

REFORM OF THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY

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In the last few years, your experiences of bird watching in the countryside may not have been as satisfying as before. If your search for skylarks, song thrushes and turtledoves has resulted in gazing at empty skies, it might not be because of your poor bird spotting skills. You are just one of the many people experiencing the biggest problem facing the European countryside today; the massive loss of once common birds, plants, mammals, and insects.

What is the major cause of this environmental catastrophe? Scientific research tells us that changes in farming, encouraged by European policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), are at the heart of this problem. For the past 30 or 40 years, farmers have had little choice but to adopt more intensive farming methods in order to survive. In practice, this means chemicals and heavy machinery united in a crusade to remove anything - insects, weeds, wet areas of ground, hedgerows and trees – that do not contribute to producing food.

The result is before our eyes everyday, especially in the North of Europe: large, square fields clean of weeds and insects and other wildlife; regular rows of fruit and vegetable crops; large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. Intensive farming produces desert-like habitats for wildlife. With few places to nest and little food to feed chicks, farmland birds in the last 20 years have declined seriously in number. The distribution of birds has also changed with some species disappearing from some areas almost completely. The switch from spring-sown to autumn sown cereals has contributed to the decline of the skylark while drainage of land has affected birds such as lapwings. A move from hay to silage making has had major consequences for the corncrake whose noisy, rasping call should be a familiar sound throughout our long summer evenings. Given these changes in farming, we should not be surprised if birds are fast disappearing from our fields and skies? How long would you survive with no food or home?

For once, however, we know what is behind these problems and something can be done about it. The CAP, applied across the whole of the European Union has, by regulating markets and money flow into the countryside, stealthily contributed to the loss of our wildlife. We cannot blame just the CAP; some of the changes in farming would have occurred anyway as a result of the development of new machinery and technologies and changing consumer demands. But the CAP has, for the last forty years, distributed generous handfuls of public money to encourage food production to the extent that we now have more food than we can eat. By focusing on production, the CAP rewards those those farmers who produce the most; to increase production they have adopted farming methods that leave little room for wildlife and have other consequences for the environment such as water pollution and soil erosion. Many farmers have not benefited

from this system as it rewards those larger farmers who produce more. The result is that 80% of CAP money goes to just 20% of all EU farmers.

Evidence that the CAP is a major driver of changes in the countryside is found in a comparison with farmland wildlife in Central and Eastern Europe. There, species such as the white stork, corncrake, great bustard and red-backed shrike are still common, but have almost disappeared from northwest Europe. A breakthrough comparative study on policy and birds, by BirdLife International, has demonstrated that farmers in these countries have helped to conserve many of the birds we have lost, because they haven't "benefited" from CAP incentives to produce. Therefore, the message for us is quite clear. This policy needs to change. If it doesn't, as soon as Central and Eastern European Countries join the EU (the first countries are likely to join in 2004), we will begin to see wildlife systematically wiped out.

This is why BirdLife has begun an EU wide campaign to reform the CAP and needs your help. It is our taxes that pay for the CAP; surely, we should have a say in how this money is spent. For years, our taxes have been used to subsidise the disappearance of traditional landscapes and farming methods. We have subsidised machinery, fuel, chemicals, the drainage of wetlands and the irrigation of crops. Without realising it, our money has been used to change the environment around us and the way in which our food is produced.

Using subsidies in this way has also led to overproduction of food. EU stores and freezers are now home to hundreds of thousands of tonnes of milk powder, meat, butter and grains that consumers don't need. Surpluses that cannot be stored indefinitely, like tomatoes and fruit and vegetables, are wastefully destroyed. But while the freezers of Europe are bulging with unsold produce and we pay the electricity bills needed to store it, incentives are still being paid to farmers that encourage them to produce more. All this is at the expense of the environment.

The question is, 'how much longer should we continue to pay for an empty countryside no longer able to provide what people really want - safe food, wildlife and preservation of our landscape and cultures?'

If you feel like us that farming should get public support, but in a different and more balanced way, and that your money could be better spent to deliver what you most cherish, you will have ways in future to voice your concern.

The European Commission has now come up with a proposal that would start addressing all these problems. They want to stop paying subsidies for production but help farmers incomes and encourage their entrepreneurial skills in ways that won't destroy the environment. Some of the money would pay for schemes that encourage farming methods which are sympathetic to the needs of birds and other wildlife. Some money would help farmers convert to organic production or improve welfare standards for farm animals.

This new proposal, which BirdLife fully supports, has been dismissed by some Agriculture Ministers, despite the fact that the need for radical reform has been clear for decades. Many countries are still dragging their feet on the reform issue. This is because much is at stake with the CAP spending half of the EU budget – some 40 billion Euros each year. Those countries and farmers who benefit from the current system – albeit a minority – have political influence and block reforms that would result in a fairer redistribution of money. However, as taxpayers and consumers, we should have the right to suggest how our money should be spent in future.

By voicing your concerns now to politicians and decision makers, the sooner we can all hope to see good farming practice that will put birds and other wildlife back in the countryside. So next time you head out for a walk and scan the fields and hedgerows with your binoculars the chance of seeing your countryside favourites will be that much greater.