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By voting “yes” to ecosystem restoration, the European Parliament shows it can still have an honest discussion about the future of agriculture

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Over the first couple of months of 2024, policymakers have responded to farmers’ protests by giving up on remaining pieces of legislation of the Green Deal at the European level and of key measures of the young national biodiversity strategy in France. This is inconsistent with their claim to support farmers economically and to improve food security. By approving the European proposal for a nature restoration regulation (NRL) on February 27, members of the European Parliament eventually send an encouraging signal for the middle-term resilience of the sector. Nature restoration of agroecosystems opens up options to improve farms’ soil productivity and adaptation to climate change.

What is restoration all about?

IPBES¹ defines restoration as “*any intentional activity that initiates or accelerates the recovery of an ecosystem from a degraded state*”. Restoration may be “*active*” when humans influence the process of biodiversity recovery (e.g., ecological engineering), or “*passive*” when it relies on natural processes (e.g., do nothing and see). A degraded ecosystem is defined as “*a long-term reduction in an ecosystem’s structure, functionality or capacity to provide benefits to people*”. In Europe and in France, many productive ecosystems, such as agricultural lands and pastures, urgently need restoration to continue to be in use². This is particularly true in the context of climate change and increasing extreme weather events.

Here, restoring agroecosystems means keeping them under productive use, through sustainable land management. The dedicated provisions of the NRL are thus well aligned with the requirements of the agroecological transition in order to achieve satisfactory levels of food production through and with the protection of the biodiversity they depend on.³

Restoring agroecosystems to secure production

The NRL includes targets to increase butterfly and more broadly pollinator populations, as well as improve the common farmland bird index. The inclusion of such targets in the law is important as they are indicators of functioning agroecosystems. Now the question is how to reach them. The best and most cost-efficient way to achieve them would be through measures such as reducing the use of pesticides and adopting organic farming practices, that would improve the degraded pollination service through the spontaneous come-back of pollinators. This corresponds to passive nature restoration measures. However, these measures make sense only within a larger policy package. As the [dedicated European regulation for reducing pesticides](#) was abandoned and the Ecophyto plan was put on hold sine die in France, this threatens the cost effectiveness of restoration measures. If the pesticides issue is not addressed, insect pollination will keep decreasing, jeopardizing pollination-dependent field outputs (e.g. fruits and a range of vegetables) or the outputs of nearby farms, and therefore farmers’ earnings⁴.

A similar point can be raised on agroecological infrastructures (e.g., hedges, ponds, trees) and extensive livestock and mixed systems, which are go hand in hand with the reduction of pesticides and increased crop rotations for agriculture adaptation. Hedges, crop rotations and mixed systems for example have a positive effect against agricultural pests and diseases affecting crops and livestock⁵. They are necessary for the decrease of pesticides to be viable. Extensive grazing systems support pollinators and natural fertilization. They also preserve natural water cycles, among other ecosystem services⁶. Such services are needed in the context of climate change, with droughts and floodings increasing in frequency and intensity. (Re-)establishing agroecological infrastructures, mixed systems and pastures corresponds to active nature restoration measures. It contributes to food security by minimizing production losses. It also contributes to food sovereignty by relying on well-functioning ecosystem services provided “for free” by the land on the spot, rather than on costly imports of fertilizers or animal feed. While the NRL addresses agroecological infrastructures directly (coined as “high-diversity landscape features”) by requiring Member States to achieve an increasing trend for them, extensive or semi-intensive livestock and mixed systems, core in agroecological farming systems, are dedicated a lesser attention in the NRL⁷. National restoration plans should however not miss this issue, which would also need to be included in animal husbandry policies.⁸

Financing issues: how restoration could support farmers’ income

If funding sources can be found in different existing schemes, the NRL does not clarify how to optimize and make the best use of them. The European Commission should present within a year a report that identifies, among other elements, financial gaps for the implementation of the regulation at the EU level. Member States however already have existing rooms of manoeuvre, within existing European and national budgets. For example, the NRL leaves the choice of resorting to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to implement restoration measures up to Member States when they implement the regulation. Streamlining the way the CAP operates and how farmers access its funds is needed. However, the simplification process should not be mixed up with the drop of environmental provisions. As the CAP supports farmers' income, it would be particularly relevant for it to fund ecosystem restoration, as a nature-based solution that brings resilience and financial stability to the sector. According to the European Investment Bank, "there is currently sufficient funding available for nature-based solutions through the CAP to finance many more potential opportunities for nature-based solutions in the European Union and their related benefits. [...] Reforming the policy to encourage greater use of nature-based solutions is an obvious opportunity for the European Commission." In a European context where ecosystems have largely been altered, nature restoration represents the main nature-based solution, including for climate change adaptation in agriculture.

Currently, CAP budgets that could be considered as nature-based solutions (e.g., eco-schemes) and therefore restoration of agroecosystems do not deliver the expected outcomes⁹. Largely repurposing CAP to support organic agriculture, extensive livestock and mixed systems could address this shortcoming, but would require Member States to put in place administrative and potentially regulatory provisions. Importantly, it also requires dedicating human and technical resources to make those funds known and accessible for the farmers.

Other existing financial tools could be considered for farmers to earn a decent and reliable income while maintaining their fields' (i.e., their ecosystems') production capacity. Such tools may be payments for ecosystem services (PES), but also compensation for potential production losses during the transition towards agroecology. These tools can be put in place by the CAP, such as agro-environmental measures (AEMs). But as a nature-based solution, restoration of agroecosystems provides benefits beyond the field, including for human and environmental health in the local area, and potentially at larger scale when taking into account downstream water quality for example. This framing could open new opportunities to support farmers in the agroecological transition beyond the CAP budgets. In France, the "Contracts for the Successful Ecological Transition" (CRTes) are signed between the State and municipalities to fund specific actions. Those contracts already include measures such as maintaining farmland hedges and trees and developing action plans for agroecology. In degraded landscapes, all of those will first require nature restoration measures, before maintaining the restored functionalities through sustainable practices. However, tools for municipalities to financially support the agroecological transition are under-developed. CRTes could also allow municipalities to provide direct financial support to farmers for the restoration of agroecosystems.

Another key component for a successful restoration policy in agro-ecosystems will also be to embark the whole value chain, including the agrifood sector and consumers, within the dedicated policies. These stakeholders, and especially those already able to support the agroecological transition, will need dedicated attention in the national restoration plans of Member States.

Now that the NRL is adopted (it still needs to be formally approved by the Council of the European Union), one of its main challenges will be to achieve its full potential by contributing to a change in the vision of agroecosystems, from European portfolios down to the national and farm level: agroecosystems functioning is not just a nature conservation issue but is positively linked to production issues. Nature restoration is therefore critical for all those who genuinely care about the future of agriculture in Europe.

1 The Intergovernmental science-policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services was established in 2012. It coordinates the work of high-level experts from around the world and produces reports that are accepted by its more than 130 Member States. It covered issues such as the decline of pollinators and pollination services for food production in 2016 and land degradation in 2018.

2 IPBES (2018). Summary for policymakers of the regional assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services for Europe and Central Asia of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. M. Fischer, M. Rounsevell, et al. (eds.). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. 48 pages <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3237428 > ;

3 Poux, X., Aubert, P.-M. (2018). An agroecological Europe in 2050: multifunctional agriculture for healthy eating. Findings from the Ten Years For Agroecology (TYFA) modelling exercise, IDDRI-AScA, Study N°09/18, Paris, France, 74 p.

4 MEEM (2016). EFES. Le service de pollinisation. Thema. Juin 2016. Commissariat Général au Développement Durable, La Défense, France, 4p.

5 Hahn, P. G., & Cammarano, J. H. (2023). Environmental context and herbivore traits mediate the strength of associational effects in a meta-analysis of crop diversity. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 60, 875–885. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2664.14382>

6 Viaud, V. (2020). Des haies bocagères, pour le climat et l'environnement. <https://www.inrae.fr/actualites/haies-bocageres-climat-lenvironnement > ;

7 Re-establishing extensive grazing systems is an example of the restoration measures listed in an annex of the NRL covering all ecosystems. The regulation does not require specific outcomes for restoration of agroecosystems on that point.

8 We note that protecting and restoring pastures and mixed systems are hardly if not mentioned in the Governmental Plan to reconquer animal husbandry sovereignty which was released on February 24.

9 European Investment Bank (2023). Investing in nature-based solutions. State-of-play and way forward for public and private financial measures in Europe. EIB, Luxembourg, 144p. DOI: 10.2867/031133

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