

Racing towards nature positive farming

The renewable energy revolution has restored the energy sector's dynamism and connected social, commercial and environmental needs. Can nature positive agriculture drive a similar change, and create a system that is better for farmers and food buyers?

An ambitious target for EU agriculture should help to focus the energy of millions of farmers across Europe. But, argues Rupert Simons, the next agricultural revolution must also secure greater commitment from the private sector.

Agriculture in Europe is at a crossroads. From the 1950s to the 1980s, food security was the priority, increasing yields to overcome Europe's historical food shortages and dependence on imports. In the 1990s, the focus shifted to income support: how to allow farmers to stay on the land while high productivity and globalisation kept food prices low. Now, faced with the threats of climate change and biodiversity loss, the challenge is to tackle the farming system's environmental and social costs, as well as providing healthy food for people at all income levels.

But how do we make it happen? Reports from organisations like the [Food and Land Use Coalition](#), the [Institute of European Environmental Policy](#), [IPES-Food](#), [IDDRI](#) and even the [EU Parliament's research service](#) all make similar recommendations. A shift to plant-based diets would reduce the demand for land, with more sustainable and regenerative approaches to the land that remains under production. Rural communities will need enhanced support, as food demand and climate conditions change, and different knowledge, practice and investments will be needed

However, the debate on reforming the Common Agricultural Policy showed how hard it is to build consensus. Some [farmers' organisations](#), scientists and agribusiness companies have challenged the 'Farm to Fork' targets, such as reducing the use of synthetic inputs and agrochemicals. Even those who support the reforms disagree about how to get there.

Go back ten years or more, and a similar debate raged about energy. How would renewables ever provide enough power to a densely populated, and cloudy, Europe? Now the debate is being won, more clearly every day, by renewables. Since 2008, the amount of solar power installed in Europe has increased by a factor of 15. By 2025, coal-fired power will have been shut down in France, Italy and the UK, and overtaken by renewables worldwide. Most importantly, wind and solar are now cheaper than fossil fuels, and their costs keep going down as investment pours in.

What will it take to see that excitement in agriculture? Most of the technologies already exist: from agroecology, regenerative farming to precision proteins, the next agricultural revolution will involve better data and more diversity, on and off-field. A longer-term perspective from food buyers would help: more farmers will invest in soil and nature if their commercial partners support them on the journey. So would a wider policy perspective. Our wellbeing ultimately depends on ecosystem services, such as like storing water and carbon. Farmers should get paid fairly for them, as well as for the food they produce.

We suggest the EU should set itself a target: make agriculture 75% nature positive by 2030. A nature positive system aims to restore soil while ensuring sustainable, affordable and available food, while

creating space for nature and biodiversity on and off the farm. Achieving this model requires unleashing the energy of millions of farmers across Europe who are held back by short-sighted commercial models and farm support programmes. The Green Deal identifies these problems, but addressing them will require a greater commitment from the private sector than anything we have seen before. Inspired by the renewable energy revolution, we believe it must be possible to create a system that is better for farmers and food buyers – and that the only way to do so is to start now.

On 10 March, SYSTEMIQ and partners including IUCN and One Planet Business for Biodiversity (OP2B) are looking forward to discussing a vision for the EU agriculture sector at the [Forum for the Future of Agriculture](#). We will be joined by leading nature positive farmers, industry representatives and policymakers. The event is open to all and you can register [here](#).