

BLOG POST June 9th 2020

EU Biodiversity Strategy: the importance of permanent grasslands, in line with the Farm to Fork Strategy

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 Reading time: 5 min

The recent and concomitant publication of the European Commission's two strategies, "[Farm to Fork](#)" and "[Biodiversity](#)", has been hailed as the mark of a stated, unprecedented and systemic ambition in the direction of European agriculture.¹ The urgent warnings on the causes of biodiversity degradation (land use change and fragmentation of natural areas, standardization and uniformity of agricultural landscapes, use of fertilizers and pesticides, particularly in agriculture) have been heard. The proposed strategies respond to these warnings, and explicitly point out the role of agroecology (and more particularly organic farming), giving it significant political weight. However, they do not stress clearly enough that such a change, of a systemic nature, cannot work without an explicit mention of the role played by permanent grasslands in livestock farming. This blog post explains the technical foundations of this key contribution and the

consequences that must be drawn for coherent action.

The Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies say virtually nothing about intensive or extensive farming methods, which are at the heart of the environmental issues they identify. Yet nearly 75% of Europe's utilised agricultural area (UAA) is currently devoted to animal production, to which the equivalent of 20% of the whole UAA in soybean imports can be added. It is therefore necessary to properly qualify livestock farming methods in order to understand what is at stake.

Intensive livestock farming²—which accounts for around 90% of pig and poultry production and the majority of milk and beef production—largely explains the health (use of antibiotics, poor nutritional quality, excessive supply in relation to health recommendations) and environmental (organic pollution) impacts associated with European agriculture. These industrial farms also "command" mass crop production that relies on fertilizers, pesticides and, in some regions, increasingly scarce water resources. And are incompatible with animal welfare, even though this issue is pointed out by the Farm to Fork Strategy as being legitimately part of the Europeans' expectations.

On the other hand, extensive livestock farming, which makes use of areas of permanent grassland, is at the origin of many environmental services, based on the functioning of agro-ecosystems and the functional management of semi-natural vegetation. If insects are to be considered as a key indicator of overall biological richness, their presence in an open landscape can be explained fundamentally by two key factors: the absence of pesticide use, which destroys them directly, and a floristic richness spread over time. The latter also depends on the absence of synthetic inputs (pesticides and fertilizers) and over-intensive farming methods (ploughing, very frequent mowing, sowing of a limited number of species at the expense of spontaneous flora). These flora-friendly practices are implemented on a significant scale in extensive permanent grasslands. Indeed, permanent grasslands as a whole account for nearly 40% of the UAA in Europe, and it is estimated that between 20 and 30% of them are managed extensively, compatible with the expression of high natural value. But this share is declining.

Thus, livestock farming can be both problematic and beneficial to health and the environment, depending on how it is conducted. For biodiversity, the share of permanent grasslands and the intensity of their use in the production system is a key indicator of the impact, positive or problematic, of livestock farming.

Among the objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy is the conservation of eco-landscape infrastructures, a central issue that intersects centrally with the modes of use of agricultural and livestock space analysed above. The preservation of "high diversity landscape elements", consisting of "among other things, grassed strips, rotational or non-rotational fallow land, hedges, non-productive trees, terrace walls and ponds", is mentioned for 10% of agricultural land. This list does not, however, include extensive grasslands, which statistically represent the largest single component of high-diversity agricultural land, and whose presence is also functionally related to that of the listed hedgerows, trees and pools (more so than for cropping systems where these elements will often be disturbances). The strategy does include extensive permanent grassland in the list of practices that national strategic plans under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) should promote, and there is nothing to say that such grassland cannot be added to the 10 % of highly diverse landscape elements mentioned above. But these extensive grasslands are 'diluted' in a heterogeneous list—on a par with precision farming,³ organic farming, agroecology, agroforestry and animal welfare—and their essential functional role in large-scale organic farming, agroecology and, to some extent, agroforestry, is absent.

The Biodiversity Strategy thus contains a major blind spot. Not taking into account grasslands that can be extensive and productive amounts to considering that high-diversity landscape elements (the equivalent of the CAP's "areas of ecological interest") have no economic function, that they are part of a productive agricultural matrix with no link to

the functioning of production systems. This framework marks a step backwards compared to the European Commission's previous biodiversity strategy of 2011,⁴ which focused more clearly on the place of permanent grasslands and the promotion of production systems that enhance their value.

Taken together, the Commission's two recent strategies provide a potentially promising framework for addressing environment and health issues jointly. However, this framework appears broad and ambivalent, leaving undetermined the livestock farming methods that are compatible with healthy food, animal welfare, the conservation of biodiversity and natural resources and the climate agenda. From this point of view, the role given to permanent grasslands and the precision given to their management mode in the evaluation of the CAP strategic plans that are supposed to implement the objectives of the two strategies in agricultural terms will be key evaluation indicators.

¹ Towards a sustainable European food system: for a successful operationalisation of the "Farm to Fork" strategy:

<https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/blog-post/towards-sustainable-european-food-system-successful>

² i.e., which provide animals with a large quantity of feed manufactured by dedicated industries and are based on a logic of economy of scale involving standardisation of production methods (selected breeds, concentration of animals in confined buildings, rapid production cycles, etc.).

³ Whose contribution, on its own, to the conservation of biodiversity does not seem obvious.

⁴ Biodiversité, notre assurance-vie et notre capital naturel - Stratégie de l'UE à l'horizon 2020: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0244&from=EN>

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