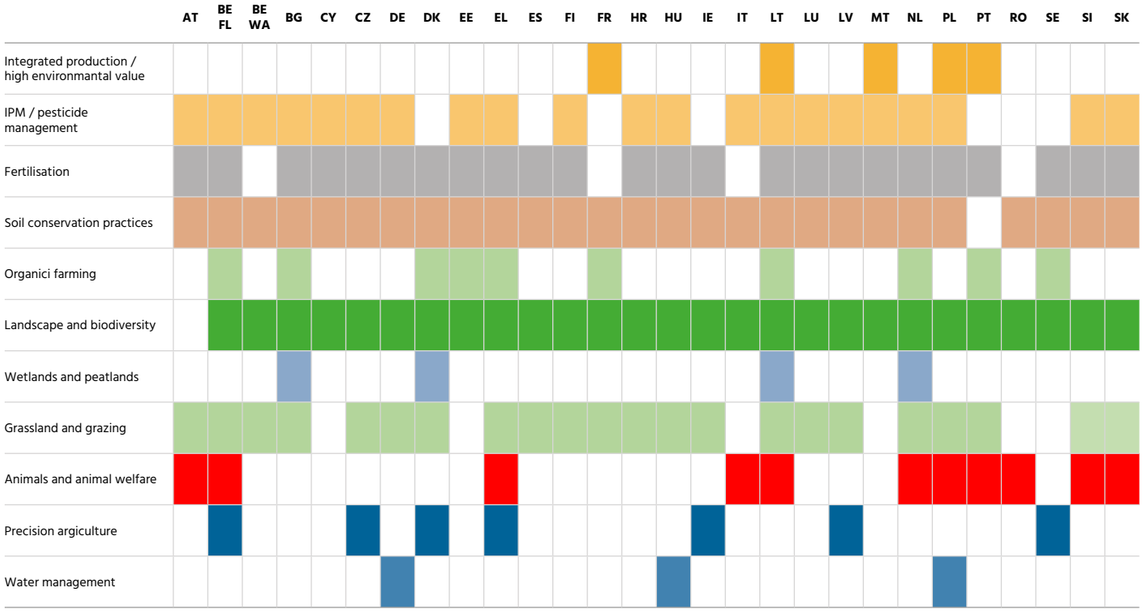
The CAP Strategic Plans regulation[6] (Article 31.4) requires that each eco-scheme addresses at least two environmental or climate-related objectives. This approach aims to maximise the ecological value of farming practices and enhance the resilience of agricultural ecosystems. Table 1 illustrates the diversity of eco-schemes developed by various EU Member States within their CAP Strategic Plans. Each colour represents specific areas of environmental action such as soil conservation, biodiversity, or grassland and grazing. All Member States, except Austria[7], have put in place at least one eco-scheme focused on enhancing biodiversity.

5 In Slovakia, the premium is different for farms situated in Natura 2000 areas

6 Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1305/2013 and (EU) No 1307/2013

7 Austria chose to address biodiversity objectives only by the rural development interventions.

Table 1: Thematic coverage of eco-schemes per country, Source: European Commission, Approved 28 CAP Strategic Plans (2023-2027), June 2023



From compensation to incentivisation

The adequacy of payments is a crucial factor in determining farmers' willingness to participate in environmental schemes. Traditionally, agri-environmental measures provided compensation payments to cover additional costs or lost income associated with these practices. Under the new CAP Strategic Plans Regulation, eco-schemes now offer an additional incentive payment. This approach allows premiums to be more flexible, independent from exact costs or market fluctuations under Article 31.7(a). This provides farmers with additional income for environmental services, moving away from the previous model focused solely on cost reimbursement.

Under this new system, farmers are rewarded for generating 'public goods in addition to agricultural products, marking a significant shift in policy. To qualify as an eco-scheme under Article 31.7(a) such initiatives must avoid restrictive criteria tied to land use type, specific crops, or any production components, ensuring compliance with World Trade Organisation (WTO) guidelines. However, the Commission has been criticised for inconsistently applying these standards. Especially in cases where organic farming practices—usually involving production components—have been included under Article 31.7(a).

15 Member States have developed a total of 25 eco-schemes aligned with this new income-effective model, with varying designs and levels of ambition. Most of these eco-schemes support biodiversity efforts through measures like maintaining unproductive areas, fallow land, buffer strips (in ES, IT, and DK), creating landscape elements (in EL, PT, and BE), or promoting soil protection through winter vegetation cover (in FI, EL, and BE).

Budgets for these eco-schemes differ widely. For example, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have committed over 90% of their eco-scheme budgets to this new incentive approach, while Greece has allocated just under 90% across four schemes. In contrast, other Member States dedicate a smaller share, around 10% of their total eco-scheme budget, to these incentive payments. This broad variation reflects the flexibility offered by the CAP while accommodating different national priorities and environmental goals.

When and which eco-schemes were programmed through Article 31.7(a) lack a clear definition and appear to have been applied inconsistently. It is unclear how organic farming can be programmed, whereby production components are to be avoided. There is inconsistency in allowing France and Hungary to program their menu approaches (see model b under section 2.1) via Article 31.7(a), while Ireland and the Netherlands could not. To ensure CAP payments effectively support public services, addressing these inconsistencies in the CAP beyond 2028 will be crucial.

3 Eco-schemes roll-out: insights from year one

3.1 Enrolment rates in eco-schemes

Table 2 provides an overview of eco-schemes from the analysed Member States, grouped by category and showing the level of enrolment during the first year of implementation. Particular attention is given to schemes targeting biodiversity, which are represented by categories such as non-productive areas, pesticide reduction, landscape features and to some extent also grassland and grazing and soil protection. The right column represents the uptake of the eco-scheme, expressed as a percentage of the originally planned area.

Table 2: Overview of eco-schemes in the analysed Member States and enrolment levels (in %) Source: CAP Strategic Plans, BirdLife/NABU compilation (HU and NL not listed due to their point- and menu-based approach)

Member State	Category	Name of eco-scheme	% of planned area
BE (W)	Soil conservation	**1. Promotion of vegetation cover in winter from Jan. to mid Feb. Progressive thresholds of 70, 80 and 90%**	92.4
	Variety-specific	**2. Environmentally friendly cultivation (to compensate for unattractive crops e.g. legumes, cereal-legume mixtures, spring cereals, malting barley, quinoa, hemp)**	83
	Landscape elements/ non-productive area	**3. Ecological connectivity (ecosystem services e.g. non-prod. area, structural elements, etc.)**	90.5
	Pesticide reduction	**4. Reduction of inputs (of pesticides)**	13.1
	Extensive grazing	**5. Permanent grassland with lower livestock density (to reduce livestock density) Basic aid (min. 0.6 LSU - 3 LSU)**	102.4
BG	Organic farming	**1. Organic farming program (livestock)**	65.9
	Landscape elements	**2. Preservation and improvement of biodiversity and ecological infrastructure (agricultural land: arable land, grasslands and orchards)**	12,6
	Nutrient management	**3. Preservation and restoration of soil potential - promotion of green manuring and org. fertilization (to reduce nutrient losses)**	282.9
	Pesticide reduction	**4. Reduction of pesticide use**	460.1
	Permanent crops	**5. Ecological management of permanent crops**	39.1
	Extensive grazing	**6. Extensive permanent grassland**	27.3
CZ	Non-productive Land	**7. Conservation and improvement of biodiversity in forest ecosystems**	12,9
	Diverse crops	**8. Crop diversification (to widen the crop rotation) (degressive)**	86.9
	Whole farm scheme	**1. Basic whole farm eco-scheme**	97.7
	Whole farm scheme	(b) Premium level of whole farm eco-scheme (top-up)	0.5
	Precision farming	**2. Precision agriculture**	0
DE	Non-productive Land	**1. Provision of areas for the improvement of biodiversity**	16,5
	Diverse crops	**2. Cultivation of diverse crops**	65
	Agroforestry	**3. Maintenance of agroforestry management practices**	0,02
	Permanent grassland	**4. Extensification of the entire permanent grassland of the farm**	67,0
	Permanent grassland	**5. Result-oriented extensive management of permanent grassland with four regional identification species**	181
	Pesticide reduction	**6. Management of arable and permanent crop areas of the farm without the use of chemically synthesised crop protection**	23,7
	Natura 2000	**7. Cultivation in Natura 2000 areas according to the protection goals**	86
ES	Soil protection non-productive land - biodiversity	**1. Carbon farming and agroecology: extensive grazing, mowing and biodiversity in wet grassland.**	142
	Soil protection/ non-productive land - biodiversity	**2. Carbon farming and agroecology: extensive grazing, mowing and biodiversity in Mediterranean pasture**	155
	Soil conservation	**3. Carbon farming and agroecology: crop rotation and direct seeding on dry cropland, 6 actions, (actions 5 and 6 perennial)**	107
	Soil conservation	**4. Carbon farming and agroecology: crop rotation and direct seeding in dry wet cropland, 3 actions, (Action 3 perennial)**	152
	Soil conservation	**5. Carbon farming and agroecology: crop rotation and direct seeding on irrigated cropland, (6 actions)**	132
	Soil conservation/ biodiversity	**6. Carbon farming and agroecology: vegetation and inert covers for woody crops on flat land, (6 actions)**	70
	Soil conservation/ biodiversity	**7. Carbon farming and agroecology: Vegetation and inert covers for woody crops with medium slope, (6 actions)**	92
	Soil conservation/ biodiversity	**8. Carbon farming and agroecology: Vegetation and inert covers for woody crops on steep slopes, (6 actions)**	123
	Non-productive Land - biodiversity	**9. Agroecology: biodiversity areas in arable land and permanent crops, at least 7% of the area (unproductive land)**	133
	Non-productive Land - biodiversity	**10. Agroecology: biodiversity areas in underwater crops and sustainable management of the water sheet**	59

Member State	Category	Name of eco-scheme	% of planned area
IT	Animal Welfare	**1. Reduction of antimicrobial resistance and animal welfare (per LSU)**	97
	Soil Protection	**2. Inter-row grassing (with prohibition of some chem. pest control)**	87
	Landscape elements	**3. Protection of olive groves with high landscape value**	87
	Diverse crops	**4. Extensive fodder cultivation with crop rotation**	222
	Non-productive Land	**5. Specific measures for pollinators**	72
PL	Non-productive Land	**1. Areas with plants for pollinators**	49,7
	Carbon Farming & Nutrient management	**2. Carbon storage and nutrient management based on soil samples (partial abandonment of pesticides) (point system: annual payment based on the points attributed for the implemented measures (1 point = 100 PLN).**	329,8
		(b) Winter intercrops/intercrops (5 points)	341,5
		(g) Application of liquid fertilizers by methods other than spraying (3 points).	1862,1
		(h) Simplified cropping systems (to support conservation tillage: no-till, no-till, strip-till - no-zero tillage with herbicides) (4 points)	339,4
		i) Straw and soil mixture (2 points)	82,2
	Permanent grassland	**3. Water retention on permanent grassland (making land available for flooding, satellite monitoring).**	82,2
	Animal Welfare	**4. Animal welfare (per animal, degression thresholds from 101 and 151 units) 30 actions in total according to the respective farm animal**	no data yet
	Integrated crop production	**5. Carrying out crop production in the system of integrated crop production (for sustainable crop production).**	677,8
	Pesticide reduction	**6. Biological plant protection (by microbial preparations: fungi, bacteria, viruses).**	688,3
RO	Whole farm scheme	**1. Environmentally friendly practices on arable land - whole farm approach with increased baseline requirements (e.g., 5% GAEC 8, diversification of acreage, promotion of C retention through minimum tillage for farms larger than 10.01 ha)**	108,9
	Whole farm scheme	**2. Environmentally friendly farming on small, traditional farms (max. 10 ha) (to reduce imports of feed)**	4,9
	Soil conservation	**3. Improvement of row spacing in orchards, vineyards, nurseries and hop gardens**	111,3
	Animal welfare	**4. Improvement of the welfare of dairy cows**	no data
	Animal welfare	**5. Improvement of the welfare of young cattle for fattening**	no data
SK	Whole farm scheme	**1. Improving soil structure, promoting biodiversity, and mitigating the negative consequences of climate change.**	88.3
	Animal welfare (LSU measure)	**2. Animal welfare - pasture**	Dairy cows:14811 Veal:44430 Sheep/goat: 192726
SI	Extensive grazing	**1. Extensive grassland**	100
	Extensive grazing	**2. Traditional grassland use**	25,8
	Nutrient management	**3. Low-emission fertilization with organic fertilizers**	no data
	Nutrient management	**4. Emission reduction certificates for ammonia and greenhouse gases (feed additives)**	no data
	Diverse crops	**5. Under sowing and following crop/ reseeding**	no data
	Soil conservation	**6. Vegetation cover of arable land over winter**	no data
	Soil conservation	**7. Conservation tillage**	no data
	Species protection	**8. Non-seeded areas for skylark (regionally specific)**	49,2
	Species protection	**9. Protection of lapwing nests (1 nest = 1 hectare, regardless of the size of the field where nests are located)**	72,0
	Nutrient management	**10. Use of only organic fertilizers for N supply to permanent crops.**	no data
	Landscape elements/ unproductive area	**11. Preservation of biological diversity in permanent crops.**	144,1

The data from Table 2 shows a mixed uptake of eco-schemes targeting biodiversity across the 12 Member States. Some of the biodiversity-focused schemes, such as those supporting non-productive areas, creation of landscape features or reduction of plant protection products, achieved only about 15% of their planned area in countries like Belgium (Wallonia), Germany, and Bulgaria. In contrast, other schemes, especially in Poland and Spain, were oversubscribed by up to 140%, with Poland showing the most significant oversubscription. Certain schemes, not directly targeting biodiversity but focusing on nutrient management, saw demand exceed targets by up to 1800%. Similarly, the use of biological plant protection products was oversubscribed by around 600%. Despite these variations, eco-schemes on average met their originally planned area targets.

The level of demand for eco-schemes can reveal the level of ambition set in CAP Strategic Plans. For instance, the exceptionally high demand for eco-schemes for nutrient management in Poland reflects a lack of ambition, as the practices promoted are already the standard under Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC). Supporting measures that are already widely adopted undermines the purpose of the eco-schemes. Additionally, such extreme demands force Member States to reallocate budgets as farmers are legally entitled to get the support as soon as they have selected and implemented an eco-scheme.

Image © ahavelaar

3.2 Exploring the factors shaping the enrolment figures

As described above, all analysed Member States have put in place at least one eco-scheme aiming to promote sustainable agricultural practices that contribute to biodiversity conservation. Despite their potential benefits, many of these schemes have not achieved the desired participation of farmers across various Member States, as shown in Table 2. Through feedback from BirdLife experts, we have gathered qualitative information about some eco-schemes to understand the reasons for low participation and propose concrete improvements to encourage wider uptake and more effective implementation.

Belgium (Wallonia)

Belgium (Wallonia) has programmed a total of five eco-schemes addressing a wide range of conservation objectives. The uptake was somewhat lower compared to other Member States.

The eco-scheme 'reduction of inputs of pesticides' only reached 13% of the target area, making it one of the least adopted eco-schemes. Under this scheme, pesticide use is to be reduced based on a list of prohibited pesticides, most of which are already classified as substitution candidates by the EU. Agricultural associations reported that the €80 premium that is given as compensation to those who reduce prohibited pesticide, was too unattractive. In comparison, other Member States offer higher premiums, but their level of ambition is often also higher. Following the request of farm unions, mechanical weeding was added as an option eligible for payment from 2024. Originally, the pesticide reduction scheme was not planned in Wallonia, which is why the budget was taken from the ecological connectivity scheme, thereby reducing its impact. Nature conservationists have called for the removal of the pesticide reduction scheme, advocating for the funds to be transferred back to the ecological connectivity scheme.

A particularly interesting eco-scheme related to soil protection, and by extension biodiversity protection, was the promotion of soil cover through mulching or cover crops. On average, it achieved 92% of the target area. The premium levels were tiered according to the achieved soil cover (70%, 80%, or 90%). The scheme extends the period for soil cover in winter. The eco-scheme is likely to make a significant contribution to erosion prevention, improved water management, and the promotion of soil life due to the extent of the target area but also because its straightforward and result-based design makes it easily adopted by farmers. To increase its impact, offering a small financial bonus to farmers who diversify their cover crops (e.g., using three or more crops) could provide greater incentives for adoption and expand ecological benefits.

The eco-scheme for 'ecological connectivity' focuses on maintaining structural elements and non-productive areas. It is important to note that this scheme is based on 'environmental hectares', meaning the footprint is one and a half to two times smaller than the actual area in hectares on the ground. While the scheme is generally seen as positive, its targets have been criticised as being too low, only slightly exceeding the GAEC and further weakened by the CAP Simplification Package in 2024. The goals were reduced by 22%, from 40,500 to 32,502 environmental hectares, following the removal of the first requirement under GAEC 8. It is a qualitative eco-scheme that compensates farmers for implementing measures aimed at enhancing the quality of ecological connectivity elements covered under GAEC 8. Natura payments should be removed from this ecological connectivity scheme, as they offer no added value for biodiversity.

Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, feedback shows that the eco-scheme for organic farming and the two schemes focused on protecting biodiversity faced challenges. The eco-scheme for organic farming covered only 65% of the initially planned area. Its focus on organic farmers with livestock likely limited its broader adoption. The second eco-scheme achieved just 12% of the planned area. It includes mowing in grasslands, no use of pesticides, and trimming hedges and bushes up to 1.5m in height. As reported, the requirements related to the grazing plan were unclear, posing challenges for farmers. In general, the biodiversity-focused eco-schemes were not sufficiently promoted, which is a key reason for the low uptake. Again, the financial incentives were insufficient for this specific scheme.

The reduction of pesticides, another measure broadly promoting biodiversity, achieved 460% of its planned area. Almost 95% of this uptake occurred on arable land. This eco-scheme only prohibits the use of glyphosate and pheromones. The remaining 5% of the planned areas were allocated to grassland and permanent grassland. Given the significant oversubscription, at least an extension of the pesticide ban list could be considered.

The payments offered for biodiversity targeting schemes were not considered attractive enough to cover the costs and risks of participation. This was particularly the case for schemes such as organic farming, which require significant investment and changes in farming practices. Lack of support and promotion from the government and relevant organisations resulted in low participation as many farmers were not aware of existing programs and their potential benefits.

Czechia

Czechia has implemented a comprehensive, whole-farm eco-scheme that allows farmers to participate with their entire eligible area. This measure, particularly relevant within the Article 31.7(a) framework of the CAP Strategic Plans Regulation[8], sets support conditions for permanent grassland, arable land (including fallow areas or grass cover on arable land), and permanent crops such as orchards, vineyards, hops, and fast-growing woods.

Initially, one of the main conditions in 2023 required farms to establish or designate at least 3% or 5% of their area (depending on the GAEC 8 option selected) as non-productive features. These could include fallow land, landscape elements, or buffer strips, with additional options for bio belts, agroforestry, or other Pillar II measures. But following the EU Commission's Simplification Package, the scheme's ambition was reduced, requiring only 5% of any non-productive features, including nitrogen-fixing and intercrops. Most farmers are expected to choose the least demanding options.

For full payment across the entire farm area, farms must meet all structural requirements under the eco-scheme. With 97% of the target area enrolled in the basic scheme, Czechia introduced a top-up premium level with more ambitious requirements. This includes 7% non-productive features, such as a mandatory 2% of linear features and/or landscape features and wider buffer strips along watercourses. Payment is offered solely for these minimum 2% of premium linear features and/or landscape features and buffer strips, with rates raised from €350/ha to €600/ha, reflecting the enhanced environmental commitment.

8 Payments for the eco-scheme are granted as payments additional to the basic income support (so called 'top up')

Germany

The first eco-scheme to promote biodiversity, as described in Germany's 2023 National Strategy Plan, is based on four variants that target non-productive areas: flower strips, permanent crops and old grassland. These measures are explicitly designed to promote biodiversity by creating habitats for insects, birds and small mammals. Germany is the only large agricultural country in the EU that has placed a strong focus on promoting biodiversity and has allocated over 30% of its budget to the creation of fallow land.

With around €1.6 billion, the measure for the 'provision of land to improve biodiversity' is by far the largest eco-scheme, which promotes unproductive areas beyond the original GAEC 8 requirements of 4%. But the approach and administrative processes behind it are not entirely straight forward. This provides for a set-aside of at least 1% to a maximum of 6% of the area, whereby farmers can receive €1,300/ha for the first percentage and an additional €500 to €300 for the remaining percentages. If the area is cultivated with flowering areas or strips, an additional €150/ha is paid. The same mechanism applies to the old grass strips, but with €900 as the base payment and €200 to €400 for each additional percent. Thanks to the exceptionally high budget, the measure aims to cover around 700,000 hectares across all sub-measures. However, an initial evaluation in 2023 by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture revealed very low uptake among farmers: only 20% of the first percentage of the scheme was utilised, and just 14% for the second tier. The other two sub-measures accounted for only about 2%, resulting in an overall average uptake of just 16.5%. The main reasons for this low participation were the derogation of GAEC 8 and insufficient promotion and communication to farmers.

Due to this unexpectedly low uptake by farmers, significant adjustments were made for 2024 compared to the first version, particularly regarding area limitations and funding conditions especially for small areas. The adjustments were ultimately made to promote acceptance and participation by farmers and to expand the eco-scheme more comprehensively. The adjustments to Germany's eco-scheme for 2024 represent a significant improvement in encouraging farmer participation while simultaneously maximising the ecological benefits of the measures.

One of the most notable changes is the increase in eligible non-productive land from 6% to 8% of the farm's arable land. This expansion allows farmers to allocate larger portions of their land for non-productive purposes, which directly contributes to fostering biodiversity across a wider area. Over time, this could enhance the diversity of plant and animal species in these regions.

Grey Partridge (*Perdix perdix*) © Rollin Verlinde

Another positive aspect is the clear definition of timeframes for sowing and maintenance. The new rules outline precisely when activities like sowing or maintenance should occur, ensuring that the designated areas serve as habitats for insects, birds, and other wildlife for an extended period. For instance, the rule of prohibiting grazing and mowing before September 1st guarantees that the vegetation has ample time to develop, providing necessary shelter and nourishment for these species. Despite the positive aspects, the administrative complexity of the scheme remains a challenge for farmers. The detailed requirements, such as minimum and maximum area sizes and specific guidelines for sowing, may continue to be perceived as barriers and too rigid depending on the region. This is especially true for smaller farms that may lack the financial or human resources to manage these requirements efficiently.

Overall, the low participation in Germany's 2023 eco-schemes can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, many farms were hesitant and needed time to adjust to the new system. Secondly, some eco-schemes offered very low premiums and were perceived as impractical. In the case of eco-scheme 1, this was particularly due to the requirement to meet GAEC 8, despite the suspension of this standard for 2023. However, after significant adjustments to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, increase premium levels, and improve support conditions, the eco-schemes saw much better uptake in the second year (2024). Additionally, two new eco-schemes targeting grassland and connectivity of non-productive areas will be introduced in Germany in 2026, further expanding the portfolio.

Eurasian Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) © Lars Soerink

Spain

Within the framework of its CAP Strategic Plan, Spain proposed four main types of eco-schemes related to agroecology and carbon management, with practices tailored to specific land use types: extensive grazing, mowing and biodiversity areas on grasslands (eco-scheme 1 and 2), rotation and direct seeding on arable land (eco-scheme 3, 4, 5), vegetated soil cover in permanent crops (eco-scheme 6, 7, and 8), and non-productive areas for biodiversity in arable land and underwater crops (eco-scheme 9 and 10). Farmers can choose only one type of practice for each hectare of land. These practices generally build on the mandatory requirements of GAEC and are annual. Additionally, farmers who are committed to maintaining the measures of direct seeding (eco-scheme 3,4,5) and vegetation cover (eco-scheme 6,7,8) for more than a year receive an extra €25 per hectare.

Spain's approach to eco-schemes in its CAP Strategic Plan aims for inclusivity by offering a broad range of practices applicable to various soil types, ensuring that farmers could select those best suited to their specific farming systems. This design maximises farmers' participation. According to the Spanish Government[9] 75% of farmers enrolled in at least one eco-scheme, covering 87% of the total declared agricultural area. The average farm size of participants was significantly larger (40.9 ha) compared to non-participants (18.6 ha).[10]

Spain places significant emphasis on soil protection and minimising soil erosion in the design of its eco-schemes, addressing a major issue in the country. The eco-schemes reflect the three principles of Conservation Agriculture as defined by the FAO (minimal or no tillage, permanent soil cover, crop rotation). By minimising soil disturbance and increasing soil cover through practices like mulching, the risks of erosion can be reduced, leading to improved water management. Unfortunately, farmers were able to opt for only one eco-scheme per hectare, limiting the systems' approach.

Our analysis shows that almost all eco-schemes, except for eco-schemes 6 and 7, were significantly oversubscribed. In particular, the two eco-schemes (1 and 2) were chosen far more frequently than anticipated, with over 140% and over 150% of the originally planned area. Similarly, two of the crop rotation eco-schemes (4 and 5) were selected more often, reaching over 150% and 130% of the planned area. One of the two biodiversity-focused eco-schemes focusing on underwater crops, like rice, was enrolled on 59% of the planned area. As reported it seemed that the payment was too low to incentivise uptake. The other biodiversity focusing scheme targeting non-productive areas was selected more frequently than expected, with over 130% of the originally planned area. Within eco-schemes 1 and 2 biodiversity-focused practices have one of the possible practices focused on biodiversity, which is leaving a part of the pastures with no mowing for a major part of the year, acting as a 'biodiversity isle'. A closer look at the uptake numbers reveals clear preferences for certain measures. For instance, farmers more frequently selected crop rotation over direct seeding and extensive pasture over sustainable mowing. Specifically, 98.7% of farmers chose the 'extensive grazing' practice in wet (E1) and Mediterranean (E2) grasslands, while other measures, such as 'sustainable mowing' and 'biodiversity isles', had very low uptake (1.3% combined). This suggests that these measures may not be effectively designed to encourage higher participation. These two eco-schemes saw an uptake of over 2 million hectares more than initially planned, largely due to the eligibility of land without Payment Rights. Despite the low payment per hectare for this eco-scheme, the high uptake indicates a significant need for support in the extensive grazing sector. Yet, the conditions tied to this payment do not ensure a positive impact on biodiversity.

Regarding the biodiversity-focusing schemes, it was recommended to redesign this scheme, clarifying the differences between arable lands and woody crops and allocating more budget. With over 2.4 million hectares almost 25% of the total arable area was addressed by this scheme. The uptake on woody crops/permanent crops was relatively low. One of the main reasons for the low uptake is that this eco-scheme was created for arable lands and was extended to woody crops without adaptation to the different landscape and the agronomic conditions. In addition, the low payment rate of this eco-scheme is another negative factor that explains the low uptake. The differences are clear when comparing the two eco-schemes applicable to woody crops: on over 80% of the hectares dedicated to woody crops, farmers have chosen vegetation covers, while only 20% have opted for biodiversity areas. In Andalucía, where woody crops are particularly important, this disparity is even more pronounced: 97% chose vegetation covers, compared to just 3% for biodiversity areas.

The cases of high uptake of the eco-schemes are partly due to the introduction of greater flexibilities following the CAP Simplification Package. For example, in the case of the Extensive Pasture eco-scheme, this meant lowering the minimum stocking density and reducing the grazing period to 90 days. On the other hand, the high participation rates also suggest that the level of ambition is not very high, as farmers are being paid for practices, they would have implemented anyway to build climate resilience. On top of that, oversubscribed schemes lead to lower payments for farmers and therefore to less planning security. Overall, the main recommendation for greater impact on habitats and biodiversity is to allow farmers to combine multiple eco-schemes simultaneously or allow at least the biodiversity scheme to be compatible with all other eco-schemes. Compared to other Member States the budget dedicated to biodiversity-focusing schemes is quite low and needs to be raised to promote uptake.

9 MAPA 2024: https://www.fega.gob.es/es/content/balance-del-primer-ano-de-aplicacion-de-la-reforma-agricola-comun-pac-en-el-ano-2023
10 IEEP 2024: https://ieep.eu/publications/environment-and-climate-assessment-of-spains-cap-strategic-plan/

Image © Federica Luoni

A pollinator-friendly strip sown with diverse, nectar-rich plants stands out on this organic cereal farm in the Marche region. Beyond supporting a variety of pollinators, this strip serves as a nesting haven for grassland birds like Eurasian Skylarks (Alauda arvensis) and Crested Larks (Galerida cristata). However, the mandatory use of certified seeds poses challenges, as these are often limited in availability, inconsistent in quality, and poorly suited to arid climates. This requirement restricts farms from fostering naturally regenerating grasslands or utilising locally adapted wildflowers to boost biodiversity.

Hungary

Hungary adopted a menu-based approach in its eco-scheme design, noteworthy for its structure. The eco-scheme is not compulsory, but if a farmer makes use of it, he or she must make commitments for the whole farm.

It consists of 21 sub-measures, and each grant one or two points to farmers based on the effort involved. Farmers must reach at least two points to qualify for support. Under the original eco-scheme rules, non-compliance would result in forfeiture of the entire aid amount. However, a partial compliance model allows farmers to retain some aid: if they meet 70% of the practices across 70% of their total land area, they receive 50% of the payment; with compliance on 50% of their land, they receive 30%. If compliance is below 50%, no payment is given.

While Hungary does not specify exact areas for each measure due to the menu approach, data on the implemented area and participating farms provides insights. The most frequently chosen sub-measure, covering 84% of Hungary's agricultural land, is crop diversification. The second most common measure, used on over 49% of agricultural land, is the application of organic fertilizers on at least half of the area. Both sub-measures are rated at one point each, reaching the two-point minimum threshold, but they add limited additional value, as they are already widely practiced in agriculture.

Italy

Italy implemented a total of five eco-schemes across different support frameworks. The largest in terms of budget, the Animal Welfare eco-scheme, aimed at reducing antibiotic use, has been implemented on 97% of the targeted farms. However, the only requirement for participation in this scheme is a 20% reduction in antibiotic use, which does little to improve the status quo. All other hectare-based eco-schemes in Italy are broken down into three different clusters: a standard version, and versions for Natura 2000 areas and nitrate-sensitive areas, each with tiered payments. The biodiversity-focused eco-scheme 'grassing in permanent crops', which includes certain restrictions on pesticides and herbicides use on crops, achieved 87% of the planned area, with 20% of that area allocated to Natura 2000 and nitrate-sensitive zones.

'Extensive fodder cultivation with crop rotation" on the other hand, reached 222% of the planned area. Despite the criticism of rotation in cross-compliance, many farmers, including organic farmers who already practice it, signed up due to the relatively low level of commitment required. To raise the level of ambition, it would be advisable to include other practices that ensure the conservation of soil organic matter. Another option would be to introduce an additional or complementary action like winter covering of arable land with subsequent green manure.

The eco-scheme 'specific measure for pollinators' is divided into three variants each for permanent crops and arable land. On average, 72% of the planned area was reached. In Natura 2000 areas, uptake reached 129% for permanent crops and 158% for arable land. It is important to note that farms, especially arable farms, located in Natura 2000 areas participated much more than expected. Alternatively, the low uptake of arable farms in nitrate-sensitive areas can be attributed to the dominance of large, high-impact farms in regions like the Po Valley.

Netherlands

The Netherlands, like Hungary, chose a menu approach for the implementation of its eco-schemes. They used the two-year transition period to develop the implementation of a points system on arable land and grassland in two pilot regions. The country has implemented a three-tier points system, categorised into bronze, silver, and gold, corresponding to graduated unit amounts of €60, €100, and €200 per hectare, respectively. These amounts are allocated across the entire farm area and disbursed accordingly. This means that there are farm-specific thresholds that a farm can reach. Farmers now have the option to choose from a total of 22 (sub-) measures, including organic farming. All measures are grouped together in one eco-scheme. Multiple measures can be implemented on the same area, provided they are compatible, or even ENVCLIM can be added.

To qualify for the points system, a farm must achieve a certain number of points across five protection goals (water, soil & air, biodiversity, climate and landscape) by means of the selected measures. Each measure is assigned certain justification values in euros, reflecting the cost associated with implementing that specific measure. These values are included in the calculation of the overall management assessment and determine the participant's classification. Once the minimum point thresholds for each protection goal are met, the justification values of the implemented measures are totalled to determine the total value of the implemented management. The pilot showed that it was difficult to obtain sufficient points for biodiversity and landscape. This can sometimes depend on the type of landscape. For example, activities with many points, such as woody landscape elements, are not desirable in open meadow bird habitats. The three staggered unit amounts result on the one hand in farm-specific threshold values, but also in 'limits'. Profit-driven farmers have no incentive to go significantly beyond the threshold set by the 'gold status' as further management is not remunerated. Table 3 presents an example calculation for a fictitious farm with a total of 100 ha of farmland (60 ha of arable land and 40 ha of permanent grassland) to illustrate the limitations of the current approach. It demonstrates that the light green measures are prioritised, leading to a system with a limited environmental impact.

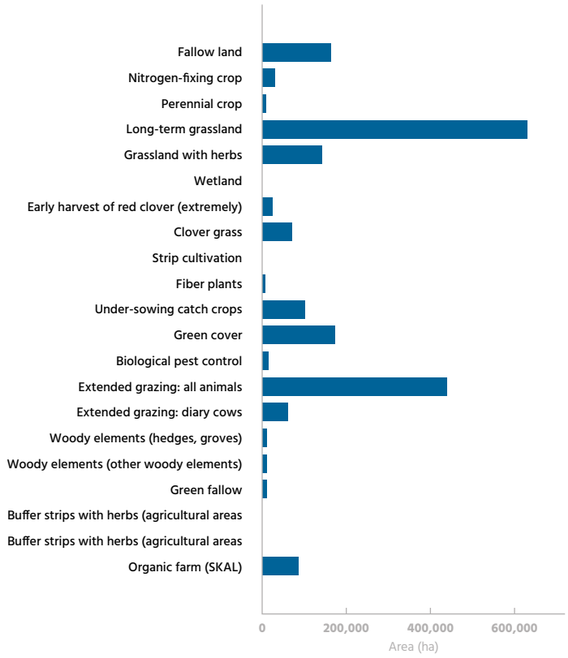
Table 3: An example calculation for a fictitious farm with a total of 100 ha illustrating limits of the Dutch approach, Source: CAP Strategic Plans for the Netherlands, own compilation

Eco-scheme	Measure area (ha)	Payment (€/ha measurement)	Payment for measure area (€)
Permanent Grassland	40	91	3.640
N-fixing Plants	60	2.308	13.848
Early harvest	6	492	2.952
Green cover	50	51	2.550
Unproductive area	5	3.961	19.805
Landscape features	1	4.221	4.221
Sum			**44.976**
Cap gold level (100 ha * 200 €)			**20.000**
Difference by			**24.976**

As described in the example, a business-minded farmer has no interest in going beyond the value rewarded by the gold level. This approach, unlike in most Member States, limits or caps the environmental impact. According to the Dutch report, the eco-schemes were evaluated in terms of participants and the number of hectares achieved. The menu approach did not allow for a previously planned area, which is why it is unfortunately not possible to compare the area addressed with the planned area. At the same time, however, the number of participating farms could be determined.

Figure 1 (left side) strikingly showcases two measures—permanent grassland and extended grazing by all types of animals—covered the largest portion of the area among the 22 eco-schemes. The permanent grassland measure was implemented on over 630,000 ha, while the extended grazing measure on 444,000 ha. Other eco-schemes such as grassland with herbs, green cover, or fallow covered approximately 170,000 ha. But most eco-schemes covered only around 10,000 ha or even significantly less. Naturally, more demanding eco-schemes such as strip farming or landscape elements

2.1 Area per Eco-activity (ha)



2.2 Number of Participants per Eco-activity

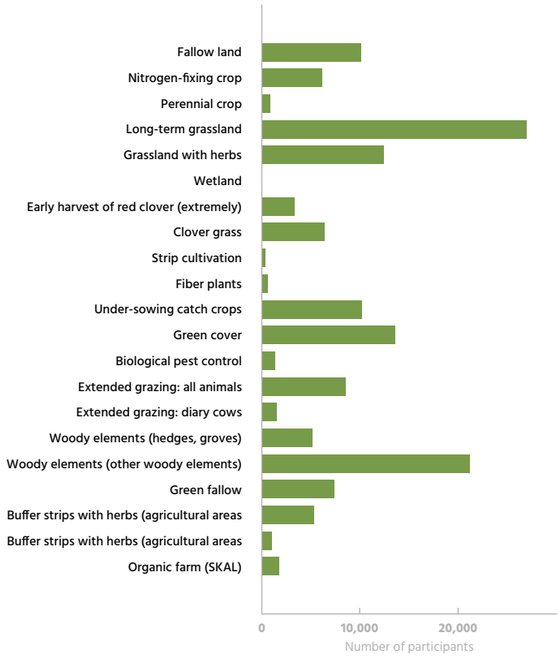


Figure 1: Overview of Area and Participant Numbers per measure in the Dutch eco-Scheme, source: Report on Eco-schemes, 12 February 2024

address a smaller area. The high uptake of eco-schemes promoting extended grazing and permanent grassland reflects the agricultural structure of the Netherlands.

The right side of Figure 1 shows that the number of participants per eco-scheme is more balanced. The eco-scheme for permanent grassland was the most frequently surveyed with around 27,000 participants. This underpins the high popularity and acceptance of this practice. The second most frequently selected eco-scheme in terms of participants is the conservation and creation of woodland elements or landscape features. This eco-scheme was selected by over 20,000 participants. This clearly shows that this eco-scheme was selected by a comparatively large number of farmers, but was only rolled out on a small area, which was to be expected for this measure. Similar differences in participant numbers and the relatively small areas covered are observed for the two eco-schemes: green fallow and buffer strips, both which are implemented on a smaller scale. The measures 'fallow land', 'under sowing', 'green cover' or 'grassland with herbs' were surveyed based on the average number of participants. Some schemes related to wetlands, strip cropping, fibre crops or perennial crops were requested by fewer than 1,000 participants. This is a low level of acceptance.

To conclude, despite the extensive financial resources of 760 million euros, the program must be viewed critically, as it is too non-binding and ineffective in achieving the overall environmental objectives. This can be seen in the two highly sought-after eco-schemes - permanent grassland and extended grazing - which mainly promote the status quo. The environmental objectives are formulated too vaguely and there is a lack of area-specific adjustments, which limits the effectiveness of the measures. So far, the Netherlands has only been divided into two regions. The main point of criticism, however, is that the program has been deliberately designed in a way that as many farmers as possible can participate, at the expense of tangible environmental goals. Figure 1 underlines the fact that farmers (understandably) participate in the measures that require the lowest adaptation costs for them, but at the same time have a low environmental benefit.

These low thresholds have led to many more farmers participating in the eco-scheme than expected, resulting in a budget shortage. To compensate, the Dutch government has added 50 million euros of national money to the eco-scheme with the approval of the European Commission.

11 Report on Eco-schemes, 12 February 2024

Poland

In Poland, specific challenges related to the structure and requirements of the eco-schemes limited participation. The strict criteria and the need to closely adhere to certain practices were seen as obstacles, particularly for programs that required specific biodiversity protection measures. Many farmers were sceptical of the changes required to participate in the programs, fearing that these changes could negatively impact their traditional farming methods and yields. To increase willingness to participate, it is suggested to allow more options and variations within the programs to meet the different needs and conditions of farmers. Highlighting success stories and best practices could help gain farmers' confidence and allay their concerns about participating in the programs.

According to Zielinski et al. (2024),[12] about 34.5% of agricultural holdings implemented eco-schemes. The paper found that participation in these schemes is largely influenced by farm size and regional conditions. The analysis shows that farms with higher agricultural development or mechanisation, typically in central and northern Poland, were more likely to participate in eco-scheme programs. These areas benefit from better natural growing conditions, larger farm sizes, and greater investment opportunities. As a result, these measures tend to reinforce existing practices rather than drive significant change.

However, agricultural holdings in Areas with Natural or Specific Constraints (ANCs), such as the southern and eastern regions of Poland, where growing conditions are less favourable, had higher participation rates in eco-schemes. These disadvantaged regions are characterised by difficult growing conditions, smaller farms, and lower yields, resulting in generally lower farm incomes compared to more favourable regions. Therefore, subsidies are crucial for stabilising income in these regions. A regionalised and tiered approach to the level of subsidies, adjusted according to these disadvantaged areas, could offer better support, especially for smaller and disadvantaged farms.

The size of the farms had a significant influence on the number of eco-scheme practices implemented. Smaller farms, especially those with less than five ha of agricultural land, had difficulty implementing multiple practices at the same time. Over 80% of these small farms only used one scheme This shows that implementing multiple environmentally friendly measures is often not feasible for them. In contrast, larger farms implemented multiple practices. On farms with more than 20 hectares, the number of implemented practices increased significantly, with some farms using up to eight or nine different practices at the same time. This illustrates that larger farms are better equipped to meet the requirements of eco-schemes while also benefiting from financial incentives.

One eco-scheme that stands out for its design is the 'carbon farming and nutrient management' scheme. For this scheme, farmers must achieve a certain number of points by completing sub-measures. More than one variant of this eco-scheme may be implemented on a single plot. For farmers, meeting the requirement to score a minimum number of points is not difficult. Especially for large farmers as most of the variants have been programmed to slightly exceed the requirements specified by GAECs.

For most of the variants included in the carbon farming eco-scheme, subsidies are provided for practices that farmers already implement because they are economically viable. These practices have gained popularity in Poland in recent years, with many being implemented even before the introduction of eco-schemes. In such cases, additionality is not present as the requirements have only slightly increased.

The possible sub-measures are listed in Table 2. The sub-measure on simplified cropping systems (to support conservation tillage and no-till) was rolled out on 339% of the planned area and by 18% of the eligible farms. This is a highly recommendable practice that has a positive impact on soil and is becoming increasingly popular, mainly due to its cost-effectiveness and savings on diesel, fertilizer, and water.

Sub-measure (b), which focuses on winter intercrops, is another example of subsidising practices that farmers already implement and beneficial to them, practices that would likely continue even without eco-scheme support. This sub-measure was rolled out on 341% of the originally planned area and selected by 7% of the eligible farms. The sub-measure 'application of liquid fertilizers by methods other than spraying' is a particularly prominent example, as it was significantly oversubscribed, reaching over 1800% of the originally planned area and by about 5% of eligible farms. Again, common practice on larger farms. Most of the time, it involves the application of fertilizers using specialised precision machinery. Small farmers do not have their own machines or the ability to hire external services for this. It is not worthwhile for an external company to come for a small field, and liquid fertilizer tanks on such farms are usually small and must be emptied frequently—fertilizer is applied more often. Consequently, the support mainly benefits larger farms.

Another sub-measure of the carbon farming and nutrient management eco-scheme, chosen by nearly 15% of eligible farms, is 'straw and soil mixture'. Farmers are required to leave straw and crop residues on the ground and incorporate them into the soil. The area covered by this practice cannot be counted towards GAEC6. This is quite a limitation as up to 80% of arable land must be covered by GAEC6 standards, making it a contradictory measure.

12 ZIELIŃSKI, M. et al. Adaptation of eco-schemes to Polish Agriculture in the first year of the EU CAP 2023-2027. Economics and Environment, 2024

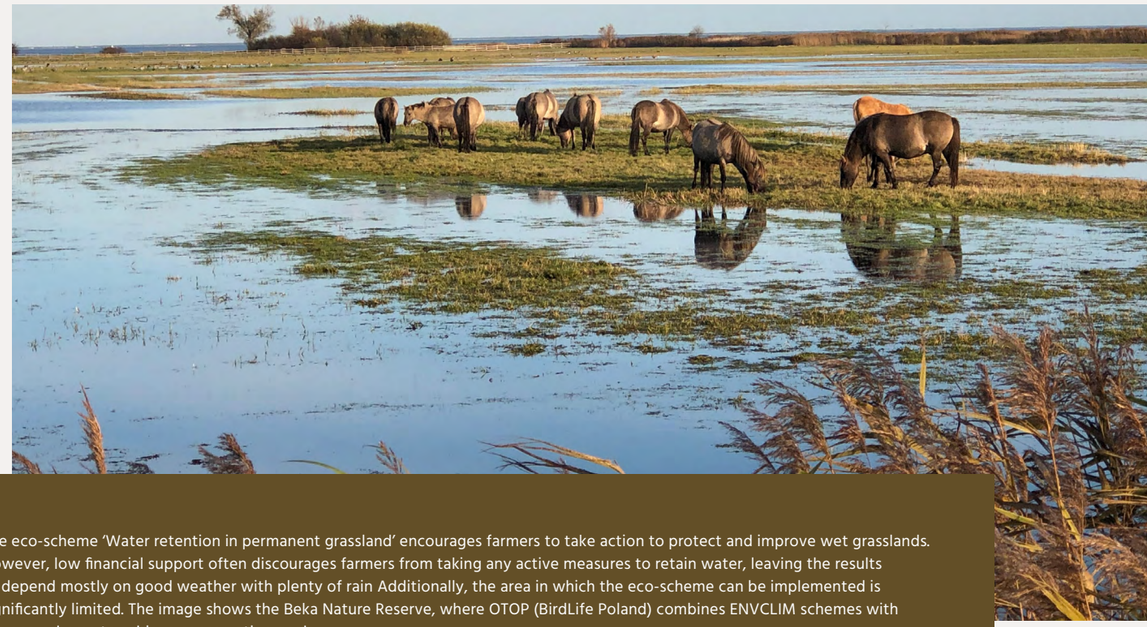
The eco-scheme linked to water retention on grassland is the only result-based - and one of very few across all Member States - intervention in the Polish Strategic Plan. A big advantage of verifying the achievement of the outcome is the use of Sentinel satellite imagery, which provides a relatively simple method for assessment. Although the eco-scheme assumes that there is an increase in water retention in the agricultural landscape, its requirements and area targets do not align with Poland's needs. The scheme is heavily restricted, applying only to meadows and pastures already covered by organic farming, the agri-environmental-climate programme, or the eco-scheme 'extensive use of permanent grasslands with stocking rate.' Additionally, the low payment rates discourage widespread adoption by farmers. As a result, the area targets for 2023 and 2024 were not met. However, the scheme's operating mechanism is innovative and can be controlled automatically, making it more cost-effective than activity-based schemes.

The biodiversity-focused eco-scheme 'areas with melliferous plants' was selected by 1% of eligible farms and was rolled out on about half of the planned area. Currently, beekeeping in Poland is subsidized through various sources, including ENVCLIM. The eco-scheme is not attractive to beekeepers, as they often do not own the agricultural land necessary to participate in the scheme.

Moreover, the scheme's focus on sowing a mixture of just two plant species is seen as ineffective, as it primarily supports honeybees rather than wild pollinators. Given the current overabundance of honeybees in Poland, further isolated support for their populations is unnecessary. In fact, the narrow focus of this eco-scheme may have little to no positive impact, or even a negative one, on biodiversity.

Instead, as Zielinski et al. (2024) propose, the introduction of another eco-scheme, 'protection of field margins with melliferous pants', should be considered. Field margins in agroecosystems are increasingly being removed. Field margins are an important habitat for perennial plants, including honey plants, and serve as overwintering sites for beneficial insects, spiders, and birds, including raptors. Protecting these landscape elements would have significant positive effects on surrounding biodiversity. In addition to enhancing biological diversity, field margins help reduce the drift of spray liquids during application, preventing them from reaching neighbouring fields where plant protection products should not be used. As a new eco-scheme, this initiative could be widely accepted by owners of smaller farms, increasing their participation in eco-schemes. Ideally, this eco-scheme should be offered on an optional, multi-year basis, as perennial plants need serval years to establish a permanent presence.

Image © Mariusz Miotke



The eco-scheme 'Water retention in permanent grassland' encourages farmers to take action to protect and improve wet grasslands. However, low financial support often discourages farmers from taking any active measures to retain water, leaving the results to depend mostly on good weather with plenty of rain Additionally, the area in which the eco-scheme can be implemented is significantly limited. The image shows the Beka Nature Reserve, where OTOP (BirdLife Poland) combines ENVCLIM schemes with the eco-scheme to achieve conservation goals

Romania

Romania initially developed five eco-schemes, three of which focus on arable land or row spacing in permanent crops. A new scheme will be introduced in 2025 to enhance the well-being of cattle through extensive grazing on pastures under optimal sustainability conditions. The eco-scheme 'environmentally friendly practices on arable land - whole farm approach with increased baseline requirements' includes practices such as providing 5% fallow land, diversification of acreage, or minimising tillage. The uptake of this scheme has reached 109% of the originally planned agricultural area. The relatively low requirements, due to derogations from GAECs, make it easy to meet the criteria. In contrast, the eco-scheme 'environmentally friendly farming on small, traditional farms', targeting farms of up to 10 hectares, achieved less than 5% of the planned area. While this is a commendable initiative, given the large average farm size and its distribution, participation has been low. The lack of promotion can be identified as a root cause, as small farmers were not aware of existing programs and their potential benefits. Other key factors in the low participation rate include insufficient government outreach.

Slovakia

Slovakia introduced a particularly interesting eco-scheme designed as a 'whole-farm scheme'. It is divided into two sub-measures, depending on whether the farmland is inside or outside protected areas (Natura 2000), for which farmers can receive €59/ha or €92/ha. In particular, the integration of buffer strips as a core measure on arable land demonstrates both strengths and areas for improvement. The balance between these successes and challenges reflects the complexity of implementing ecological objectives under the CAP. The buffer strips in Slovakia are tailored to the specific conditions of the country. With large fields, often covering more than 50 hectares, and a lack of non-productive land, this measure offers a sensible solution to mitigate the negative effects of agricultural intensification.

One of the greatest successes of the Slovakian eco-scheme is the proven improvement in biodiversity. The buffer strips provide important habitats for birds, especially in intensively farmed landscapes with large, homogeneous fields. By creating buffer strips within these large fields, the monotonous landscape is interrupted and an important source of food and a protected area for various bird species is created. The results of the study of Slovak Ornithological Society/BirdLife Slovakia show that birds are significantly more numerous and diverse in the buffer strips than on adjacent farmland without these strips.[13] Ground-nesting birds, which are often unable to find suitable nesting sites due to the uniform fields, benefit from this measure. The monitoring of insects, which was carried out by entomologists from the Slovak Academy of Sciences and Trnava University, also showed very promising results. Insects prefer buffer strips significantly more than surrounding fields, only 6% out of more than 13,000 individuals were recorded in fields.[14] In the months of May and June, the number of insects in the buffer strips exceeded the fields by up to 40 times. The monitoring results clearly showed that buffer strips also significantly contribute to the increase in species diversity. At the same time, entomologists noted a high incidence of pollinators and pest predators, which represents a positive impact for agricultural production as well. Observations of several endangered insect species were particularly interesting. As expected, buffer strips with flowering plants had the best results, but they are the least represented in the country. The success of buffer strips in increasing biodiversity, especially of endangered species, proves that the measure can play a central role in restoring and protecting biodiversity. This way buffer strips can also support beneficial insects and therefore farmers' pest management.

Another positive aspect is the high willingness of Slovakian farmers to participate. In 2023, more than half of the farms participated in the scheme, which shows that the measure is widely accepted. This indicates that the scheme is not only environmentally effective, but also practicable and feasible for farmers. The high level of participation is crucial in order to achieve a widespread effect, as the measure must be applied on a broad basis in order to bring about significant ecological improvements.

Nevertheless, there are suggestions for improving the design and consequently the success of the measure. Despite the high willingness to participate, there is room for improvement in the way financial incentives for participation in the eco-scheme are designed. Slovakia has formulated the support conditions independently of land use types, for example by promoting the improvement of soil structure through catch crops, mowing times, grazing, greening of permanent crops, the management of agroforestry or non-productive areas. Farms smaller than 10 ha do not need to create any non-productive areas above GAEC 8. Farms larger than 10 ha must create 1% above GAEC 8 outside special protected areas and 3.5% within Special Protected Areas (SPA). Every other year, this percentage increases by 0.2%. Although the level of ambition in terms of the expected environmental impact can still be improved, it is sufficient.

Image © A. Hološková

The 12-meter buffer strips which split the large field blocks are a mandatory component of the whole-farm eco-scheme. Monitoring data has shown that these buffer strips support more numerous and diverse populations of birds and insects, and observations also highlight benefits for game species. This measure has gained significant popularity among farmers, with 85.6% of agricultural land in Slovakia enrolled in the eco-scheme in 2023.

Another point that could be improved is the reduction of bureaucratic requirements. Many farmers find the administration and application of the eco-scheme too complex, which could potentially discourage farmers from participating. Simplifying the application process and reducing the bureaucratic burden could further increase the willingness to participate and ensure that more farmers actively participate in the implementation of measures.

The current eco-scheme in Slovakia focuses heavily on buffer strips as a core measure. Although these strips have a proven positive impact, a diversification of measures could offer even greater ecological benefits. Other agro-ecological measures, such as hedgerow planting, afforestation or the introduction of perennial plants, could create additional habitats and further promote biodiversity. It would be useful to expand the program to include such measures in order to support a wider range of species and habitats.

While diversifying measures such as hedgerow planting and agroforestry systems could provide additional ecological benefits, it is crucial to recognise that Slovakia's most pressing biodiversity challenges lie elsewhere. The country faces a significant lack of non-woody, non-productive elements in the landscape, alongside the issue of land abandonment leading to overgrowth with trees. These problems are compounded by the need for better management of permanent grasslands, where delayed mowing is a key aspect of biodiversity conservation. The current eco-scheme, by focusing on buffer strips and delayed mowing, directly addresses these urgent issues. So, while expanding measures is important, the scheme's primary focus on these critical problems reflects a pragmatic approach to tackling the most immediate threats to biodiversity in Slovakia's agricultural landscapes.

Overall, the Slovakian eco-scheme shows many strengths, particularly through its positive impact on biodiversity and the high willingness of farmers to participate. Flexibility in implementation and adaptation to local conditions make the scheme an important tool for halting the decline of bird populations and enriching the landscape ecologically.

Nevertheless, there is room for improvement, especially in terms of financial incentives, bureaucratic hurdles, and long-term research. Greater attention to these aspects could further increase the effectiveness of the scheme and enable even wider farmer participation. By diversifying the eco-scheme and adding additional measures, Slovakia could be a role model for other countries on how to successfully promote sustainable agriculture in an environmentally sound way.

13 Hološková, A., Ridzoň, J., & Reif, J. (2024, December 31). Using the EU's common agricultural policy to improve the habitat for farmland birds in landscapes with excessively large arable fields: Buffer strips in Slovakia. Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0167880924005802?dgcid=author

14 Slovak Academy of Science: Rare and endangered pollinators also hide in bio-belts, October 2024

Slovenia

Slovenia designed 11 eco-schemes, although only partial data on their adoption is available. The eco-scheme with the largest budget and area, focused on extensive grassland, was fully adopted, with 100% of the planned area used. While this scheme supports biodiversity through extensive grassland management, it excludes farmers, particularly those without livestock and the majority of managing authorities of protected areas as these do not have livestock. Even though these land managers play a key role in biodiversity preservation. Additionally, limiting fertilizer usage and reducing the number of cuts could increase the scheme's effectiveness.

In contrast, the eco-scheme related to traditional grassland management was only implemented on 25% of the planned area, with a minimum stocking density of 0.9 livestock units per hectare. Other eco-schemes, for which quantitative data is available, focus on species-specific measures typically associated with ENVCLIM. For example, one measure targets non-seeded areas for skylarks with regional differentiation, implemented on about half of the planned area. Another measure focuses on the protection of the Northern Lapwing (Vanellus vanellus) and specifically its nests, with each nest counted as one hectare; this scheme covered 54 hectares in 2023 which is 72% of the targeted area.

Image © Tilen Basle

The picture depicts a Lapwing (Vanellus vanellus) nest protected under the "Protection of Lapwing Nests" eco-scheme. This year, 134 of the 228 discovered lapwing nests were successfully safeguarded thanks to the eco-scheme.

Image © Tilen Basle

Unsown land, created as part of the 'Unsown land for skylark' eco-scheme, enhances breeding and feeding conditions for this rapidly declining bird species.

4 The CAP Simplification Package and implications for eco-schemes

Ideally, 2024 should have provided an opportunity to address the challenges identified during the first year of implementation and improve upon existing measures. As pointed out earlier in this report, the rushed amendments to the basic CAP regulations[15] following the farmers' protests are likely to have significant implications for the policy's green architecture, including eco-schemes. The new CAP regulation considerably relaxed some of the GAEC standards that farmers must meet to receive direct income support. Notably, the GAEC 8 obligation was removed, which required farmers to devote a share of arable land to non-productive areas and landscape features. Instead of this mandatory tool, which according to the Commission's own report[16] had the potential to create an additional one million hectares for nature, the new rules rely on farmers' willingness to enrol in eco-schemes that support the maintenance of non-productive areas and the establishment of landscape features. Member States that did not include such an eco-scheme in their CAP Strategic Plans adopted in 2022 must ensure its availability for 2025.

15 Regulation (EU) 2024/1468 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 amending Regulations (EU) 2021/2115 and (EU) 2021/2116 as regards good agricultural and environmental condition standards, schemes for climate, environment and animal welfare, amendment of the CAP Strategic Plans, review of the CAP Strategic Plans and exemptions from controls and penalties

16 REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL Summary of CAP Strategic Plans for 2023-2027: joint effort and collective ambition

The eco-schemes supporting the maintenance of non-productive areas and the establishment of landscape features are being amended to align with the new baseline following the removal of the first GAEC 8 obligation and to address issues that emerged during the first year of implementation. Despite reassurance from the Commission that the amendments to the CAP legislation will not affect its environmental ambition, the developments in some Member States suggest otherwise. The proposed amendments to eco-schemes in Czechia, Spain, Italy, and Slovakia reduce the originally set share of agricultural land devoted to non-productive areas and landscape features. This reduction deviates from the combined requirements set under GAEC 8 and the eco-scheme. For example, in Slovakia, this change is expected to result in the loss of approximately 50,000 hectares of fallow land that benefited nature in 2023 and 2024. In Spain, the area dedicated to nature under the eco-schemes was reduced from 7% to 3%. Czechia proposed to completely remove the obligation to allocate a portion of land for non-productive areas and landscape features from the whole farm eco-schemes. Bulgaria has chosen a different approach and introduced a new element to the existing eco-scheme on 'ecological infrastructure', namely support for fallow land of up to 7% of the declared area.

Entirely new eco-schemes to support farmers in creating space for nature are being introduced in Czechia, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. For example, Slovenia's proposed scheme aims to support the maintenance of fallow land, the coverage of agricultural land with grass and grass-clover mixtures, the creation of flower strips, the maintenance of landscape features, and the establishment of new hedgerows in certain areas. At the time of the writing of this report, the development of these new schemes is still in progress, making it too early to draw definitive conclusions. However, several concerns have already emerged. For instance, the eco-scheme proposed by Poland does not clearly specify how it will encourage the creation of new landscape features as required by legislation. There are also questions about the level of payment and into what extent it will be attractive to farmers. In other countries, such as Italy and Czechia, the budgets allocated for the new eco-schemes are very small, suggesting that their inclusion may be more of a formality to comply with the legislation, rather than a genuine effort to ensure their success on the ground.

Member States are required to report the number of hectares paid for practices related to the maintenance of non-productive areas and the establishment of new landscape features under the eco-schemes.[17] Concrete data will be available and should be published in the report to the European Parliament and Council due on 31 December 2025.[18] Yet, early indications suggest that overall, the amended and newly introduced eco-schemes are unlikely to compensate for the loss of GAEC 8, due to delays in introducing new eco-schemes, problematic design, inadequate budgets, and/or non-competitive premiums, which makes the schemes unattractive to farmers.

Lastly, there are serious concerns about the lack of consultation with relevant stakeholders and Monitoring Committees on the proposed amendments to CAP Strategic Plans and new eco-schemes. The Monitoring Committees had minimal real influence on the content and were merely asked to rubber-stamp decisions, which is a direct contradiction to the declared partnership principle. This lack of consultation risks significantly affecting the quality and effectiveness of the schemes.

17 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32024R1962

18 https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECAReplies/COM-Replies-SR-2024-20/COM-Replies-SR-2024-20_EN.pdf

Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) © Yves Adams

5

Monitoring and evaluation of eco-schemes

During the implementation of CAP Strategic Plans, Member States are obliged by the CAP Strategic Plans Regulations to carry out evaluations to improve the quality of the design and implementation of the plans. These evaluations should assess the impact on achieving CAP Strategic objectives. Looking through the prism of this report, Member States should have a framework in place to assess whether eco-schemes designed for the protection of biodiversity deliver the desired outcomes. These schemes are labelled as contributing to Specific Objective 6 (SO6) under the CAP, which is related to biodiversity.

The details and procedures for evaluating CAP Strategic Plans are outlined by Member States in an evaluation plan, based on the rules established in the Commission Implementing Regulation on CAP Strategic Plans evaluation and information. These plans should have been adopted by Monitoring Committees and made publicly available.

As outlined in Table 4 (see Annex 1), of the assessed countries, only Germany, Spain, and Slovakia included a specific evaluation of eco-schemes in their evaluation plans. Most countries plan to evaluate the CAP's green architecture under SO6, but they do not provide details on how eco-schemes are being monitored and evaluated.

The absence of systematic and targeted monitoring of eco-schemes focused on biodiversity protection makes it difficult to assess whether they are meeting their intended goals and to identify areas in need of improvement. Reliable data is essential for building buy-in among farmers and creating trust in society that measures for biodiversity deliver the desired outcomes and inform future decisions on resource allocation.

6 CONCLUSION

The evaluation and analysis of eco-schemes across 12 EU Member States highlights both the potential and challenges of implementing biodiversity-focused agricultural practices within the framework of the CAP. Eco-schemes, introduced to promote sustainability in agriculture, have shown varying levels of adoption and success, with participation rates differing significantly across countries and regions. The schemes that performed well were generally simpler to implement, in most cases with limited additional value for biodiversity, better communicated, and aligned with farmers' practical realities.

However, several challenges were identified. Complex application processes, rigid program structures, insufficient financial incentives, and a lack of flexibility regarding land management have caused limited participation in some cases. Additionally, the simplification of CAP environmental standards, particularly the derogations of GAEC 7 and 8, has significantly weakened the environmental effectiveness of these tools. This is evident from the lower participation rates in certain eco-schemes designed to promote non-productive areas.

On the positive side, there are clear examples of success, such as Slovakia's buffer strip initiative, which has significantly improved biodiversity by providing crucial habitats for birds and pollinators in otherwise monocultural landscapes. The Netherlands' tiered eco-scheme model also offers lessons in incentivising participation through flexible options while being cost efficient. However, it carries the risk of promoting practices with limited environmental benefits.

Looking forward, eco-schemes must be better tailored to regional conditions, with more targeted incentives and simplified processes to increase farmer participation. Greater integration with the broader green architecture of the CAP and more robust communication strategies are essential for improving the uptake and effectiveness of these schemes. Additionally, the need for long-term monitoring and adaptive management to address environmental objectives more effectively remains crucial.

In conclusion, while eco-schemes present a valuable tool for advancing sustainable agricultural practices, their success will depend on addressing the barriers identified in this report. Improving their design to better address biodiversity needs, tailoring schemes to local needs, increasing financial incentives, and simplifying participation are critical steps in ensuring that eco-schemes fulfil their potential in contributing to biodiversity conservation and environmental sustainability in European agriculture.

Image © Tatiana Nemcova

Policy Recommendations

1 **Increase ambition levels and maximise environmental potential**

Many of the current eco-schemes seem to offer payments to farmers for practices they are already implementing, resulting in limited added benefits for the environment. Particularly the heavily oversubscribed eco-schemes, which have led to reduced payments for farmers and less planning certainty. These schemes should set more demanding requirements that go beyond the status quo to maximise environmental benefits and make more effective use of EU subsidies. This includes extending the requirements, for example, by mandating larger share of non-productive areas and landscape features, expanding the list of prohibited pesticides and promoting measures to conserve soil fertility, such as longer soil cover periods or the use of compost and green manure. More demanding crop rotations or the use of nitrogen-fixing crops should be encouraged to improve soil quality, promote biodiversity, and reduce chemical inputs.

2 **Make payments tailored and attractive to farmers**

To maximise the environmental impact of eco-schemes and encourage widespread participation, payments must be designed to reflect both the costs and benefits of sustainable practices. Utilising Article 31.7(a) of the CAP Strategic Plans Regulation —whenever possible—presents a key opportunity to innovate payment structures by offering incentive-based payments independent of exact costs. As reported, in some cases unattractive payments were the main reason farmers did not participate in certain eco-schemes. More substantial premiums incentivise farmers to adopt ambitious practices that go beyond mere compliance, unlocking the full ecological potential of eco-schemes. Equally important is tailoring payment rates to address regional challenges and diverse farm sizes. Higher incentives for areas prone to erosion or targeted support for smaller farms can enhance equity and ensure that the system is accessible to all.

3 **Utilise and apply flexibilities more strategically**

The new CAP legislation has granted Member States significantly more flexibility and design options within the 2023-2027 CAP funding period. The CAP Simplifications Package adopted in 2024 introduced a further broad range of flexibilities which, as noted, risk undermining the integrity of many eco-schemes. However, some Member States, such as the Netherlands or Slovakia, have demonstrated how flexibility can be used creatively, both at the system level and at the detailed level of specific eco-scheme requirements, including regionalising payments and conditions. It is essential to support Member States in using these flexibilities while ensuring eco-schemes achieve their environmental objectives.

4 **Introduce long-term commitments and multi-annual payments through tiering**

Most Member States have opted for annual payments, which is not mandatory. To ensure lasting ecological improvements, eco-schemes should offer long-term commitments instead of promoting only short-term measures. Tiered payments could serve as a tool to encourage farmers to sustain specific practices over longer periods. Multi-annual payments are particularly important for measures with long-term impacts on soil, water, and biodiversity (e.g., fallow, landscape features, perennial plantings, protection of field margins).

5 **Provide targeted support for small and disadvantaged farms**

Small and disadvantaged farms have often faced difficulties participating in existing eco-schemes. New schemes should be tailored to the needs of smaller farms by offering regionally tiered payment levels. Higher payments or more flexible requirements should be available in disadvantaged or sensitive areas. Simplified participation conditions for small farms, reducing unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles, and improving accessibility would also encourage broader participation.

6 **Integrate (innovative) technologies for monitoring and implementation**

In light of the growing challenges posed by climate change, eco-schemes should promote practices that help farmers become more climate-resilient while achieving multiple environmental objectives. These include enhancing water management and biodiversity through minimal soil disturbance in arable farming, permanent soil cover, maintenance of biodiversity rich grassland, fallows, and fostering diversity both on and off the farm. Such actions are crucial to ensure that eco-schemes deliver their intended environmental impact.

7 **Expand and strengthen measures for climate resilience and biodiversity**

Cost-efficient implementation and monitoring of eco-schemes are essential to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic burdens and ensure effective payments to farmers. Remote sensing technologies and other innovative tools could be used to track the implementation and ecological success of these schemes. This allows for result-based payments to be distributed efficiently with minimal bureaucracy. The lack of systematic and targeted monitoring of eco-schemes focused on biodiversity protection makes it difficult to assess whether they are meeting their intended goals or to identify areas in need of improvement. Reliable data is essential for gaining farmers' support and building public trust that biodiversity measures deliver the desired outcomes and inform future decisions on resource allocation.

8 **Involve diverse stakeholders in the design process**

Involving NGOs and other stakeholders in the development of eco-schemes and other environmental policies is crucial for decision-making. Early engagement of a variety of actors in the design phase helps balance different interests and ensures that the eco-schemes address the needs of all involved parties, promoting a more inclusive and sustainable agricultural transition.

19 Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1475 of 6 September 2022 laying down detailed rules for implementation of Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards the evaluation of the CAP Strategic Plans and the provision of information for monitoring and evaluation

ANNEX 1

Table 4: An overview of Member States' plans for monitoring and evaluating eco-schemes, with focus on biodiversity eco-schemes. Source: Own compilation and Overview of Member States' evaluation plans for CAP Strategic Plans (2023-2027).[20]

Country	Specific evaluation of eco-schemes planned?	Name of eco-scheme
Belgium - Wallonia	No	**Under SO6 (Strategic objective 6 - biodiversity), an evaluation of the green architecture is planned for 2026-2027. One of the subthemes is related to biodiversity: "Continue to stop and reverse the process of biodiversity loss, improve ecosystem services, and preserve habitats and landscapes". It is unclear how eco-schemes will be monitored and evaluated.**
Bulgaria	No	**Under SO6 (Strategic objective 6 - biodiversity), an evaluation of the green architecture is planned for 2026-2027. One of the subthemes is related to biodiversity: "Continue to stop and reverse the process of biodiversity loss, improve ecosystem services, and preserve habitats and landscapes". It is unclear how eco-schemes will be monitored and evaluated.**
Czechia	No	**Under SO6, an evaluation of the green architecture is planned in 2026-2027; 2031 along with a focused assessment on reversing biodiversity loss, ecosystem services, and interventions supporting apiculture.**
Hungary	No	**Under SO6, an evaluation of the green architecture is planned in 2025- 2027, along with an evaluation focused on biodiversity and ecosystems planned. A specific evaluation of eco-schemes is also planned only under Specific Objective 4 (SO4).**
Germany	Yes	**In parallel with the evaluation of the green architecture, a specific evaluation of eco-schemes related to conditionality and agri-environmental climate measures (AUKM 2023-2027) is planned.**
Spain	Yes	**1. Several reports are planned:[21]** • An assessment of the criterion of relevance and internal and external coherence of the CAP Strategic Plan's green architecture, which will include an analysis of all eco-schemes. (2024) • A processes evaluation focusing specifically on eco-scheme uptake by farmers and their perceptions of the different phases of implementation. (2025) • A report assessing the impact of pesticides allowed in the 'direct seeding' eco-scheme on the success of this and other eco-schemes (2025) **2. An Environmental Surveillance Plan (Plan de Vigilancia Ambiental)[22] has been established to monitor environmental aspects of CAP Strategic Plan, including 17 biodiversity indicators (both habitats and species).** **3. A platform was created to provide scientific baseline for CAP economic, social and environmental efficient development. One of the four thematic areas is 'biodiversity and ecosystem service'.[23]**
Italy	No	**Under SO6, there will be an evaluation focusing on: reversing biodiversity loss, ecosystem services, enhanced conditionality, and a tailored assessment of the territorial context and on a company scale in 2025, 2028 and 2031. The specific evaluation of eco-schemes is not planned.**
Netherlands	No	**Under SO6, the evaluation of the green architecture is planned. In addition, certain outcome and impact indicators linked to the eco-scheme are used to measure biodiversity targets. This mainly concerns area, participation, etc. To translate this into actual impact, additional questions must be asked. For these additional questions, the evaluation plan indicates that data is often not (yet) collected to answer them properly.**
Poland	No	**Evaluations are planned for various interventions, including those under SO6. However, it is unclear how eco-schemes will be assessed specifically. Regarding monitoring, ongoing nature monitoring is planned, including the monitoring of habitats, bird species covered by the agri-environment-climate scheme, and landscapes. However, there are no specific plans for monitoring focused solely on eco-schemes.**
Romania	No	**Under SO6, the evaluation of the green architecture is planned for 2025-2026. It will focus on adopting environmentally friendly agricultural/forestry practices on small farms (maximum 10 ha), maintaining traditional farming practices, maintaining environmentally friendly farming practices, contributing to climate change mitigation, promoting sustainable development and efficient management of soil, air, water and biodiversity resources. Modalities of data collection (who, how, cost) and the methodology have not been defined or communicated by the Ministry of Agriculture. It looks like several institutions will provide the information on SO6.**
Slovenia	No	**Under SO6, the evaluation of biodiversity and ecosystem services is planned for 2025-2026. Several support studies are planned that are relevant for biodiversity, namely:** • Monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of nature protection operations • Environmental indicators for monitoring the state of the environment in view of the implementation of Slovenia's Cap Strategic Plan 2023-2027, which will showcase data on the state of the environment for agriculture and forestry. • Monitoring of populations of selected target bird species in Natura 2000 sites • Monitoring of selected target species of butterflies • Monitoring of common bird species to determine the value of the Slovenian farmland bird index **It is not clear to what extent those studies will focus on eco-schemes.**
Slovakia	Yes	**Under SO6, there is a plan for evaluation focusing on reversing biodiversity loss and ecosystem services. Several support studies are planned that are relevant for biodiversity, namely:** • Assessment of the impacts of the CSP and its interventions on areas of high nature value (by habitats, NATURA sites) • Monitoring of birds on agricultural land (increase, decline of the Farmland Bird Index, regular thematic monitoring of birds on eco-schemes) targeted at specific sites and through individual interventions **While the plan specifically mentions monitoring of birds on eco-scheme modalities of data collection (who, how, cost) and methodology have not been defined/ communicated by the Ministry of Agriculture.**

20 Overview of member states' evaluation plans for Cap strategic plans (2023-2027), August 2024, https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/publications/overview-member-states-evaluation-plans-cap-strategic-plans-2023-2027_en#section--resources

21 https://www.mapa.gob.es/es/pac/pac-2023-2027/plan-evaluacion-pepac-21_tcm30-660318.pdf

22 https://www.mapa.gob.es/es/pac/pac-2023-2027/pva-del-pepac-primer-avance-julio23_tcm30-656831.pdf

23 https://pti-agriambio.csic.es/area-tematica-1/

Partnership for nature and people

Image © Tatiana Nemcova

NABU

BirdLife INTERNATIONAL
EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

Life

European Climate Foundation

Funded by the European Union and the European Climate Foundation. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only. The European Union and the European Climate Foundation are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.