



NBSOIL

Nature-Based Solutions
for Soil Management

Protecting Europe's Soils: Assessing the Future Common Agricultural Policy's Commitment to Soil Health

Policy Brief

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1 Key Policy Recommendations

- The farm stewardship framework must be strengthened as the environmental baseline of the CAP.
- Coupled Income Support should be gradually reoriented and limited to production systems and practices that provide tangible environmental benefits, such as low-input crop rotations, extensive livestock management, or drought-resilient practices.
- In line with the Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025), the new CAP should move decisively from conditions to incentives by strengthening AECAs as the main vehicle for rewarding performance.
- A dedicated environmental ring-fence should be restored to safeguard resources for soil, climate, and biodiversity objectives.

2 Context of the Issue

As the European Union prepares for the next programming period of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the protection and restoration of soil health stand out as key priorities for ensuring the long-term resilience of Europe's food systems.

Healthy soils sustain agricultural productivity, climate stability, water regulation, and biodiversity. Yet across Europe, over 60% of soils are in poor condition, degraded by erosion, compaction, contamination, and organic matter loss (EC, 2021; EC, 2023).

The Soil Monitoring and Resilience Directive (SMRD) adopted in 2025 underscores the scale and economic implications of this challenge, estimating that soil degradation costs the Union tens of billions of euros annually.

At the same time, enhancing soil health generates tangible benefits for productivity, biodiversity conservation, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, water regulation, and ecosystem resilience and contributes to climate change adaptation and mitigation (Council of the EU, 2025).

The Evolving Policy Context

Agriculture remains both a key user and a major influencer of soil resources. Intensive practices have contributed to soil degradation, biodiversity loss, and greenhouse gas emissions (EEA, 2024), while also exposing farms to reduced fertility and climate vulnerability.

The CAP has long aimed to balance production and environmental protection, yet evaluations have highlighted persistent difficulties in linking public support to environmental performance (EEB et al., 2025; ECA, 2024).

The European Commission's proposal for the post-2027 CAP, published in July 2025, therefore arrives at a pivotal moment (EC, 2025b,c). Building on the Vision for Agriculture and Food (EC, 2025a), which announced

a shift “from conditions to incentives,” the proposal offers a first indication of how agricultural policy may evolve to address soil and ecosystem challenges within the broader European Green Deal framework.

Structure of the Proposed Green Architecture

The new proposal introduces a restructured green architecture, reducing the existing three-tier system (conditionality, eco-schemes, and agri-environment-climate measures) to two levels:

- a **compulsory farm stewardship framework**, and
- **voluntary agri-environment-climate actions (AECAs)**.

In this design, the farm stewardship framework replaces current Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAECs) with six “protective practices” covering broad thematic areas. These practices aim to protect soils against erosion and maintain soil organic matter and carbon-rich soils, among other objectives. However, the formulations remain general and open to interpretation, allowing Member States wide discretion in defining “site-specific conditions” or “sensitive periods.”

While flexibility enables adaptation to local contexts, recent experience suggests that such discretion can lead to uneven implementation and reduced environmental effectiveness (EC, 2023a; ECA 2024).

The challenge for policymakers, both at European and national level, will be to ensure that simplification does not translate into lower ambition or undermine the environmental progress achieved over previous CAP reforms.

Environmental Compliance and Oversight Mechanisms

The proposal classifies all support under farm stewardship as compliant with the “do no significant harm” (DNSH) principle. However, the framework offers limited clarity on how compliance will be verified. Member States are required to establish penalty systems, but the new approach significantly reduces administrative requirements, exempting holdings under ten hectares from controls and allowing broader discretion in checks and sampling (Matthews, 2025). While these changes aim to reduce bureaucracy, they also weaken assurance mechanisms ensuring that CAP funds effectively prevent soil degradation or biodiversity loss.

The balance between simplification and accountability will therefore be critical in determining the environmental credibility of the new CAP.

Financial Structure and Incentives

The financing framework proposed for the post-2027 CAP represents one of its most significant innovations. It merges most types of interventions under a single CAP Fund, combining what are currently (CAP 2023-2027) Pillar I (direct payments) and Pillar II (rural development) resources.

This integration aims to enhance flexibility but also creates direct competition between income support, coupled payments, and agri-environmental measures within a limited budget.

► Distribution of Support

Within this single envelope, area-based income support remains the dominant component, though the proposal introduces degressivity and capping mechanisms to promote fairness. Payments would be gradually reduced above a certain threshold and capped for very large farms.

These changes are positive steps toward redistributing funds, but their effectiveness will depend on the thresholds ultimately set by Member States and on whether the savings generated are redirected toward measures that are more clearly linked to environmental outcomes.

► Expansion of Coupled Income Support

A significant structural change is the introduction of mandatory Coupled Income Support (CIS), with its ceiling raised from 13% to 20% of the total budget. While intended to stabilise key sectors, CIS remains largely directed toward livestock production, which exerts considerable pressure on soils and ecosystems. Expanding this instrument could therefore reduce the share of funding available for climate- and environment-related measures unless carefully targeted toward low-input or extensive systems.

► Financing of Environmental Interventions

The merger of eco-schemes and agri-environment-climate measures (AECMs) into a single category of Agri-Environment-Climate Actions (AECAs) alters the logic of environmental support. Under the current CAP, eco-schemes are fully EU-financed and mandatory for Member States, while AECMs receive only partial EU co-financing (typically 20–25%). In the new framework, AECAs would require a minimum 30% national co-financing rate across all Member States.

This modification shifts more responsibility to national budgets, potentially discouraging ambitious environmental programming, particularly in countries with limited fiscal capacity.

Furthermore, no environmental measure would be fully financed by the EU, weakening the incentive for Member States to maintain or scale up voluntary agri-environmental schemes.

► Ring-Fencing and Budget Competition

Unlike several other interventions, such as CIS, young farmer schemes, or social conditionality measures, AECAs are not ring-fenced within the CAP budget.

The removal of the previous minimum allocations (25% of Pillar I for eco-schemes and 35% of Pillar II for environment- and climate-related measures) means that funding for soil protection and biodiversity restoration will depend entirely on Member States' policy choices.

Projections suggest that, depending on per-hectare payment levels, area-based income support could absorb between 45% and 83% of total resources (Matthews, 2025). In this context, the competition for funding is likely to favour politically less sensitive instruments, such as income support, over long-term environmental commitments.

Support for Transition Pathways

A notable element of the proposal is the possibility to support farmers undertaking a “voluntary transition toward resilient production systems”, including conversion to organic farming or extensification of livestock. This represents a more systemic approach to agri-environmental support, moving beyond isolated practices.

However, without dedicated funding or advisory mechanisms, the potential of these measures to drive large-scale transitions remains uncertain.

3 Policy Recommendations

To ensure that the post-2027 CAP effectively contributes to a sustainable, resilient, and fair food system, several strategic adjustments are required. These recommendations draw on the analysis above and on evidence from NBSOIL activities assessing the relationship between CAP design and soil-health outcomes.

1. Target Income Support to Environmental and Social Performance

While degressivity and capping are steps toward fairness, the persistence of area-based payments continues to reward land ownership rather than environmental contribution (Guyomard et al., 2024). Future income support should prioritise farms delivering ecosystem services, including High Nature Value systems.

- The farm stewardship framework must be strengthened as the environmental baseline of the CAP.
- The six “protective practices” proposed in Annex I should be made more specific and outcome-oriented, with clearer requirements for the protection of soil health.

Linking support to measurable soil-health, climate, and biodiversity indicators would ensure that public funding yields public goods.

2. Redesign Coupled Income Support

- Coupled Income Support should be gradually reoriented and limited to production systems and practices that provide tangible environmental benefits, such as low-input crop rotations, extensive livestock management, or drought-resilient practices.

Making CIS mandatory and expanding its budget ceiling risks diverting scarce resources from more effective agri-environmental actions (Hart and Baldock, 2025). A reduction in mandatory interventions could preserve flexibility for Member States to pursue higher environmental ambition.

3. Make AECAs the Cornerstone of the CAP's Green Architecture

In line with the Vision for Agriculture and Food (2025), the new CAP should move decisively from conditions to incentives by strengthening AECAs as the main vehicle for rewarding performance.

AECAs should prioritise measurable outcomes - such as improved soil structure, organic-carbon content, reduced erosion, reduced nutrient runoff, improved water infiltration capacity, enhanced landscape heterogeneity, increased soil biodiversity - and focus on transitions to resilient production systems, including organic farming, agroecology, and extensive livestock models. These schemes require dedicated funding and independent advisory services to help farmers design and implement credible transition plans (Matthews 2025).

4. Reinstate an Environmental Ring-Fence and Strengthen EU Financing

A dedicated environmental ring-fence should be restored to safeguard resources for soil, climate, and biodiversity objectives.

At least half of total CAP expenditure should progressively support environment- and climate-related measures, in line with recommendations of the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture (EC, 2024).

To ensure coherence and equity across Member States, a significant share of environmental spending should again be fully financed by the EU, reducing disparities linked to fiscal capacity. A no-backtracking clause should prevent Member States from lowering current spending levels for these priorities (Hart and Baldock, 2025).

5. Link Spending to Verified Environmental Outcomes

Environmental credibility depends on evidence. The CAP's monitoring framework should integrate impact indicators already developed under other EU legislation, such as soil-health metrics from the SMRD (Council of the European Union, 2025) and nitrogen-balance indicators from the Nitrates Directive (Council of the European Union, 1991).

The current method used to track climate and environmental spending relies on the application of fixed 'climate markers' to different types of CAP expenditure. As a result, 40% of area-based income support is automatically counted as climate-related spending, even though these payments are not tied to demonstrable improvements in soil health, biodiversity, or emissions reduction. This inflates reported climate and environmental expenditure without guaranteeing real outcomes, a practice widely criticised as a form of greenwashing. Only spending demonstrably linked to improvements in soil condition, biodiversity, or emission reduction should qualify as climate or environmental expenditure (WWF EU et al., 2025).

4 Concluding Note

The post-2027 CAP proposal offers an important opportunity to realign Europe's agricultural policy with its environmental commitments. Achieving this alignment will depend on how resources are structured and targeted, on how performance is measured, and on how accountability is maintained across Member States. Strengthening the CAP's financial incentives, monitoring framework, and progressive ambition is essential if Europe is to secure healthy soils and sustainable food systems for future generations.

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About this policy brief

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