ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 19.05.2025 | Natasha Foote

A trim too far?

The EU's latest agricultural reform promises to cut red tape. But for many observers, it's cutting corners — particularly on environmental protections

The European Commission has once again reached for the pruning shears, announcing yet another 'simplification' package to cut the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) down to size. But rather than simply trimming deadwood, the EU is again cutting into some of the green shoots still clinging to this increasingly threadbare farming policy.

Presented on Wednesday (14 May), this latest reform package is the second simplification shake-up of the CAP in two years, and the sixth consequential change to the policy since its adoption in 2021.

The Commission says it's cutting red tape, but for many farmers and observers, it's cutting corners — especially on environmental protections.

So, what's in the new package?

The reforms promise reduced bureaucracy, more flexibility for member states, fewer on-the-spot farm checks and simplified payments, especially for small farms. If adopted, organic farmers would be deemed 'green by definition', automatically fulfilling several of the environmental criteria, while farms under 10 hectares would be exempted from certain rules and granted easier access to funding, including receiving up to €50 000 in a lump sum payment.

There are also more changes to key environmental rules, known as 'GAECs' (good agricultural and environmental conditions). GAEC 1, which protects permanent grasslands, could soon allow up to 10 per cent reconversion (double the current cap). GAEC 2 and 4, protecting peatlands and watercourses, would no longer have uniform EU standards — it would be up to member states to decide how to implement them. And perhaps most strikingly, the requirement to align CAP Strategic Plans with broader EU climate and environmental laws would be cut.

The proposal also introduces new crisis payment options in the event of unforeseen circumstances, but these are without meaningful conditions – such as tying them to workers' rights – prompting concerns about weakening protections and fairness across the sector.

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While the EU's Agriculture Commissioner Christophe Hansen insists that this is the 'greenest CAP ever' and will continue in that vein, many aren't buying it. 'This is not simplification: this is deregulation', says Fabrizio De Pascale of the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions. And he's far from the only one. Environmental groups like WWF see this as a rollback of the EU's already fragile green agenda. For the WWF's Giulia Riedo, the Commission is 'dismantling the GAEC system' and 'weakening the green backbone of EU legislation', while the European Environmental Bureau called this an 'erosion of the CAP's climate and nature credibility' which risks 'de-legitimising the entire policy'.

The concern is not groundless. While it does not do away with them entirely, the package chips away at the remaining green conditions, many of which have already been targeted by the previous simplification package. With the proposal on the next reform of the EU farming subsidies around the corner, this also gives a worrying hint at what could be to come in the Commission's 'more carrots and less sticks' approach.

Losing the C in CAP

Moreover, by allowing member states to decide how to apply key environmental protections – and by weakening links to broader climate goals – the EU is increasingly moving away from a unified approach. To take an optimistic view, this could mean that member states are better able to tailor rules to their specific circumstances. But by weakening centralised oversight and letting each country chart its own path, the CAP risks losing its 'C' — its common character.

That may sound like bureaucratic nitpicking, but a truly common agricultural policy is what ensures fair competition and environmental consistency across the bloc. This could lay the groundwork for a fragmented, 27-speed CAP where environmental ambition depends more on national politics than on science or EU strategy.

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The new rules also give member states greater power to tweak their CAP Strategic Plans without needing Commission approval — unless the changes are deemed 'strategic' (i.e., tied to money). While this might speed things up and make national administration's lives easier, it also risks eroding oversight, especially when it comes to environmental and social standards, of a policy worth a third of the EU budget.

And, far from bringing the legislative stability that farmers have been asking for, this moving-goalposts approach to CAP may actually make things more complicated for the long-term planning that farming requires.

Even more troubling is the lack of transparency.

The Commission has offered no formal impact assessment for this package – not on how it affects farmers, nor on the environmental consequences – something that is all too familiar by now to agricultural stakeholders. Instead, estimates of cost savings for farmers (€1.58 billion annually) and national administrations (€210 million) are based on a 'staff working document', full of assumptions and caveats. This is despite the fact that impact assessments are a requirement of the 'better regulation' standards, in place to ensure more evidence-based, transparent and efficient lawmaking.

What's next?

This proposal is far from the final word on the matter. It now heads over to the European Parliament and Council, where the two lawmakers can propose to amend, expand or even dilute the Commission's plans. Environmental NGOs are already urging lawmakers not to let this 'simplification' become a pretext for further environmental backsliding.

What will come out of these negotiations remains to be seen. But one thing is clear: calling this simplification obscures a deeper shift — one that risks weakening the CAP's green ambitions under the guise of reducing red tape.

Cutting back unruly branches can indeed promote healthy new growth. But when you slice into the roots, you risk killing the plant altogether. The EU should tread carefully, or it may find its agricultural policy too weak to sustain either farmers or the environment.



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