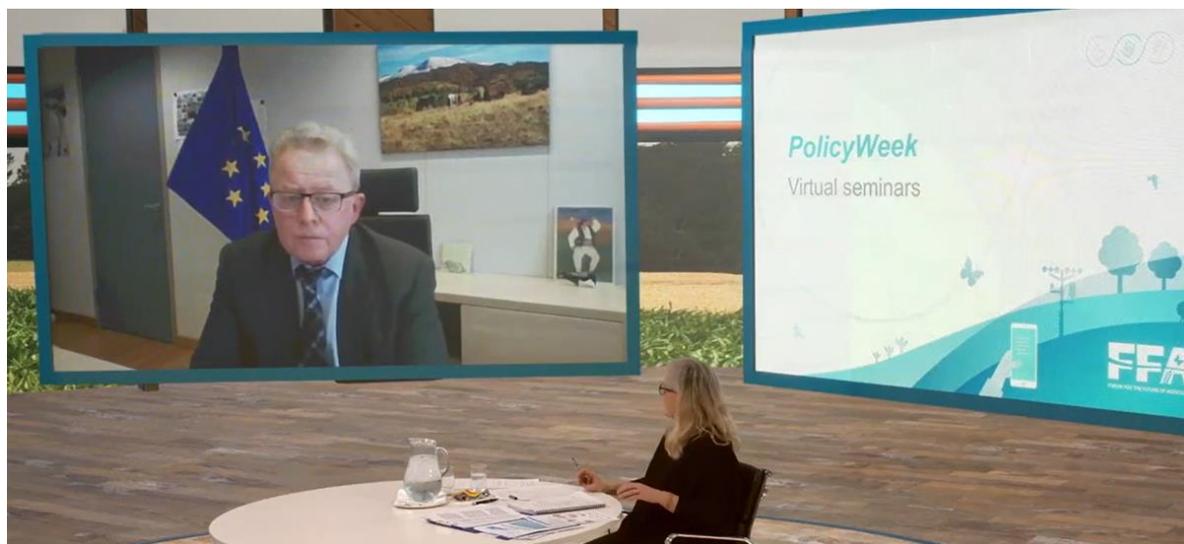


Will the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) deliver for society?

The new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) comes during a pandemic and with high expectations; greater flexibility for Member States, integration with the Green Deal and Farm to Fork, and sustaining the European countryside. Can it deliver on such different expectations? This was the main question being posed at the afternoon session on March 16, 2021, hosted from the Forum for the Future of Agriculture (FFA2021) studio.



Opening the session, Janusz Wojciechowski, Commissioner for Agriculture, stressed that the CAP is already delivering for society. He pointed to its role in food security, supplying high quality, affordable sustainably produced food, even during the pandemic. It helps to protect the environment, climate, biodiversity and animal welfare. Its rural development programme counters depopulation by supporting jobs and economic activity in the countryside.

The farm to fork and biodiversity strategies will increase these contributions. Reform of the CAP will allocate, through eco-schemes, specific funding to environmental and climate measures. Agriculture and rural areas are eligible for finance from the EU's pandemic recovery and resolution programmes. "This is the value the CAP delivers, not only for farmers, but for society."

Frédéric Lambert, French Ministry of Agriculture, described France's preparations for the reforms. Governments have flexibility to adapt measures to local needs, but overall European ambition, particularly for the eco-schemes, should not be watered down, he insisted.

France pressed for the eco-schemes to be mandatory within a common framework, with ringfenced finance and a transparent procedure for their adoption by all EU governments. "This is a way to have a sort of harmonisation in ambition of national measures," he explained. The government is consulting widely on its strategic plan and setting concrete targets ranging from organic farming to replanting of hedges.



In the panel discussion, Professor Allan Buckwell, RISE Foundation Research Director, was pessimistic about the CAP reforms. He described the policy as locked into a “structure set up over two decades ago”, failing to “deliver the environmentally public goods only farmers can supply or help rural diversification”.

He argued that greening and eco-schemes should be moved from the annual pillar one payment structure to the multiannual rural development programme. He called on the Commission to hold governments to high ambitions, concluding: “More change is going to be required and we need to be ready for the 2027 reform.”

Elsi Katainen, MEP, Vice-Chair of the Committee of Agriculture and Rural Development, was more positive, but pointed out that the details of national policies would only be clear once EU policymakers have adopted the basic legal texts.

She noted that the green deal targets focus on 2030, while those for the CAP on 2027. With both “the economic, social and environmental dimensions must be in balance” to achieve their objectives. While supporting free trade, she believes imports must meet the EU’s high standards.

Monika Nebeská, Chairwoman of the Board, Agricultural Cooperative Vřestary, brought the perspective of 25 years’ cooperative farming in the Czech Republic. Her philosophy is to build a strong environmentally conscious community to use farming to better itself and the surrounding world. “We do this not because we have been told to, but because we believe this is the right thing.”

She confessed concern at the impact of CAP reform with its high ambitions and the absence of an impact assessment on her country’s strategy. The targets, she believes, “will lead to a significant drop in agricultural production, exports and farmers’ incomes”.

Jeremy Wates, Secretary General European Environmental Bureau, criticised the CAP proposals and the current negotiations. These reflect a “disconnect with the science for climate change, biodiversity and pollution”. In the long term, “the farming sector will be in the front line of the losers,” he predicted.

He called for legally binding, time-bound and measurable environmental targets backed with public spending to reflect the new priorities, and stronger public involvement in the strategic plans.

Wrapping up the discussion, Commissioner Wojciechowski emphasised: “Farmers are not the problem. We need to see them as part of the solution.”