

Birdlife Europe and the European Environmental Bureau call on MEPs to choose nature over pesticides in critical vote for European Biodiversity!

Birdlife Europe and the European Environmental Bureau call on Members of the Agriculture Committee to stand up for nature and health by supporting the proposal made by the European Commission in the Delegated Regulation of 15 February 2017. Though the delegated regulation consists of several amendments, one stands out loud and clear: the ban on pesticides in ecological focus areas (EFA). Let's recall however that initially EFAs were designed "to safeguard and improve biodiversity on farms".

Members of the Agriculture Committee will be asked to specifically vote on a resolution (2017/2571(DEA)) to halt this ban, put forward by MEPs Dess and Agnew in the Agriculture Committee on 30th May. MEPs are being asked a clear question: will they choose nature or pesticides? The answer is simple: MEPs must use this opportunity to save biodiversity such as bees and other beneficial insects, ensure that public money is well spent and, affirm the spirit of the legislation: to have a workable tool within the CAP that protects areas dedicated to the conservation of wildlife. If they vote in favour of the resolution; they will jeopardize the credibility of the whole CAP.

Therefore we call on MEPs to vote against the proposed resolution.

What is an ecological focus area?

The Ecological Focus area or EFA has been introduced as part of the Greening reforms of 2013 CAP. In order to receive the 'greening direct payment', farmers are required amongst others to dedicate a modest 5 percent of their arable land to biodiversity in the form of e.g. landscape elements or land laying fallow. Even though the original intention was biodiversity, co-legislators annihilated the measure by allowing crop production (catch crops and leguminous crops) in these areas as well as the use of pesticides on those. Clearly it had not been the Commission's original intention to use the Ecological focus areas for crop production in Europe. Allowing crops in the EFAs runs counter to meeting its objectives of protecting biodiversity. Supporting crop diversification or the promotion of protein crops are both valuable objectives but they should be supported using different policy tools within the Common Agricultural Policy.

As a consequence of competing objectives within the policy, the EFA measure is currently failing to protect biodiversity, in part due to the use of pesticides in these areas. Several elements of research that BirdLife and EEB have commissioned show that to greatly improve the EFAs, the simple crop options – that farmers have overwhelmingly chosen to fill in this requirement - should as much as possible be avoided and pesticides should not be used.¹ The commissioner for Agriculture, Phil Hogan, has rightly proposed this measure to ensure the policy is more effective and correct this unacceptable part of the CAP. However, to actually contribute to halting major biodiversity declines, the greening as it stands will not suffice and in the future it's the whole policy that would need to be redesigned.

¹ <http://ieep.eu/work-areas/agriculture-and-land-management/policy-evaluation/2016/12/ecological-focus-areas-what-impacts-on-biodiversity>

Why support the ban of pesticides on areas for nature?

- It is unacceptable that the EU allows to spray pesticides on areas meant to protect biodiversity.
- It is an urgent and necessary correction of the so-called greening part of the CAP that is still the largest spending pot of the EU. Without this correction; it undermines further the CAP's legitimacy.
- It is vital to halt biodiversity declines.
- It is important to bring back the functional biodiversity that underpins our agro-ecosystem and which is the basis for our food production and hence long term food security in Europe.

What is the state of EU biodiversity?

Farmland makes up 47% of the European territory. However, for several years, the farmland bird index, one of the best indicators of the health of Europe' farmland ecosystems and wildlife, showed that common farmland birds like corn bunting, goldfinch, lapwing and skylark, have declined by almost 50% in the past 30 years. Other indicators show similar declines. As an example, the European Environmental Agency showed an almost 50% decline of 17 EU grassland butterfly populations between 1990 and 2011². The ecological focus area was designed as a public payment to establish or maintain habitats to halt these declines. The policy needs reform in order to ensure that pesticides are not used and the habitats are maintained for biodiversity.

European versus global biodiversity?

Those opposing the ban have been using arguments stating that halting biodiversity loss globally cannot come at the cost of saving biodiversity in Europe. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the current pesticide use in EFAs is reducing - or will in future reduce – global deforestation. Promoting protein crop production in Europe must not be supported through Ecological Focus Areas, it should happen through a well-thought through protein plan including basic good agronomic practices such as crop rotation. At the same time, everything should be done to implement the EU biodiversity strategy by 2020 and the commitments of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The CAP – value for money?

The cost of the Green Direct Payment, the payment to farmers to deliver three 'green' measures (EFAs, crop diversification and grassland protection), is estimated at around 12 Billion EUR per year. So far, research has shown that this had delivered very little for biodiversity in Europe.³ The main recommendation from a recent report from the Institute for European Environmental Policy is that pesticides and fertilisers should not be used in these EFAs in order for them to be beneficial for biodiversity. In order to bring greater value for money for this expenditure, European institutions must not allow the use of pesticides in areas of land that the public have paid to be an area for biodiversity protection.

The CAP is in need of major reform. This is an opportunity to fix a small part of the policy. Excluding the use of pesticides in EFAs is a step forward in making the policy more 'fit for purpose' and to justify expenditure of a large portion of the European budget on agriculture in a time of major budgetary constraints. Allowing the use of pesticides in areas designed for biodiversity will only undermine the credibility of this policy further and will be yet another nail in its coffin.

² [the European Environmental Agency showed an almost 50% decline of 17 EU grassland butterfly populations:
http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/the-european-grassland-butterfly-indicator-19902011](http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/the-european-grassland-butterfly-indicator-19902011)

³ <http://ieep.eu/work-areas/agriculture-and-land-management/policy-evaluation/2016/12/ecological-focus-areas-what-impacts-on-biodiversity>

What is the process?

The European Commission has proposed on 15 February 2017, an amendment to the delegated act consisting out of several elements (amending Delegated Regulation (EU) No 639/2014 as regards the control measures relating to the cultivation of hemp, certain provisions on the greening payment, the payment for young farmers in control of a legal person, the calculation of the per unit amount in the framework of voluntary coupled support, the fractions of payment entitlements, and certain notification requirements relating to the single area payment scheme and the voluntary coupled support, and amending Annex X to Regulation (EU) No 1307/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council).

Members of parliament can only vote for or against the whole delegated act (i.e. it is not amendable and the different elements cannot be split from each other). Two members of the Committee for Agriculture, Mr. Dess (EPP, DE) and Mr. Agnew (EFDD, UK), have lodged a resolution for opposition against the whole Commission proposal based on the one element of the ban of pesticides in EFAs. The whole Committee will vote on the 30th May. If the resolution against the ban goes through, all MEPs will need to confirm it with a 2/3 majority in plenary. It is likely that the plenary vote will take place in the week of the 12th June.

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