

Background paper

Agriculture and sustainable water management

Introduction

The global importance of agriculture and water is evident in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely sustainable water management (SDG6) and sustainable agriculture (SDG2). The link between agriculture and water-related objectives has been addressed at EU level in the evolving EU law: (a) The 1991 Nitrates Directive had a measurable effect on the reduction of nutrient pollution from agriculture; (b) The 1998 Drinking Water Directive (DWD) laid down minimum health standards for water intended for human consumption, including as regards pesticides and nitrates (c) The 2000 Water Framework Directive (WFD) set 2015 as the deadline to achieve good water status, covering water quality and quantity objectives; (d) the 2006 Groundwater Directive took on board the DWD pesticide and nitrate standards, and the 2008 Environmental Quality Standards (EQS) Directive set EQS for several pesticides in surface waters; (e) The 2009 Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive was introduced to reduce the risks from pesticide use to human health and the environment. All these must work in concert to ensure that farming is environmentally and economically sustainable while contributing to the achievement of good status of water bodies as defined by the WFD.

The proposal for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post 2020 strengthens its level of ambition as regards environmental and climate protection, in response to EU commitments as well as public demand. It also seeks to put more emphasis on knowledge transfer and innovation while making the policy simpler to implement. There is also a new emphasis on giving Member States more responsibility and flexibility to design their own implementation strategies better suited to local conditions and needs. This should maximise their contribution to Union objectives.

The proposed CAP regulation contains better links with the WFD objectives – “...each CAP Strategic Plan should take account of environmental and climate legislation where appropriate and national plans emanating from this legislation should be described as part of the analysis of the current situation ('SWOT analysis').” In addition, enhanced conditionality links CAP support to compliance by beneficiaries with basic standards concerning the environment, climate change, public health, animal health, plant health and animal welfare. For the CAP Strategic Plan, “investments in irrigation which are not consistent with the achievement of good status of water bodies, (*as laid down in the WFD*), including expansion of irrigation affecting water bodies whose status has been defined as less than good in the relevant river basin management plan” are ineligible. At the same time, the fruit and vegetable sectors shall develop, implement and promote methods of production respectful of the environment, with a particular focus on water.

Innovations in how CAP funding is used also reflect the increased environmental ambition of the CAP including the achievement of good status in water bodies. Each Member State will have to offer eco-schemes, by definition fully focused on climate and the environment, to support farmers in going

beyond the mandatory requirements, funded with a share of their national direct payments' allocations. Moreover, at least 30% of each rural development national allocation will be dedicated to environmental and climate measures. In addition to the possibility to transfer 15% between pillars, Member States will also have the possibility to transfer an additional 15% from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 for spending on climate and environment measures (without national co-financing). Finally, Member States will continue to be able to use their rural development budget to fund a range of other types of support, which are very relevant for the environment and climate - such as funding for knowledge transfer, eco-friendly investments, innovation and co-operation.

Challenges

The EEA's State of Water Report 2018 and the Commission's ongoing assessment of Member States' 2nd River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) suggests that agriculture continues to be a significant pressure on surface and groundwater in most River Basin Districts in the EU, through diffuse pollution and over-abstraction. The diffuse nature of agricultural pressures on water body status and the large number of actors involved (farmers, agricultural contractors, farm workers, agri-supply companies etc.) make this a particularly challenging problem to address.

Only about half of the Member States have performed a gap analysis in terms of load reductions for nutrients and pesticides for their second cycle RBMPs, following the Commission recommendation from the first cycle. For those who have not yet carried out such an analysis, it remains unclear how the selected measures will contribute to achieving good status. Member States need to monitor closely whether the objectives are likely to be achieved. This includes investigating the causes of possible failure and establishing any necessary additional measures.

The effectiveness of Nitrates Action Programmes (Nitrates Directive) and Programmes of Measures (WFD) depends on better coordination of national/regional sectoral administrations (e.g. agriculture, water) to develop an approach to nutrient management that can secure environmental objectives in a cost-effective manner, especially in nutrient 'hotspots' that originate from intensive agricultural production. Good nutrient management on farms remains one of the most challenging measures to implement. This is why the proposed CAP Regulation contains a Farm Sustainability Tool for nutrients (FaST). Mandatory for all farmers, FaST is conceived to be an application for mobile devices, accurate, easy to understand and easy to implement, facilitating optimum production, thus improving financial returns while minimising risk to the environment. FaST has significant potential for improving current nutrient management practices, benefitting farmers and water.

The WFD requires Member States to take measures to restore the sustainability of water abstraction, by ensuring the review and updating of permits, and the inspection and enforcement of 'uncontrolled' or 'unauthorised' abstractions; however, in many Member States these measures are not well implemented.

Water pricing policies that do not incentivise farmers to use water efficiently are still in place in several Member States, due mostly to lack of metering and volumetric pricing.