

Will Portuguese farming be greener under a new EU farm policy?

[EEB](#), [ZERO](#) - 21 June 2021

Overview

A €270 billion new 5 year Common Agricultural Policy will likely be agreed in a closed meeting between negotiators for the EU commission, parliament and national ministers on 25 June, or during the weekend. Talks [collapsed](#) in May, with environment a central area of disagreement. Formalisation of deals negotiated between EU institutions are usually a formality. Ministers may rubber stamp the new farm deal when they [meet](#) on 28 June.

Agriculture is the [single largest](#) cause of collapsing wildlife populations in Europe. A rare sector able to trap atmospheric carbon emissions, it is also currently a [major contributor](#) to global heating. All sides claim the new policy will do more for the environment. But NGOs say [little will change](#), with most money will continue going to the [most polluting](#) farms.

Portugal's draft spending plans suggest it will reward the intensive agriculture lobby, worsening the unsustainable use of water; misdirecting green funds to activities that could actually harm the environment; and supporting continued decline of traditional Portuguese landscapes in favour of intensive farming. These developments will threaten Portugal's international legal obligations, on the [environment](#), [water pollution](#) and [climate](#) overall and an 11% climate emissions reduction target for the farm sector.

Portuguese domestic plans

Significant control of EU farm budget spending is shifting from Brussels to member capitals. The EU Commission must approve Portuguese national spending plans, but oversight will be weak. Like other member states, Portugal usually presents weak environmental ambition in the EU farm policy as progress, then waters that ambition down further during national [implementation](#).

Portugal's draft spending [plans](#) will likely be complete before a [final] public consultation starting in early August 2021. The final plan will go to the European Commission by this December.

From the draft plan and responses to earlier public consultation, it is [clear](#) that new EU funds will continue favouring unsustainable agriculture in Portugal, increasing major environmental problems, including climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity and pollution, soil degradation and antibiotic resistance.

The government established an expert panel to review its EU farm spending, within the Conselho de Acompanhamento da Revisão da Política Agrícola Comum. Nearly half the panel has [quit](#), with one [complaining](#) of unfair distribution of EU agriculture funds favouring big land owners and agribusiness. Two remaining panel experts are hostile to the plans, particularly around irrigation, and have shared their concerns with parliament. We can here reveal that parliament will hold [hearings](#) with the former panel members in September and

have asked the farm minister to attend. NGOs have repeatedly queried government plans and met with similar stonewalling tactics.

The draft spending plans suggest the government will continue heavy support of irrigated farming. Crato (Pisão) dam and its irrigation perimeters. But with no plans to reform today's [unregulated](#) and [poorly supervised](#) water use and farmland intensification, overuse will increase within and beyond established irrigated areas. With aquifers [shrinking and degrading](#) in several regions, and critical in Algarve, new infrastructure and water use incentives will exacerbate the problem.

Expanded irrigation is part of a major focus in the plans to increase agricultural production and international competitiveness. This means further agricultural intensification and a speeding up of an already rapid disappearance of traditional landscapes, particularly in the [south](#). The old patchwork of dry cereal fields, grassland, fallow land, as well as the legally protected montado (dehesa) and other such extensive agroforestry systems will continue to be lost to intensive monocultures heavily dependent on pesticides and artificial fertilisers. Funding is planned to support bird-friendly farming to revive collapsing bird populations. But this will do little when set against the rapid loss of traditional farmland these birds depend on.

Green farm funds could actually make severe environmental problems worse. EU funds earmarked by Portugal for a transition to sustainable (long-term) farming lack enforceable, results-based obligations, so will likely be largely misused. Green funds for general training and support for the production of fruit and vegetables will not actually be green. Green funds to support young farmers could pay those with no real agricultural activity or intention of moving to rural areas. Green funds to strengthen farm insurance against things like [growing climate losses](#) should steer farming to a safer future, but could instead end up promoting unsustainable farms that are less resilient or lowering food security, such as monocultures and export crops.

To evaluate the Portuguese spending plans, government appointed AGRO.GES, an organisation with strong ties to the cellulose industry (Portucel is a [client](#)) and several agribusiness [players](#), including pesticide producers (ANIPLA) and the biggest agroindustry interest group (CAP), which regularly lobby for intensive forestry and farming. These conflicts of interest are well documented in the [media](#).

Portugal's role at EU level

Portugal leads the EU council presidency and claims to have an environmental focus. Its leadership approach has been to raise pressure and talk up big symbolic moments, coining the phrase “super dialogue”, but without putting in the groundwork to secure progress. The council has consistently been the least environmentally ambitious of the three EU institutions and its sudden dropping of environmental ambition in May led talks to collapse abruptly.

Contacts

[Pedro Horta](#), agriculture and rural development work group, ZERO, +351 966 962 281

[Célia Nyssens](#), agriculture policy officer, EEB, +32 492 58 50 35