

THE SILENT WAR ON FARMING



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**HOW EU POLICIES ARE
DESTROYING OUR AGRICULTURE**

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1. Executive summary

- For decades, the EU has been integrating environmentalism into its agricultural policies. But in recent years, this has escalated into something of an environmentalist crusade.
- This capture of agricultural policy by environmental goals has been driven by green and climate activists and means nothing less than the end of farming as we know it.
- The goal of this new transformation is simple: to radically reduce the amount of agriculture that takes place across the EU and to substitute lost farming with emissions trading schemes.
- Farmers across Europe bear the brunt of impractical, ideologically-driven regulations. This will lead to many farms closing, and will cause a scarcity-driven surge in food prices.
- At the same time, the policies, as destructive as they are, will not meet Europe's self-imposed emissions targets.
- The logical outcome of EU policy is to transform farms from places which produce food, to barren wastelands which can be used as bargaining chips by industrial interests to offset their emissions.
- Thankfully, farmers are not taking this lying down.
- In the Low Countries, the policies associated with tackling the "nitrogen crisis" triggered massive resistance from farmers facing stringent EU environmental regulations. Farmers' organisations have mounted a surprisingly successful resistance, turning the countries' political systems upside down.
- In Finland, centuries-old forest management is now under threat as the EU, left-wing parties, and environmental NGOs advocate for converting the country's forests into carbon reservoirs. Given threats to the timber industry and doubts about its impact on climate targets, resistance is building.
- Unless Europe urgently changes course, it risks enormous dependency on foreign agricultural imports. The food grown currently on Europe's efficient, technologically advanced farms will instead be grown elsewhere. Emissions will shift from Europe to the developing world.
- Europe is consciously risking becoming dependent on agricultural imports in the future. If production is merely relocated overseas, this will not help global climate goals. This is apparently ignored so long as the emissions do not take place in Europe.
- Farmers are an integral part of Europe's economy and identity. To secure the future of farming, Europe must invest in domestic production instead of relying on subsidies or emissions trading. Preserving the current way of farming is not just an economic necessity but also central to the identity of entire regions.
- Europe cannot afford to compromise its agricultural independence nor the livelihoods and identity of its farmers for short-term environmental appeasement.

2. Policy recommendations

- **Return to basics:**
The EU has to make the security and affordability of food supply for consumers a top priority again. If other goals conflict, Europe should have the power to prioritise these aims. This would also include ensuring that European agricultural policies do not try to change consumer behaviour through rising food prices.
- **Keep farming in Europe:**
Europe's highly intensive agriculture produces agricultural products with the lowest possible use of resources and environmentally harmful emissions. Shifting agricultural production from Europe to other regions of the world would contradict not only our own climate goals but our independence.
- **Farmers first:**
European agriculture needs a farmer first approach to climate policy. Agriculture can be adapted to environmental needs, but it cannot be sacrificed to them.
- **A new model:**
Central planning and bureaucracy have their limitations. The agriculture of a continent as diverse as Europe cannot be governed via micro-management from Brussels. EU agricultural policy needs to give the farmers enough breathing room to make their own business decisions, as their skin is in the game. If state intervention is required, it should preferably be at the lowest possible level.
- **Accept there are trade-offs:**
Europeans have been managing their environment through agriculture for thousands of years. In the process, they have learned to balance the exploitation of nature and its conservation. We must learn again to have honest debates about this balance.
- **Free farming from bureaucrats:**
The central planning of agriculture in Europe via state prices, subsidies, quotas and bans has never led to optimal solutions. Instead of micro-management from Brussels, our agriculture needs a clear policy focus on new technologies, innovation, research and development.
- **Embrace honest trading:**
While Europe demonises her own food exports, we expect others to provide for our food through free trade agreements. At the same time, Europe seeks to demonise other countries through carbon-adjustment mechanisms. Europe should also produce food for the world market and accept the consequences of agricultural production in Europe. We cannot expect others to take these negative consequences for us.
- **Support the farming way of life:**
Farming is crucial to Europe's way of life. Cease demonising farmers for practising a centuries-old vocation. Europe without her farmers is not Europe.

3. Introduction

*'Honour Yahweh with what goods you have
And with the first fruits of all your produce;
Then your barns will be filled with corn,
Your vats overflowing with new wine.'*
Proverbs 3:9–10, New Jerusalem Bible

Skyrocketing food prices after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine shifted European attention to the future of agriculture for the first time in decades. But a food crisis was brewing before the war. Smart observers were already urging the expansion of food production.¹ Across the European Union, rising food prices cut deep into peoples' pockets — some even began to struggle to put food on the table. Even Charles Michel, President of the European Council, albeit in the empty fashion of European elites, recognised the importance of stable and affordable food supplies: 'Now is the time for all of us to translate our political commitments into concrete action'.²

Thankfully, farmers themselves are not standing by as European food production veers towards a cliff. Farmers' protests have shaken almost every member state, as well as Brussels itself.³ Their protests have highlighted rising energy and commodity prices but, above all, they are protesting against the misguided European policies that, in the name of environmentalism, put severe limitations on farming.

Ultimately, their existence is at stake, as shown by the record numbers of farms vanishing in Europe each year — a problem which the EU has long promised to solve, without effect.⁴ Taken together, this mix of EU and national agricultural policies represents an undeclared war on farming. Farmers, especially small farmers, are the main casualty — but soon enough all European citizens will feel its effects one way or another.

This war on farmers has massive political consequences. Perhaps most famously in the Netherlands, where the so-called "nitrogen crisis" has contributed to years of farmer protests and to massive political upheaval.⁵ Most recently, the populist pushback of the farmers was responsible for a total reorganisation of the Dutch party landscape and the collapse of the governing coalition in the summer of 2023.⁶

But how could a relatively small number of farmers cause such a political upheaval?

This paper argues that the political revolt results from European elites abandoning the long-standing principles of European agriculture policies, in favour of a misguided enforcement of environmentalism.

"Agriculture policy has become subservient or even dominated by both nature conservation and the climate change agenda."

For the first part of its existence, food security and affordable prices were at the core of the EU's policy aims. Under this arrangement, farmers could earn adequate incomes in exchange for feeding Europe, and the world. Food production was expanded, specialization and economics of scale rewarded, and exports were seen as positive.

However, over recent decades, agriculture policy became overburdened with priorities that hampered its ability to reach its goals. Agriculture policy became subservient to nature conservation and climate change agendas. Farming was turned first into a mere tool to achieve these new targets and later a target of endless interventions to pursue often-conflicting goals. The supposed reason for this attack on agriculture is provided by environmentalism.

But, looking forward, the forecast is even grimmer. Indeed, the change of priorities makes agriculture in Europe potentially unviable. In many cases, government interventions already have made the agricultural business model impossible. In the Netherlands and Flanders, livestock farming has become a battlefield between environmentalists and farmers. In other cases, century-old forms of agriculture are in danger of being made unviable by new European regulations, such as in Finland, where the forestry industry is in danger of becoming subservient to climate change mitigation policies. Across Europe, whole industries risk becoming unviable.

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This report also seeks to expose underlying causes for this policy change. Perhaps most important among these are the abandonment of farmers by the traditional agrarian parties, and the role of powerful environmentalist interest groups which have captured agricultural policy from the local to European level.

Finally, this report explores the political consequences of this policy. Starting with those affected by these policies – the farmers themselves – rural communities began to resist their marginalisation. Contrary to the hopes of many party strategists, their protests have even spilled over to the urban middle classes, who have developed great sympathy for the farmers' cause in times of high food prices and insecure identities.

Ultimately, this report argues that security of supply and affordable consumer prices should be treated as priority objectives of European agricultural policy. Environmental goals are not to be ignored, but neither should they become the sole focus of agricultural policy. We cannot sacrifice the production of food at the altar of environmental sentiment. Only by seriously valuing the role of agricultural communities and providing them the ability to respond to changing demands, can we hope both to respond to environmental issues, and to feed Europe.

4. The transformation of EU agriculture policy

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is one of the EU's most famous policies. But European agricultural policy goes far beyond CAP. Countless policies deal with agricultural issues, such as single market regulations and environmental policies. Here we focus mainly on CAP, but we also analyse the related policies which overlap with, and sometimes even overshadow, the CAP. The net effect is the transformation of European agriculture.

4.1. "Never hungry again" – The origins of European agricultural policy

The Common Agricultural Policy of the EU is one of the most significant and enduring policies in the EU's history. Its primary objectives were:

- First, an increase in agriculture productivity. This was to be achieved through rationalisation and by using the modern methods of industrial farming.
- Second, the agricultural community was to receive not only a fair but an increasing standard of living.
- Third, customers would be guaranteed stable markets, food security, and reasonable prices.

These three principles were laid out in the 1957 Treaty of Rome as one of the European Economic Community's (EEC) core policies.⁷ The EU was founded on the promise that farmers would get a decent living just as consumers would get affordable food. Europe was not alone in this regard; all industrialised societies pursued similar policies.⁸ The experiences of two world wars, with their horrible disruptions of food supplies for millions, left them with no other choice in a Cold War environment.⁹ Europe's vow was "never hungry again", as one of the founding fathers of European agriculture policy, Sicco Mansholt, stated.¹⁰

To achieve these aims, the EEC began creating a common agricultural market. For the first time, European farmers were able to sell their products without customs and according to common standards across the proto-EU.¹¹ But the agricultural sectors of the member states were extremely diverse,

not only due to geography, but also due to different farm sizes, varying levels of specialisation and mechanisation and each member state's previous agricultural policies. To counterbalance this, the EEC guaranteed prices for agricultural products in the common market. But this diversity also offered a huge opportunity: Since every region has a structural advantage in growing a specific crop or raising a particular type of domestic animal, farms could specialise and grow to profit from economics of scale.¹² Furthermore, European policies were intended to enable farmers to grow the scale of their farms and invest in processing and marketing their produce.¹³

"The last time Europe restructured farming, it made promises to its farmers that those who remained would have good and secure incomes. But a dangerous principle was established."

But more action was needed. The result of guaranteed prices was increasing production surpluses, yet still, many farmers needed help. The then Commissioner for Agriculture, Sicco Mansholt, proposed a plan for drastic rationalisations. Farm amalgamations should lead to 5 million farmers leaving the agriculture sector, leaving the remaining ones with sufficient incomes.¹⁴ Even though the 1968 Mansholt Plan was not adopted into European legislation directly, since it triggered widespread unrest among farming communities, it led to the adoption of other legislation with the same thrust: the number of farmers in Europe should be reduced and the average size of a farm should become bigger. Farmers in less favourable areas such as mountains and marshy lands received extra funding.

Europe made further promises to its farmers. Those who remained in business, should have sufficient incomes. Any production surpluses should be made available as exports to an exploding world population.¹⁵ Yet, for the first time, the dangerous idea of the reduction in agricultural production, or even the abandonment of it, was introduced into the political debate. However, it did not

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gain traction yet, since the political support for farmers was still widespread, agrarian parties were in power in many places, and the farmers' lobby organisations were intact. The farmers wanted to produce, and the consumers enjoyed their new purchasing power amidst falling food prices.¹⁶

Until 1990, European agricultural policies delivered impressive results. Yield per unit area had almost tripled since the beginning of the European agricultural policies, while labour input per unit area fell by 70 per cent. While in 1950 the average European household spent 50 percent of its income on food, this fell to 15 per cent by the 1990s. Yet, this progress came at the cost of a reduction in numbers of farmers. Productivity increases were possible thanks to the increased use of modern fertilisers and feed imports.¹⁷

Responding to environmentalist concerns about (among others) this increased use of fertilisers, from 1972 onwards, the EEC began to introduce environmental aspects into its agricultural legislation for the first time, although these were initially on a modest scale.¹⁸

4.2. The transformation of CAP into an environmentalist policy

The CAP faced criticism due to agricultural overproduction by the 1980s, which led to the infamous "butter mountains" and "wine lakes". These problems prompted significant reforms in the 1990s, notably the MacSharry reform of 1992. This reform marked a considerable departure from the previous CAP policies: farmers' income losses due to reductions in guaranteed prices were partly compensated by direct payments, based initially on current farm sizes and animal numbers.¹⁹ Furthermore, the reform aimed to set aside 15 percent of agricultural land in Europe, continuing a 1988 set-aside scheme.²⁰ The MacSharry reform also included a new batch of rural development and environmental protection policies. These were not agricultural policies as traditionally understood — but they had the intended effect of reducing agrarian output whilst also tying agriculture to extraneous political imperatives.²¹

These measures not only revived the old idea of set-asides in Europe, but also favoured large holdings to the detriment of smaller family-run farms. A pattern began to emerge. Whenever European agricultural policy was confronted with new challenges, it opted for

policies that left smaller, family-run farms out in the cold. While the smaller farms had been supposed to merge and invest in the first decades, the ones remaining small were now supposed to set aside their land. At the same time, the EEC budget was not reduced, as the subsidies — once established — could not be reduced.²²

This pattern continued during the 1999 CAP reform, where the differences regarding farm sizes and structures between the member states made a genuine policy change impossible.²³

“Whenever European agricultural policy was confronted with new challenges, it opted for policies that left smaller, family-run farms out in the cold.”

By the end of the Nineties, it became clear that the “old” CAP was unsustainable for a growing EU admitting ever-more member states with highly diverse agricultural sectors. The upcoming integration of ten new Central and Eastern European member states required a complete overhaul of EU agricultural and regional policies. Budget constraints also dominated the negotiations on “Agenda 2000”, put forward by the European Commission.²⁴ A two-pillar structure of the CAP emerged. While the first pillar contained the traditional instruments of the CAP, income support for the producers and market measures, the second pillar addressed rural development and sustainability.²⁵

Agenda 2000 also expanded the principle of “cross-compliance”, which was first introduced in 1992 and finalised with the Luxembourg decisions in 2003. Since 2005, farms can now be checked for compliance with environmental, climate and animal welfare standards as part of the CAP. If a farm does not fulfil these standards, CAP payments to it are sanctioned.

This step inaugurates the final departure from the “classic” agricultural policy from the time of Sicco Mansholt, whose primary goal was food security. CAP was to become transformed into a compliance regime for environmentalist goals, as much as it was a policy to protect and strengthen farms.

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As one commentator puts it, somewhat opaquely, 'The multifunctional role of agriculture is coming to the surface'.²⁶ This "multifunctionality" can only be understood if one also considers that the EU has massively expanded its environmental legislation since the 1980s.²⁷ The environmental legislation contained crucial elements for agriculture, such as the Habitats Directive or the Nitrates Directive.^{28 29} If agricultural policy has become "multifunctional", this clearly means it has strayed from its primary function of feeding people and supporting farmers.

See Figure 1 (end of document): Evolution of CAP payments and as a % of EU GDP.³⁰

This expansion of CAP came up against budget restrictions. Decoupling of aid from volumes produced went beyond curbing overproduction. Farmers' incomes fell by 4.8 per cent as a result of the Agenda 2000 reform alone.³¹ This introduction of ideas such as organic farming into CAP further heightened the tensions and gave rise to new regulations for European agriculture.³² After two decades of reform, CAP goals now included environment and landscape production, as the set-aside schemes were still in force.³³ The result: European farmers had to fulfil more and more tasks with less and less money.

This development eventually became so unsustainable that the 2009 "Health Check" of the CAP abolished set-aside policies and increased direct payments, reversing the declining CAP budget since 2006.³⁴

Notwithstanding the minor changes introduced in the 2009 "health check", the nature of European agriculture policy had been entirely transformed within 20 years. Whereas in 1992, the farmers were paid for their output, now they were paid for land area and cattle numbers. A new way of thinking became dominant in agricultural policy: Farmers were no longer farmers but land managers.

A 2013 reform further expanded these developments. Direct payments to agricultural producers were now linked to compliance with seven criteria, which, in addition to a basic premium, primarily provided for an environmental premium.³⁵ Fortunately, instruments were also introduced that rewarded smaller farms and young farmers with premiums. However, the overall budget of the CAP was not increased, so new environmental protection tasks took away

funds overall, and family farms were left with no more than before. This was especially true for the new "Greening" premiums, which represented genuine environmental policies integrated into the CAP.³⁶ The "Greening" premiums cut deep into the direct payments to the farmers.

4.3. The environmental policy agenda of the 2010s

Until the mid-2010s, the integration of environmental policy into agricultural policy was still hampered by the weak growth of the European economies. This not only caused significant unemployment in the Union but also forced resources to be expended to protect the many under-developed agricultural sectors. In addition, many consumers in Europe were wary of rising food prices.

"If agricultural policy has become 'multifunctional', this clearly means it has strayed from its primary function of feeding people and supporting farmers."

This situation changed after Europe emerged from the global financial crisis, and with the successful integration of the new EU member states. Crucial EU players now gave up their resistance to a shift in priorities towards environmental policy. Meanwhile, environmentalist NGOs managed to connect environmentalist and economic policy agendas. The rising awareness of climate change and the promotion of policies of reducing greenhouse gas emissions offered a perfect chance to promote this agenda. The idea of a "green economy" became commonplace. Productivity and sustainability were seen as two sides of the same coin, especially in international organisations.³⁷ Even the EU Commission Secretariat-General, previously concerned with economic competitiveness, became an advocate of this "green economy".³⁸

For farmers, climate change and "green economy" became the new challenge. Not only should they now invest to avoid emissions, but they should also contribute enough to the energy transition so that cars can run on biofuels, for example. The focus shifted further away from food security. But while Europe reorganised its agriculture, geostrategic issues were ignored, which later returned more powerfully. Between 1965 and

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2015, the amount of agricultural land in the world increased by only 9 per cent, while the world's population doubled.³⁹

The EU's agricultural policy has been overloaded with environmental, climate, economic, regional and animal welfare policy concerns in the course of "multifunctionality". The intention to combine these concerns with agricultural policy often grew out of good intentions. For example, structural policy for rural areas is inconceivable without agriculture, as this accounts for a large part of the economy there. The idea of sustainability, which European farmers have integrated into their work for thousands of years, opened up the possibility for nature conservation and climate protection policy to expand into agricultural policy.

However, the incorporation of non-agricultural concerns into agricultural policy can become a problem for various reasons, making the genuine objectives of agricultural policy impossible.

"The EU's agricultural policy has been overloaded with environmental, climate, economic, regional and animal welfare policy concerns."

Firstly, there are practical issues. The loss of coherence resulting from so many conflicting objectives – protecting farmers, conserving nature, reducing emissions, increasing output, promoting efficiency, going organic, protecting wildlife, etc. – outweighs the positive goals. For example, there may be a conflict between nature conservation and increasing agricultural production.⁴⁰ The sheer administrative burden of cross-compliance alone is hampering the effectiveness of the CAP direct payments to the farmers.⁴¹

This is a picture of European policy writ large: there is never simply an energy policy, or an environmental policy, or a farming policy, or a security policy, or a policy for minorities, etc. There is instead a farming policy which must meet energy, environmental, security and diversity goals. In other words, everything is always an "everything" policy. European elites like to pretend that there are never trade-offs between policy agendas, but this is simply wishful thinking.

Secondly, it exposes the decision-making mechanisms of agricultural policy to the more general social lines of conflict. The overlapping of agricultural policy with structural and environmental protection policy also exposes it to the conflicts that otherwise exist between social groups. Thus, there are considerable ideological, social and material differences between those concerned with economic policy and those with environmental policy.⁴²

The result: European agricultural policy has become part of the culture war that has begun to take over Western politics.

4.4. A new environmentalist agenda

Since 2019, European policy has been particularly driven by the environmental and climate movement.

With its Green Deal, the new von der Leyen Commission presented what is probably the most ambitious climate and environmental package in the history of the European Union.⁴³ Of course, agricultural policy was not spared: it was covered by a sub-unit of the Green Deal, the "Farm to Fork" strategy. This strategy aims to accelerate a transition to a sustainable food system. Of the five goals of this strategy, three were aimed at environmental aspects such as climate neutrality or biodiversity, while only the remaining two were concerned with food security and affordable prices.

This focus on the environment was expanded even further when it came to the exact design of the plan.⁴⁴ During the von der Leyen Commission there has been a marked shift in agricultural directives and initiatives with regard to accentuating sustainable farming, minimising chemical usage, and preserving natural ecosystems. The CAP was expected to align more closely with the European Green Deal, reflecting the deep interrelation between farming and environmental goals. The EU Commission subsequently put forward a proposal for a CAP 2023–2027 that is even more focused on environmental goals than in the previous period.⁴⁵

But the CAP alone was no longer enough to realise the environmental goals. The CAP behemoth cannot be changed overnight. For example, since the massive reduction of livestock in Europe was demanded for environmental reasons, the CAP had to be supplemented by other legal instruments to

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achieve these goals.⁴⁶ In plain language, as Europe's farmers wanted to hold on to their traditional economic models, regulations and mechanisms had to be found to break them up.

One of these suggestions is to tax the so-called "harmful effects" of agriculture on climate and biodiversity. This would mainly affect fertilisation and livestock farming, which should both be decreased heavily. On the other hand, higher incentive payments for permanent grassland, crop diversity, soil cover, and landscape features should be paid.⁴⁷

4.5. The rise of emissions trading schemes

At this stage, it is necessary to take a step back. How do instruments such as the carbon tax, widely accepted policy instruments among European politicians and bureaucrats, actually work?

A recent academic study⁴⁸ exposes how insufficient the unilateral carbon taxes imposed in the EU are: They would lead to a decrease of only 0.15 per cent of agriculture-related greenhouse gas emissions globally. For carbon taxes to be effective, the tax rate needs to be high enough to constrain production. But this would lead to a loss in the competitiveness of European farmers on the world market. Farmers in Europe will either reduce their output or go bankrupt, while their foreign competitors will produce more food instead of them. Only a global carbon tax would work.⁴⁹ In light of these facts, not even the most environmentalist EU politician would argue for an agricultural policy that drives farming overseas without reducing emissions.

The other option is a leap of faith: the hope that the EU becomes a "global leader" in carbon taxes, and somehow accrues competitive benefits. This is exactly the strategy of current European environmental policies.⁵⁰ Yet, the international community is sluggish to follow the European example. Tariffs need to be found to compensate for the "backward" attitudes of the rest of the world.

Therefore, in the meantime (until all the major global economies follow), the EU wants to impose a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), effectively putting a duty on "carbon-intensive" imported products.

Though the CBAM might effectively reduce some greenhouse gas emissions, it constitutes an enormous unilaterally imposed barrier to global trade. 'Many countries will not sit back and suffer from it. The world economy will inevitably face a vicious cycle of trade retaliation.'⁵¹ Furthermore, the CBAM would harm poorer agrarian areas in the world. Russia, India and China are affected, but more in their rural countryside.⁵² Rural areas would also suffer in Africa.⁵³ How the EU wants to achieve a global agreement on carbon pricing while it is starting a vicious trade war amidst already rising global tensions remains a mystery. Many effects of the CBAM are also counter-intuitive, e.g. timber production in India might be promoted instead of food production.⁵⁴

"How the EU wants to achieve a global agreement on carbon pricing while it is starting a vicious trade war amidst already-rising global tensions remains a mystery."

The CBAM in the first phase does not include the agricultural sector, but it opens the way to include it in later phases, as agriculture should be included in the emissions trading system (ETS). Nonetheless, the CBAM can indirectly raise production costs in agriculture, given that conventional agriculture is heavily dependent on fertiliser, pesticides, fuel, and electricity, which would only increase as the European ETS is expanded. The CBAM also requires an extensive measurement system for the emissions of each product, which is extremely difficult to implement in the agricultural sector.⁵⁵

Although agriculture is not included in the European ETS, the EU expects a 30 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in these non-ETS sectors by 2030. Reduction of emissions in this case means investment in buildings and facilities, the purchase of new equipment for the precise preparation of feed and the application of fertilisers, and the qualification of personnel. These already available reduction techniques could reduce the emissions from agriculture by 15 per cent. Yet, the heavy financial burden of these measures can only be shouldered by large agricultural producers. 'In smaller farms, the application of reduction techniques is simply

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unprofitable financially.⁵⁶ We recognise an old pattern: when the EU encounters a problem in agricultural policy, it consistently ignores the concerns of small farms. The current EU climate policy expects the impossible from small family farms in particular.

“The idea is essentially that European farmers should switch their business from growing crops and animals to farming emissions trading certificates.”

The ETS is currently not expanded onto agriculture, as the EU recognises the matter's sensitivity.⁵⁷ After all, ETS poses a heavy financial burden on farmers who cannot reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Set high enough, a carbon tax can increase food inflation significantly.⁵⁸ Yet the European Commission is determined to bring agriculture into the ETS.⁵⁹ The ETS is seen by many as the long-term replacement of the CAP, as the former will never have enough funds to finance the climate policies stipulated by the Paris Agreement's mitigation goals.⁶⁰ The idea is essentially that European farmers should switch their business from growing crops and animals to farming ETS certificates. Not only can they avoid emissions, but they can turn their land into “carbon sinks”, generating ETS certificates that then can be sold to, for example, industrial companies. One of the major examples would be to turn pasture for cattle into woodland, not only avoiding the emission of the cattle but creating a “carbon sink”. This would amount to the deliberate destruction of Europe's farms to fulfil environmentalist goals.

This line of thought is further pursued by the snappily named Land Use, Land-use Change and Forestry Directive (LULUCF). LULUCF's goal is that land use should not produce net greenhouse gas emissions. LULUCF is another core element of the Green Deal and requires the creation of “carbon sinks” by member states. It contains a clear obligation to enforce climate policies in relation to land and, in particular, forests.⁶¹

Livestock farming has become a particular concern for European politics, as livestock are responsible for significant greenhouse gas emissions in the EU. As ETS and carbon tax are not yet available as instruments,

many call for other regulatory instruments to be used to reduce the amount of livestock in the EU by decree or by taxes imposed on meat or dairy products to change consumer behaviour.⁶² In the previous decades, EU policies already have been established that could be repurposed to accommodate a more radical environmentalist agenda, most notably the Habitats Directive or the Nitrate Directive. Since many of these regulations are already in force, their regular updates can be used to implement stricter restrictions on agricultural activities.

These provide only a glimpse of the flurry of environmental policies currently affecting farming. To summarise, the current thrust of European environmental and climate policy is aimed at a fundamental transformation of the agricultural sector. In contrast to the gradual reforms of previous decades, European policy is currently setting an unprecedented pace in the implementation of its environmental agenda in the agricultural sector. But there is a very good reason why the change in European agricultural policy in previous decades was only gradual. Many ambitious plans to restructure agriculture have failed due to the realities on the ground and lack of stakeholder acceptance. Expecting a more ambitious pace to be convincing on its own is largely unrealistic. This Green Deal can only succeed if it is widely accepted by the population. However, the problems with this new pace are already evident, even though many instruments have not yet fully come into force.

4.6. Explaining the domination of agriculture by environmentalism

Why has the EU positioned itself so one-sidedly in favour of an environmental agenda that either completely ignores objections regarding the impact on agriculture, or simply brushes them off by pointing out that climate change is even more dangerous?

We need to look at three aspects to shed light on this question. Firstly, we must understand how climate change has become an overshadowing paradigm of European policy. ‘Recently climate change has become a stronger driving force towards [sustainable development] than has been the real political will to integrate the economical, social and environmental dimensions of the [sustainable development] policies’, as former Green MEP Bruno Boissière stated already in his

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2009 analysis.⁶³ This perception of the risks of climate change has since reached the wider public. The higher the level of formal education, the more urban the socialisation, the more left-wing the political attitude, the more people perceive climate change as an immediate risk.⁶⁴ An extremely influential publication by Campbell et. al. singled out agriculture as a significant contributor to climate change, but also as an even more relevant one to land system change and freshwater use.⁶⁵

“As far as urban elites are concerned, worries about the environment have morphed into what can only be called ‘agri-bashing’.”

It is, therefore, evident that, in the opinion of many decision-makers, these two concerns, namely climate and environmental protection and agriculture, have merged. The tendency of public debates to simplify has led to a discussion that can undoubtedly be categorised as “agri-bashing”, a phrase coined by farmers fed up with their negative image in the media.⁶⁶ However, it is essential to note that this view is often limited to urban decision-making centres. For example, the rise in interest in ETS on social media in Europe is mainly due to the increase in interest in the Brussels EU bubble.⁶⁷

Secondly, we need to look at the current meaning of the “multifunctionality” of agricultural policy. Political discourses that favour degrowth scenarios remain a minority position as most Europeans remain supportive of economic growth. The European Union institutions, therefore, shape the discussion around the Green Deal as one of striving for green global leadership.⁶⁸ The overall political narrative is that the new green policies would transform the agricultural business model.

This approach has several advantages. As farms need to invest heavily in new technologies and equipment to meet the new requirements, business opportunities for the industry open up. But in this way, the EU can also show farmers prospects for the future. Not only can they benefit from new eco-subsidies, e.g. for the maintenance of nature reserves, but they can also obtain an additional source of income as “carbon farmers” by storing greenhouse gases. However, the technocratic nature of this vision

must be noted. While as traditional food producers, farmers were still dependent solely on the environment and their own skills, they are now also dependent on the processing of subsidies, tenders and artificial emissions trading. Many representatives of agricultural interests are initially looking too favourably at these new offers. But to outsiders, this offer seems perfectly acceptable, and together with the profiteers of this policy, it can be sold as a possible prospect.

Thirdly, we need to see how these ideas have found their way into the European institutions and which actors are promoting them there. ‘The Green Deal discourse shapes political and institutional power of the Commission and the EU.’⁶⁹ The EU sees itself as a leader in the adoption and promotion of climate policies.⁷⁰ Partially, the explanation can be traced back to the escalation of climate activism from 2014 onwards. With the rise in global temperatures and the undeniable impacts of climate change, Europe witnessed a wave of heightened environmental advocacy. Prominent young activists, such as Greta Thunberg, brought climate concerns to the forefront of public discourse. This rising tide of ecological awareness undeniably affected EU decision-makers, pushing them to reconsider policies with notable environmental consequences, agriculture being a prime example.

The 2019 European elections further highlighted this transition. The Green parties across various member states witnessed unprecedented electoral success, indicating the public's growing environmental concerns.⁷¹ The radical left adopted the Greens’ policy stances.⁷² This success was not merely a reflection of the climate movement but also a response to the broader socio-political landscape in Europe.

As right-wing populism gained traction in parts of Europe, it often positioned itself in opposition to environmentalism.⁷³ These conflicts have intensified divisions and disagreements on various societal issues, leading to increased polarisation or a widening gap between opposing viewpoints. For populist movements, climate policies were seen as elitist impositions that disregarded the concerns of the “ordinary” citizen. This framing turned environmentalism into a political battleground, and made it a trademark of those opposing right-wing populism. For EU politicians, this presented both a challenge and an opportunity. The

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challenge was the increasing polarisation in Europe, with agricultural and climate policies becoming deeply politicised. The opportunity, however, was to leverage this polarisation to their advantage. By supporting climate policies, EU decision-makers could present the Union as a progressive force, standing in striking contrast to the regressive tendencies of populist movements. In essence, they sought to battle populism by making the EU more progressive, using climate policies as a tool.

food security second. Affordable prices as a goal remain only in glossy brochures, as the reduction of agricultural production is pursued through many secondary channels, especially in livestock farming. But how do such EU policies impact the member states and those directly affected?

“The new unholy alliance between green concerns and left-wing movements has opened the door for environmentalist NGOs to exert pressure like never before.”

The combination of these factors culminated in 2019 during the formation of a new Commission. Ursula von der Leyen (EPP), originally not part of the Spitzenkandidat process, has been nominated by the European Council as Commission president. Yet, the traditional alliance of the EPP and the S&D had lost its majority in parliament. Not only did von der Leyen have to make concessions to the Renew group, but she also had to put forward policies that received support from the S&D.

Since many former S&D and EPP voters switched their votes to the Greens, many representatives of these parties were eager to see a heavier emphasis on green policies to stem the Green wave. The result of this political pressure was the inclusion of the Green Deal in von der Leyen’s programme and the installation of powerful commissioners with environmentalist portfolios; most powerful among them Frans Timmermans (S&D).⁷⁴

This institutional constellation opened the possibility for environmentalist NGOs to influence European politics even more significantly than before.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the EU continued to outsource the enforcement of environmental legislation to NGOs, handing them considerable power.⁷⁶

Today’s European agricultural policy is almost unrecognisable as such. The jack of all trades, master of none, it is supposed to serve environmental and climate interests first and

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5.1. Nitrogen

The emblematic case of the impact of EU environmental obsessions is the Dutch nitrogen "crisis" (also known as the "stikstofcrisis" in Dutch). The battle here revolves around the supposed effects of nitrogen pollution on the environment. Nitrogen emissions mainly come from agricultural activities, transportation, and industrial emissions.

In the Netherlands, the highly modern and efficient agriculture processes significantly contribute to nitrogen emissions, with livestock farming being a major source. Nitrogen is simply a central part of modern livestock farming: it is part of a cycle between proteins bound in organisms and the atmosphere. Animals release ammonia (a source of nitrogen) directly into the atmosphere and the soil, mostly through their excrement. In 2021, 86 per cent of ammonia emissions and 8.4 per cent of the nitrous oxide emissions in the Netherlands arose from agricultural activities.⁷⁷ Within the Dutch agricultural sector, livestock farming is responsible for roughly half of greenhouse gas emissions.⁷⁸

One of the side-effects of agricultural production is excess nitrogen in the soil (so-called wet and dry depositions), which can lead to a process called eutrophication. This process causes an overgrowth of certain plant species, such as nitrogen-loving grasses, which can outcompete other plant species. As a result, biodiversity in affected areas decreases, leading to negative consequences for ecosystems and wildlife. Nitrous oxide is further a strong greenhouse gas, contributing to climate change. Nitrous oxide and ammonia have several further negative effects on wildlife and the surrounding population.⁷⁹

5.2. Dutch agricultural efficiency

Dutch agriculture enjoys legendary status. Long decades of research, investment, and hard work have transformed a starving country into an agrarian powerhouse. The Netherlands is the second-largest exporter of agricultural goods in the world. The productivity of its agricultural sector is also

world-leading: the intensive use of technology and investment led to a dramatic fall in the use of resources per unit and in emissions. Together with its climate, which makes it suitable for both crop, vegetable and livestock farming, the intensity of its agriculture leads to enormous outputs. This tiny country feeds Europe and the world.⁸⁰

For further illustration, see Figure 2: Trends of environmental pressure by agriculture in the Netherlands.⁸¹

This progress in the agricultural sector has led to significant reductions in emissions. The nitrogen soil surplus and the ammonia emissions have been cut by more than half. Phosphorus soil surplus, antibiotics and pesticide use has been reduced by over 70 per cent. Unfortunately, there has not been a similarly staggering reduction in greenhouse gases.

Herein lies the rub: research and investment alone cannot reach net zero (at least yet). As rapid as it has been, technological progress has its limits. Thus, the EU has embraced the chilling alternative: further emission reductions are only achievable through the reduction of agricultural production. At the extreme end, environmentalists call for cutting the Dutch livestock production by half to meet climate targets.⁸²

But the problem with simply reducing agricultural output in Europe is that production will inevitably be shifted abroad; instead of the efficient Dutch farms, food will be produced in less efficient farms overseas.

5.3. The EU's war on nitrogen and the farmers' fightback

To meet European standards such as those in the Birds, Nitrogen and the Habitats Directives, the Netherlands, like other EU member states, has designated specific areas as "Natura 2000" sites to conserve biodiversity. However, due to nitrogen emissions, many of these sites did not meet EU standards, leading to legal challenges and concerns about environmental conservation.

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The crisis came to the fore when the Dutch Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, ruled in May 2019 that the Dutch government's programme for nitrogen emissions was not stringent enough and violated EU laws. This ruling essentially brought construction projects to a halt, as new permits could not be issued without assurances that they would not lead to further nitrogen pollution.

“Farmers felt thrown under the bus by the urban, detached elite and sacrificed in favour of the interests of industry, construction and transportation.”

In response, the Dutch government implemented measures to address the crisis. Central to its policies was the Programmatic Approach to Nitrogen (PAS). PAS turned European regulations that required action on nitrogen emissions into a national action plan. The Dutch government had to try to fulfil the demands of the Birds and Habitats Directives without destroying economic activity.⁸³

The PAS was first developed under a CDA-led government in 2008, responding to legal challenges.⁸⁴ The CDA was traditionally regarded as an agrarian party in the Dutch political system, yet CDA state secretary Gerda Verburg cooperated closely with the centre-left PvdA in developing PAS. In 2010, an election brought the liberal VVD of Mark Rutte into the leading position in the government coalition. The more liberal, urbanite VVD prioritised industry over agriculture. Then, in 2012, the centre left PvdA replaced the CDA as a junior partner of the VVD. This led to even more stringent PAS policies, especially regarding livestock farming. The final PAS was passed almost unanimously by the Dutch parliament in 2014.⁸⁵

The defeat of agrarian interests was clear from the design of PAS. Political pressure came from environmentalist parties (Green and the PvdD) and NGOs. They continuously challenged the task forces developing the PAS — both publicly and in the state administrative court.

In addition, they attacked the representatives of livestock farmers, delegitimising their

case.⁸⁶ PAS was from the outset tailored according to the interests of industry — not of agriculture.

This fact led to the 2019 political bomb, where the state administrative court ruled in favour of environmentalist groups that the PAS is inadequate to achieve the aims of the Habitats Directive.⁸⁷ The 2019 ruling was largely a result of a year-long campaign by the tiny environmentalist NGO run by Johan Vollenbroek.⁸⁸ This led to a cessation of permits issued under the PAS, affecting agriculture, industry and the housing construction sector.⁸⁹

In response, new rules on nitrogen were issued by all twelve provincial governments. These new rules transferred nitrogen quotas from the agricultural sector to industry. At the same time, the D66, part of the government coalition, suggested that the number of livestock in the country should be cut by half. Previously extreme environmentalist positions had entered the mainstream. This sparked the beginning of the Dutch farmers' protests that are still with us today.

The protests made some of the provinces withdraw their new rules, although the debate had only just begun at the national level.⁹⁰ Farmers and environmentalists developed their own narratives. Farmers felt thrown under the bus by the urban, detached elite. They also felt sacrificed in favour of the interests of the industry, construction and transportation sectors. For the farmers, the nitrogen crisis is overblown and amounts to “agri-bashing”. Meanwhile, environmentalists framed the nitrogen crisis as an opportunity to develop a completely new form of agriculture in the Netherlands.⁹¹ Van der Ploeg even denounced the farmers' narratives as right-wing, rural populism that ignores the contribution of agriculture to the environmental crises. Agriculture was painted as the symbol of rapacious capitalism: ‘Entrepreneurial agriculture has internalised the logic of capital: it needs ongoing expansion, both for material and symbolic reasons’.⁹²

The Dutch government, a hotchpotch of supposedly centre-right parties, then announced that livestock numbers would be cut by half by 2035. In an attempt to buy off the farmers, the government launched voluntary acquisition schemes. But the voluntary schemes soon became mandatory as the CDA gave in to the demands of the

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other governing parties, which wanted to preserve industry and construction. The forced transformation of Dutch agriculture had begun.

'Land acquired through buying out farmers will be either returned to a natural status or designated for nature-inclusive agriculture usage'.⁹³

5.4. The Farmers Movement vs the Greens

It is unlikely that Dutch livestock production will relocate to other EU countries. Even relocating farmers within the Netherlands is hard because farmers are deeply rooted in their local environment, where their farm expresses their values and beliefs.⁹⁴ So the Dutch measures will mean a reduction of animal products on the European food market.⁹⁵

Even though COVID-19 measures banned many public protests, the political struggle continued. The newly founded Farmers' Defence Force (FDF) and the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB) continued to organise protests and also put pressure on the governing Rutte coalition. Minister for Agriculture Carola Schouten (CU) announced in May 2020 that crude protein fodder for dairy cattle should be limited to offset nitrogen emissions in the construction sector. Another round of angry protests erupted.⁹⁶

In 2021, the governing coalition put forward several proposals to tackle the "nitrogen crisis". They all had in common that agricultural enterprises had to be reduced in numbers. Thus, in the summer, farmers' protests began again.⁹⁷

The nitrogen crisis and the future of Dutch agriculture played a significant role in the Dutch elections of 2021. All major parties included agriculture as one of the main issues in their election manifestos.⁹⁸ Yet, the political atmosphere in the Netherlands was still not ready for major change. Support for the BBB soared in rural communities, who felt sidelined by politicians. However, their issues still failed to gain traction among urban electorates. The farmers' protests failed to gain significant influence in the parliament, and the governing coalition retained its majority.

After the elections, the government announced a 25 billion Euro package to reduce livestock numbers by a third by 2035.

The proposal originated from the urban-liberal D66. A spokesperson for the once agrarian CDA simply stated: 'We have been very good at feeding the world. We can be proud. But it didn't work out for us, so we have to change. I hope other countries will learn from what we have done wrong.'⁹⁹ The Netherlands was supposed to shrug its shoulders as the quintessential Dutch industry was dismantled.

"The forced transformation of Dutch agriculture had begun. The Netherlands was supposed to shrug its shoulders as the quintessential Dutch industry was dismantled."

The 25 billion plan was developed under the new Minister for Agriculture Christianne van der Waal (VVD). In the Summer of 2022, this sparked the biggest and fiercest farmers' protests yet. The farmers accused the VVD, the CDA, the CU and the D66 of throwing them under the bus in favour of the interests of industry and the cities.¹⁰⁰ With COVID restrictions now gone, the farmers' protests gained new momentum, and they attracted more widespread support for the first time. Two thirds of voters supported the farmers protest.¹⁰¹ Farmers now gathered often in front of local or provincial governments and water board meetings that dealt with agricultural matters, to keep up constant political pressure. The years of protests had transformed the farmers: they were better prepared and more conscious of their collective interests.¹⁰²

The government went ahead with its reduction plans nevertheless. In December 2022, it proposed a new nitrogen program.¹⁰³ The latest Minister for Agriculture, Piet Adema (CU), opened up negotiations with farmers, environmentalist organisations and provincial governments in January 2023 that ultimately went nowhere.¹⁰⁴ In March of 2023, the BBB scored a historic victory in the provincial elections, becoming the strongest party in all the twelve provinces and scoring over 20 per cent of the votes nationwide.¹⁰⁵ As the CDA lost votes, it began negotiations with the other governing parties to intervene in favour of the farmers' cause. The other government parties refused to play ball. Together with

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other issues including migration, the nitrogen crisis ultimately led to the downfall of the fourth Rutte government in July 2023.¹⁰⁶

In the campaign for the upcoming November 2023 parliamentary elections, the environmentalist-agrarian divide has played a huge role. In response to the CDA's self-immolation, former CDA parliamentarian Pieter Omtzigt founded his own party. The VVD did not implode, but the D66 did. Consolidating the link between left-wing activism and environmental movements, the PvdA and the Greens formed an electoral alliance. To hammer the point home, the PvdA and the Greens recalled Frans Timmermans, the European commissioner and arch EU environmentalist, to be their lead candidate.¹⁰⁷

5.5. The situation in Flanders

In the neighbouring Flanders region of Belgium, a similar story unfolded due to the similarities in geography, agricultural structure, and the political system. After years of investment since the Second World War, also stipulated and financed by the agricultural policies of the newly founded EU, Flanders became home to intensive livestock farming. The history and the distribution of ammonia and nitrous oxide emissions by these sectors mirrored the Netherlands as well. In short, the sector improved efficiency dramatically, but significant emissions remained. Efficiency alone is not enough to reach the emission reduction targets and so environmentalist groups called for the sharp reduction of absolute livestock number in Flanders.¹⁰⁸

Their efforts were supported by environmentalist-minded political groups such as the Greens and the Social Democrats.¹⁰⁹ Once again, the European Habitats Directive proved to be the lever that could be used to unwind long-standing agricultural policies. The Flemish government promoted research on the nitrogen crisis as soon as the Dutch case gained prominence.¹¹⁰ As the Flemish government struggled to find a solution, they invented tools such as "impact scores" to measure the ecological footprints of agricultural activities. Although scores like this may be helpful from a scientific perspective, when applied to reality, and when used in the messy world of politics, they are blunt tools.¹¹¹ Further research explored the possibility of farm relocations nevertheless.¹¹²

All this highlights the basically political nature of the decision-making, despite the heavy use of academic publications in the public debate. In March 2022, the Minister for Environment, Zuhal Demir (N-VA), put forward a nitrogen decree that would heavily limit agricultural activities in Flanders. The primary goal of Demir and the N-VA was to avoid upcoming bans on industrial activity in Flanders. By reducing the emissions in the agricultural sector, they could still issue licences for industry. At the same time, Demir wanted to appeal to more environmentalist electorates by sticking to the target of emissions reduction.¹¹³

"No matter how efficient the farms became, it was not enough to reach the emission reduction targets. Environmentalist groups called for the sharp reduction of absolute livestock numbers."

The Flemish government, headed by the ironically named Minister-President Jambon, was unsympathetic to the interests of livestock farmers. The government is comprised of the N-VA, the liberal openVLD and the Christian-Democrats CD&V. The new nitrogen decree shed light on the inherent conflicts within the coalition. While the N-VA and the openVLD have their core electorate in cities and urban areas, the CD&V is a traditionally agrarian party.

After years of trying to ignore the nitrogen issue, the CD&V blocked the new nitrogen decree in March 2023, causing a government crisis.¹¹⁴ As the Flemish government struggled to come to a decision, it became clear that the N-VA and the Belgian federal government, led by Alexander de Croo (openVLD), are mainly concerned with the protection of the chemistry industry in the port of Antwerp.¹¹⁵ This unequal treatment of agriculture in favour of industry was also the subject of a decision by the Council of State which ruled that agriculture must not be penalised, but the Habitats Directive must be fully implemented in the economy.¹¹⁶ This decision was a double-edged sword for farmers.¹¹⁷

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5.6. What lies behind the squeeze on farmers?

The similarities between the Netherlands and Flanders show us a pattern. EU legislation is clearly the cause of both problems. Over the decades, a system of micromanagement has been established first through the CAP and then through additional environmental legislation. Although the Habitats Directive is now three decades old, the so-called "prohibition of deterioration" in the directive deliberately creates a dynamic of constant tightening. This is particularly important as the Habitats Directive was not only to be tightened as part of the Green Deal, but the "prohibition of deterioration" was also to serve as a blueprint for further EU legislation.

"It is as if the directives were deliberately designed to destroy Dutch agriculture."

Existing EU policy was not only expanded here, but a milestone was also to be established in terms of environmental protection and the transformation of agriculture. Livestock farming is particularly suitable as an enemy, as animal welfare issues have lots of public sympathy. When coupled with the climate protection argument, the case against livestock farming seems compelling. Interestingly, rather than genuine public belief, the mainstay of support comes from the scientific and bureaucratic communities.

With the argument "settled", national structures are called upon to enable or even go beyond the full implementation of EU law. In the Netherlands, the technologically advanced agricultural sector unintentionally became its own worst enemy: the state was able to precisely track the emissions of, and penalise, individual farms.

The implementation of EU directives was characteristically haphazard. For example, Natura 2000 areas were designated purely by technocratic and environmental protection considerations. In fact, the very applicability of such directives to an area such as the Netherlands should be questioned.

How could the degradation of nature be avoided "at all costs" when we are talking about one of the most densely populated and farmed areas in Europe?¹¹⁸ It is as if

the directives were deliberately designed to destroy Dutch agriculture.

As we can see, this has created considerable pressure for Dutch politicians. The EU legal standards demanded action and could, in theory, be implemented. However, it was crystal clear to everyone with eyes to see that the implementation of EU law would mean that the structures of local agriculture built over decades would have to be broken up, or else other sectors, such as industry, would suffer. By the time the Dutch decision-makers realised this and went to Brussels to re-negotiate with EU politicians, it was far too late. The Dutch ministers were sent home like naughty pupils from school, as right-wing politician Wybren van Haga complacently told reporters.¹¹⁹

Unwilling to take on the EU, Dutch politicians attempted to fudge their way through. PAS was implemented, but they tried to circumvent the problem by technocratic means. European law was to be implemented 100 per cent, but without harming the Dutch economy. This approach was based on the political paradigm of Dutch decision-makers that European directives must be fully executed, even if they leave no room for national law.

"NGOs proved to be especially successful. They both successfully sued for the implementation of the Habitat Directive and lobbied for stricter regulations at national and European level."

If Dutch politicians had spared agriculture, there would have been a risk of being branded an "enemy of the environment" or an "opponent of Europe" by environmental parties, environmental NGOs and the media. NGOs proved to be especially successful as they both successfully sued for the implementation of the Habitat Directive and lobbied for stricter regulations at national and European level. In contrast, protecting agriculture only promised the support of the few per cent who work in agriculture. At some point, this thinking also took hold of the traditionally agricultural CD&V, which ceased to function as the farmers' advocate in government.

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In this political environment, counterarguments could not gain a hearing. For example, a good case can be made that livestock farming is necessary for the entire agricultural sector. Agriculture that includes livestock farming produces a greater overall output.¹²⁰ Also, the role of the Netherlands as the "tiny country that feeds the world", has never been officially abandoned.

"Both in the Netherlands and Flanders, farmers have successfully staged protests against the tightening of the emission requirements. They have scored astonishing successes."

Ultimately, politicians shirked the debate. Is growing food to feed people wrong simply because it incurs emissions? The debate on this question often just comes to the point that people should eat less meat.

The case of Flanders shows how this kind of political struggle can spread over Europe. The spread of the farmers' movements from the Netherlands to Flanders was straightforward, owing to language and agricultural similarities. But these debates may continue to spread even beyond the Netherlands and Belgium. Ironically, these debates could arise in other member states when they invest in agriculture, as increased efficiency can increase absolute production. Production means emissions, which means reduction targets, and these, in turn, attract the attention of environmental parties and organisations. The political result for farmers in the Netherlands and Flanders is the same: a drastic tightening of emission requirements. 'This deliberately conceals the fact that it is impossible to achieve all the targets set and at the same time continue to work profitably as a livestock farmer.'¹²¹

Both in the Netherlands and Flanders, farmers have successfully staged protests against the tightening of the emission requirements. The Dutch protests have scored astonishing successes. Not only did they outlast the Covid lockdown measures but managed to get the plurality in the upper house of the parliament, contributing to the breakup of the governing coalition. The affected farmers themselves, whose immediate future was threatened by the measures, did not only demonstrate

enormous perseverance and political skill to defend their interests. They also became the nucleus of resistance in rural areas, as agriculture has an identity-forming character for many people, even if they are not directly involved in farming. Here, politicians have failed to realise that agriculture cannot be "transformed" at will, as if it were a public authority or a start-up.

What's more, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have made broad sections of the population more aware of strategic food supply security and have also caused enormous concern about rising food prices. In this environment, farmers' concerns fell on receptive ears, as evidenced by the different ways in which farmers' protests were handled. In both Belgium and the Netherlands, the traditional farmers' parties, the CDA and the CD&V, spurred on by the BBB or Vlaams Belang have tried to rediscover their roots. The farmers are also learning to coordinate across borders, as successful Dutch campaigners are joining the farmers' protests in Flanders.¹²²

The Low Countries show us not only the potential of long-standing environmentalist policies to spur upheaval in rural communities but also how this upheaval can lead to a severe political backlash against governing elites. But how would countries react if an entirely new piece of legislation by the European Green Deal is targeting their agricultural sector?

6. A (carbon) sinking feeling: The Finnish forestry industry

Finland's forestry industry is a global market leader in terms of its key figures. This is hardly surprising for a country where two-thirds of the land is forested. The success of Finnish forestry is due to a centuries-old tradition and specialisation of forest farmers. Finland joined the EU relatively late, but its location and policies made a successful forestry policy inevitable during the Cold War. As forests are the country's most important natural resource, wood processing also became the nucleus of Finnish industrialisation.

See further information in Figure 3: Forest Ownership Structure in Finland (1996–2003).¹²³

Private owners, primarily families, predominantly own Finnish forests. As families are both interested in the economic exploitation of their woodland and its sustainability, since they want to pass it down to their children, Finnish forest owners developed a deep bond with their land. They had a culture of sustainable economy long before it became a buzzword in academia, and mostly did well without large-scale state interference. Finland exemplifies a commitment to balancing economic interests with environmental stewardship.¹²⁴

Finnish forests are also a net carbon sink. As early as 1997, research began on how Finnish forests can further contribute to carbon sequestration, counteracting climate change. Sustainable forest management involves responsible harvesting, reforestation, and biodiversity conservation. These practices not only ensure a continuous supply of wood products but also contribute to the overall health and resilience of the forest ecosystem.¹²⁵

6.1. Finnish forests in the crosshairs

The central question for Finnish forestry is: How much wood can be removed from the forest so that it can be managed sustainably? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to define sustainability. Does this mean a sustainable timber yield, or do we also need to calculate the consequences for biodiversity and for climate change? What is

the relationship between the two factors? For example, wood products replace fossil raw materials and fuels and therefore contribute to reducing emissions, but the extraction of wood also potentially releases greenhouse gases.

Predicting these effects is quite challenging. Some studies suggest that a fully undisturbed forest is the best from a climate protection perspective.¹²⁶ Other studies support intervention.¹²⁷ 'As a scientist, it is extremely difficult to propose magic bullet solutions to our climate change goals, yet policymakers in the [EU] tend to do so with regard to [forestry] sector greenhouse gas reduction targets', as one academic review states. The study points out that well-managed young and middle age forests sequester the most greenhouse gases, while unmanaged forests can even become carbon emitters.¹²⁸

"In 2018, the Finnish centre-left government stated that the EU should stay away from Finnish forests. 'Forestry should be based on local conditions and knowhow in each member state'."

No area of European policy can escape without a mystifying acronym, so the European Union passed its LULUCF (Land use, land-use change, and forestry) Directive in 2018, though this legislation did not yet stir unrest among the Finnish forest owners.¹²⁹ Still, the Finnish centre-left government stated that the EU should stay away from Finnish forests. 'Forestry should be based on local conditions and knowhow in each member state', as the cabinet meeting stated.¹³⁰

In May 2022 though, the European Commission put forward a proposal for a Nature Restoration Law (NRL) according to its strategy for biodiversity.¹³¹ The core logic of the NRL is modelled on the Habitats Directive. The member states must designate specific areas in which nature is restored to an "ecologically desirable" state. The Commission's original draft planned to

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“restore” up to 30 per cent of the area of the member states, with strict timetables and close monitoring.

During the legislation process, political opposition erupted from Finland.

Finland has fallen behind in representing its political interests because the country has only been a member of the EU since 1996, and so does not have the networks of the “old” member states in Brussels.¹³²

As the forests are predominantly privately owned, hundreds of thousands of families in the country of 5.5 million people were affected. They feared that the forests could no longer be managed economically in future if the new regulations also affected them. The fact that the Finnish administration has a reputation for strictly implementing EU regulations also plays a role here, as civil servants can be held liable if they fail to do so. The Finnish government coalition, led by Sanna Marin (SDP), first struggled to develop a common position. The range of opinions varied from the VIHR's ultra-environmentalist approach to the KESK, which insisted on its traditional role of defending agrarian interests, which gelled with the SDP's concern about jobs in rural areas.¹³³ The government was also under pressure from the conservative opposition.

“The battle for the soul of Finland’s forests is only heating up. The plans are clear: to meet the EU’s official goal of net zero emissions by 2050, the Finnish forests are to serve as a “carbon sink”.”

The Agriculture Minister Antti Kurvinen (KESK) succeeded in putting together a package within the government in favour of agriculture and forestry, which also included the rejection of core elements of the Nature Restoration Law.¹³⁴ The government survived a vote of no confidence by the opposition in December 2022, which was triggered by its agricultural and forestry policy.¹³⁵ Forestry remained a hot topic during the campaign for the April 2023 parliamentary elections. KESK remained firm on the defence of the forestry industry, while VIHR attacked them fiercely.¹³⁶ In the general elections, KESK lost some of its vote share to centre-right parties, though

its losses remained manageable. The big loser of the election proved to be the VIHR, which lost especially in rural areas. The poor performance of VIHR resulted in the loss of a majority for the centre-left government, and the formation of the centre-right Orpo government (with the KOK and the PS being the main parties).¹³⁷

The new government naturally maintained its predecessor's critical stance on the NRL during negotiations between the EU Commission, Council and Parliament. The result of the trialogue, which was presented at the beginning of November 2023, shows a significantly weakened interim status compared to the Commission's draft.¹³⁸ Issues like the prohibition of deterioration resulted in compromises.¹³⁹

6.2. The lessons from Finland

The example of Finland shows how intact structures of rural interest representation can work. The interests of forest farmers, the wood-processing industry and environmentalists were all represented in the governing coalition, even though it leaned centre-left. As a result, the political conflict was resolved in a textbook manner without a serious political crisis.

The Marin government was voted out in 2023 in favour of a shift to the right. Whilst this cannot be compared to the total collapse of the Rutte government, it does demonstrate a shift of interests in Finnish voters. The KESK was challenged by the PS in rural areas in particular.

Finland also shows that a strong connection between large parts of the electorate and the forestry industry has changed the political debate. While the Dutch and Flemish farming communities are initially manageable in number within their countries, Finland's forest farmers are numerous. This sheds light on an inherent conflict between people who work with nature and people for whom nature is primarily a romanticised retreat. This finding is largely in line with existing literature on the rural-urban divide: ‘The differences are most striking for environmental and climate-related aspects of agricultural policy, as well as for its goal of generating economic growth and jobs in rural areas’, as Tosun et.al. conclude.¹⁴⁰

But the battle for the soul of Finland’s forests is only heating up. As European forestry policy have become caught up in environmental,

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climate and economic policies, the forests of Europe will attract special attention. The plans are clear: to meet the EU's official goal of net zero emissions by 2050, the Finnish forests are to serve as a "carbon sink". To replace the traditional business of forestry, the EU plans to make foresters into traders of ETS credits. As Artur Runge-Metzger, director at the European Commission's department for climate action, stated 'At the end of the day, there will have to be a balance between demand and supply for such carbon removals. This will provide an incentive for forestry activities or soil conservation.'¹⁴¹ Indeed, the Commission's 2030 climate and energy framework leaves little room for the wood industry.¹⁴²

7. Conclusion

This paper began with the claim that the European Union has abandoned long-standing principles of its agriculture policies. After the Second World War, food security, affordable food prices and strategic autonomy were primary goals of European agricultural policy. To achieve these aims, the EEC stipulated specialisation, technologisation, farm amalgamations and a common market for agricultural product. The main challenge to this first agricultural regime were the limits of its bureaucracy, as its system of guaranteed prices continuously produced market inefficiencies such as surpluses. Yet, the main goal of food security was achieved spectacularly.

Wishful technocratic thinking has reached its political limits, as farmers and rural communities fight fiercely for their way of life.

Then came the dilution of Europe's traditional agricultural policy. The second agricultural regime evolved towards the new state of multifunctionality. Agricultural policy now had to be economically efficient, fiscally feasible, environmentally sustainable and last, but not least, should contribute to rural development. European agricultural policy reached some economical goals, as the new system of direct payments got rid of many economic inefficiencies. But the introduction of the new goals, especially environmental ones, meant that the stagnating CAP budget now had to finance more obligations than ever before. Therefore, the CAP began to perform mediocly in all departments. New environmental legislation set the seeds of the end of the second agricultural regime.

In the era of the new, third agricultural regime, agricultural policy is merely a tool to achieve climate and other environmental goals. The competing goals are no longer equal, as during the age of multifunctionality, but climate change and environmental protection are paramount. Rural development and security of food supply have been demoted to secondary aims. This is especially highlighted by the fact that climate change is now seen by European decision-makers as the biggest threat to food security. To turn the

argument on its head, food security cannot be the immediate aim of European agricultural policies anymore, as climate action is the prerequisite for all agricultural policies. Thus, many EU measures now actively aim at the reduction of agricultural output.

As this third agricultural regime is still unfolding, we cannot yet evaluate its impact on climate-relevant emissions; we can only see its first economic and political outcomes. The case of the Low Countries highlights how an environmentalist policy introduced in the second agricultural regime can already be enough to make genuine agricultural policies impossible. As Dutch and Flemish livestock farmers struggle to meet ever-increasing nitrogen emission requirements, their business model, their future, becomes untenable. However, the new business model has not arrived yet: because including livestock farming in ETS trading is not possible now, since the new artificial ETS is meeting so many harsh realities on the ground that its expansion in the agricultural sector remains in the far distance, the only immediate measures to reduce emissions are outright bans on nitrogen emitting farms. But this met fierce resistance from Dutch and Flemish farmers, who demonstrated their potential to topple existing governments and to win elections.

Wishful technocratic thinking has reached its political limits, as farmers and rural communities fight fiercely for their way of life. The Finnish case highlights the fact that member states and their politics have begun to learn from experiences such as in the Netherlands. Instead of waiting for overambitious environmental policies to come into effect, they have already begun to fight them at the European level. In this case, public awareness of European politics has only led to the rejection of them in the parliament and at the ballot box. A representation of farmers' interests and the existence of agrarian parties that stood their ground helped with this political success. Although Finland alone could not stop the NRL, it succeeded in pulling many of its teeth that would have made forestry for many Finnish families impossible. If further member states become alarmed, they could stop the third agricultural regime before it gets fully implemented.

8. Illustrations

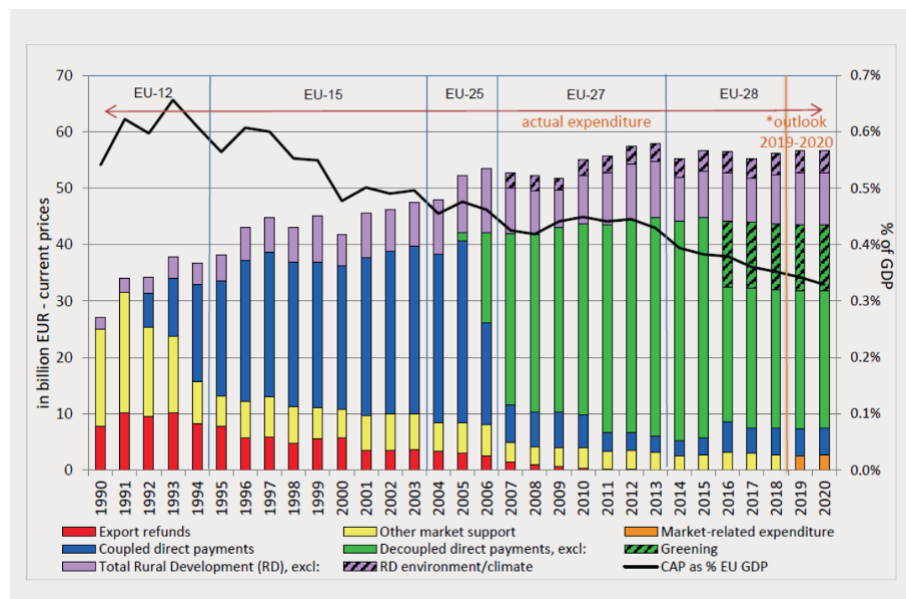


Figure 1. Evolution of CAP payments and as a % of EU GDP

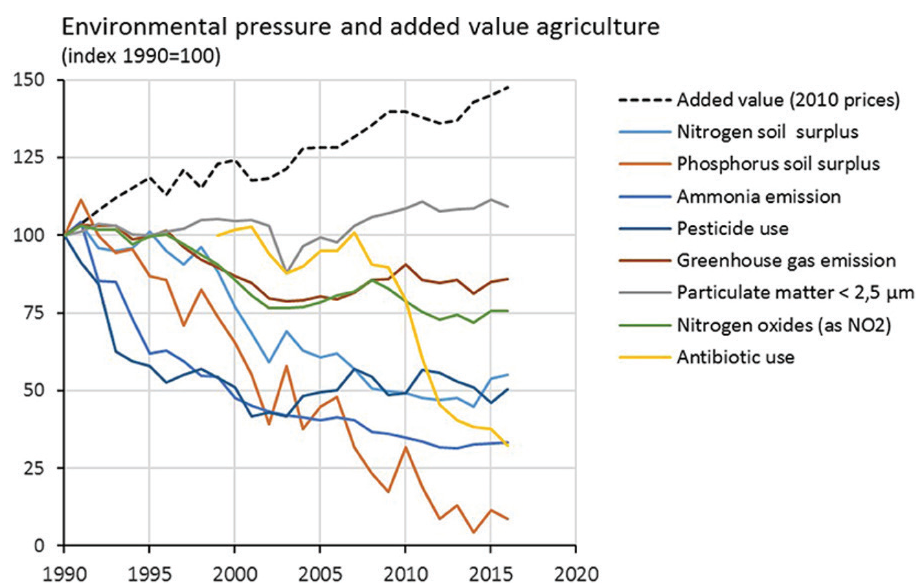


Figure 2: Trends of environmental pressure by agriculture in the Netherlands

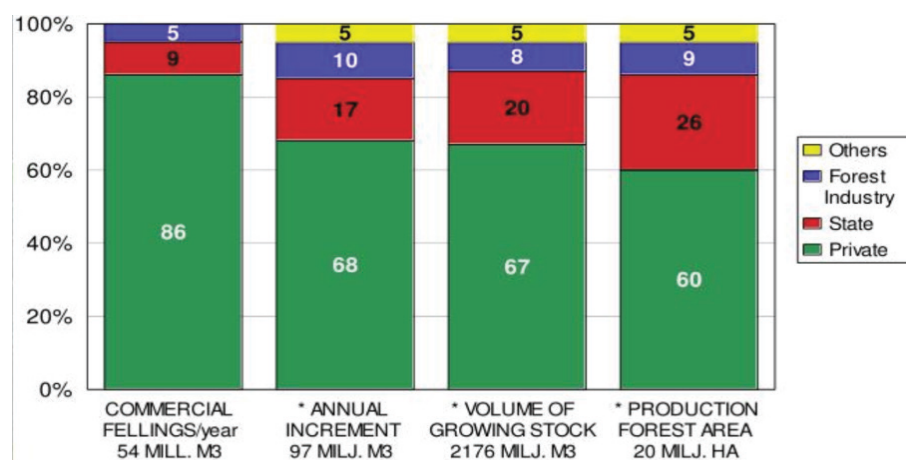


Figure 3: Forest Ownership Structure in Finland (1996-2003)

9. Abbreviations

BBB	BoerBurgerBeweging [Farmer-Citizen Movement]
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CDA	Christen-Democratisch Appèl [Christian Democratic Appeal]
CD&V	Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams [Christian Democrats and Flemish]
CU	ChristenUnie [Christian Union]
D66	Democraten 66 [Democrats 66]
EEC	European Economic Community
EPP	European People's Party
ETS	Emissions Trading System
EU	European Union
FDF	Farmers' Defence Force
KESK	Suomen Keskusta [Centre Party (Finland)]
KOK	Kansallinen Kokoomus [National Coalition Party]
LULUCF	Land Use, Land-use Change and Forestry
NGO	nongovernmental organisation
NRL	Nature Restoration Law
NVA	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie [New Flemish Alliance]
openVLD	Open Vlaamse en Liberal Democraten [Open Flemish Liberal Democrats]
PAS	Programma Aanpak Stikstof [Programmatic Approach to Nitrogen]
PS	Perussuomalaiset [Finns Party]
PvdD	Partij voor de Dieren [Party for the Animals]
S&D	Socialists & Democrats

Abbreviations

SDP	Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue [Social Democratic Party of Finland]
VIHR	Vihreä liitto [Green League (Finland)]
VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie [People's Party for Freedom and Democracy]

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About the author

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Richard is a graduate of the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, where he received a diploma in political science with a major in public administration and minors in economics, political theory, and international relations at the Bavarian School of Public Policy. His master's thesis dealt with the role of the local governments in German federalism. Later he worked as a research associate at the Technical University of Munich, specialising in transportation policy and multi-level governance. His courses at TU Munich included German Federalism and Cases in Policy Analysis. During this time, Richard developed a penchant for small everyday issues, such as train timetables or motorway slip-roads, but many of which harbour unexpected political explosives. Richard is also a proud holder of fishing licences in Bavaria, Upper Austria, Czechia, and Hungary. At MCC Brussels, Richard wants to revive the values that have shaped Europe into the great place she still is.



About MCC Brussels

At a time of unprecedented political polarisation, MCC Brussels is committed to providing a home for genuine policy deliberation and an in-depth exploration of the issues of our time.

MCC Brussels is committed to asking the hard questions and working with people of goodwill from all persuasions to find solutions to our most pressing problems. An initiative of MCC (Mathias Corvinus Collegium), the leading Hungarian educational forum, MCC Brussels was founded in the autumn of 2022 to make a case for celebrating true diversity of thought, diversity of views, and the diversity of European cultures and their values.

There has been no declaration, troops are not mobilised, no foreign country is occupied. But the EU is nonetheless at war – with its own farmers.

Under the guise of environmental concerns, European regulation has slowly squeezed farmers – especially livestock farmers – to breaking point. The aim of European policy in the post-War period “never hungry again” seems like a distant memory.

This report examines the transformation of European agricultural policy into a tool of environmental policy. Rather than promoting low prices and productive farmers, agriculture now promotes lowering emissions, reducing nitrogen, rewilding, habitats and a host of other concerns. As part of this transformation, the report traces the outsized influence of environmental ideology and environmental NGOs. Farmers – who play a central role not just in feeding Europe but in Europe’s very identity – have by contrast very little influence in the corridors of Brussels.

But farmers have begun a fightback – and this report illustrates and champions this resistance. It shows that with determination, organisation and public support, the outcome of the silent war on farming is not a foregone conclusion.

The fact that this war is silent – receiving little media attention or sympathetic speeches from European parliamentarians – only makes it more important to understand how we got here. This report is a start in that direction.



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