



Supporting sustainable plant-based production in the EU



We cannot meet the Paris Agreement commitments without reducing emissions from animal agriculture. People are already changing their diets, presenting an environmental and economic opportunity for EU agriculture.

A broken food production system

The EU's food system needs a fundamental shift in production. It delivers food to the consumer at low prices, but this comes at the expense of most other objectives. The system is environmentally unsustainable, energy-intensive, highly concentrated, and often fails to support good jobs.

While every sector of the economy is making moves to lower its inputs and emissions, the agriculture sector lags behind. It is the sector with the third highest greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, accounting for 10%¹ of the European Union's total, 70% of which come from animal farming.² Animal agriculture also leads to ammonia and nitrate pollution from wastes, comparatively high water use, and demand for imported feed crops that require a huge land area and are the leading cause of Amazonian deforestation.

All these factors should be taken into account when assessing the environmental benefits of shifting towards plant protein crops and away from our dependence on animal proteins.

Public money for public benefit

According to DG for Agriculture and Rural Development 37% of total EU farming income comes from subsidies. If we are to put the environment at the centre of agriculture policy, we need a drastic shift in the way farmers are supported, and the environmental costs of animal farming must be reflected in the costs of production.

There is potential for more widespread EU cultivation and consumption protein crops and public money should support this because of their positive contribution to public health and low environmental impact. Farmers willing to move out of animal farming into more environmentally friendly, ethical land management practices, must be given financial support to do so.

Benefits of growing plant proteins

Protein crops – plants with high levels of natural proteins such as peas, beans and lentils – could bring huge benefits to EU food and agriculture. Protein crops are frequently highlighted as a solution to the wide-ranging demands placed on EU farming with the United Nations General Assembly and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) declaring 2016 International Year of Pulses.

Unfortunately, the cultivation of these crops in the EU continues to be very limited. As reported in a study conducted by the DG for Internal Policies of the European Parliament in 2013, protein crops are grown on 1.8% of European arable land. Additionally, only 11–15% of peas and 9–14% of fava beans grown are now used for human consumption,³ the majority are used as animal feed instead, with much lower efficiency. Pulses are nitrogen-fixing crops, taking their nitrogen from the air and depositing it in the soil. This reduces their requirement for synthetic nitrogen fertilisers. Using pulses to cut synthetic fertiliser use could reduce GHG emission from EU agriculture by 25%.⁴

¹ Eurostat, (2019), Greenhouse Gas Emission Statistics – Emission inventories. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/1180.pdf>

² European Commission (2020) A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-annex-farm-fork-green-deal_en.pdf

³ Directorate General for internal policies – Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies, (2013), The environmental role of protein crops in the new common agricultural policy. Retrieved from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/JOIN/2013/495856/IPOL-AGRI_ET\(2013\)495856_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/JOIN/2013/495856/IPOL-AGRI_ET(2013)495856_EN.pdf)

For consumers, pulses can contribute to a healthy diet through their high protein content, and as a good source of iron and fibre. EU diets should be sustainable, healthy, affordable and ethical, and it is clear that protein crops can support these objectives. European agriculture and food policies should encourage greater consumption and production of plant protein and build up a consistent policy framework to create synergies between all actors in their supply chains.

EU political context

In 2018 the European Commission issued a report on the development of plant protein in the European Union. The aims of this report were to review the supply and demand situation for plant proteins and to explore possibilities to further develop their production.⁵ Prior to this report's publication, the European Parliament acknowledged all the benefits of plant protein crops and encouraged to scale up their production.⁶

Given these environmental and health benefits of plant proteins, and the context of the European Green Deal, they should be considered a high priority for EU policy makers. The following recommendations build on the Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F) and suggest changes to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the next programming period 2021-2027.

The Farm to Fork Strategy⁷

The Farm to Fork Strategy paves the way for a more sustainable and healthy eating diet in an environment-driven farming production system. Nonetheless, the F2F could be improved to ensure a successful implementation of the European Green Deal and to make Europe the first climate-neutral region by 2050.

The first highlighted element is diets. The European Commission emphasises the important role of improving diets in order to reduce the cases of non-communicable diseases (e.g. cardiovascular diseases, cancer, type 2 diabetes and obesity). However, the F2F fails to provide EU citizens with healthy dietary guidelines including a recommendation for an increased intake of plant-based proteins and a decrease of animal proteins.

In section 2.3 the F2F Strategy notes that "consumption of whole-grain cereals, fruit and vegetables, legumes and nuts is insufficient". It also notes that 70% of emissions from agriculture come from the animal farming sector. Unfortunately, this is not followed by a proposal for limiting production from the sector in favour and supporting alternatives.

Two tools proposed by the Commission could be used to support a transition in diets:

- Tax incentives could be directed towards specific, sustainable plant-based products in order to reduce their prices and make them affordable. The price of animal products should reflect their environmental externalities (GHG emissions, land use etc.).
- In the legislative proposal for a framework for a sustainable food system that will be published by the end of 2023 listed as an Action in the F2F Strategy, measures should be included to promote protein crops for human consumption.

The Farm to Fork Strategy states that it must be supported by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), there is an opportunity to address this in the reform of the CAP.

⁴ Pérez Domínguez, I. et al, (2016), An economic assessment of GHG mitigation policy options for EU agriculture. Retrieved from: https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC101396/jrc101396_ecampa2_final_report.pdf

⁵ European Commission, (2018), Report from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the development of plant proteins in the European Union, COM/2018/757 final. Retrieved from: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0757&from=EN>

⁶ Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, (2018), Report on a European strategy for the promotion of protein crops – encouraging the production of protein and leguminous plants in the

⁷ European agriculture sector (2017/2116(INI)). Retrieved: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0121_EN.pdf

The future Common Agricultural Policy for the 2021–2027 programming period

We call for the CAP to be a tool for enhancing the production and consumption of plant-based proteins. Considering the impact of current levels of animal farming, on both the environment and public health, the Commission should promote the production of plant-based proteins in Europe, and member states should include this in their Strategic Plans.

The CAP should also promote the use of alternative farming techniques including permaculture, stock-free organic farming and agroforestry. These methods allow for reductions in pesticide and fertiliser use, increased biodiversity and limit the production of GHG emissions.

Considering the “new Delivery Model” of the CAP and its “Green Architecture”, the new CAP has means to support a shift towards a sustainable agriculture in which plant-based protein crops should hold a major position. Therefore, we would like to suggest policy recommendations within the new framework of the CAP:

Under Pillar 1:

- Eco-schemes are direct payments only dedicated to environmental measures which should comply with three objectives: climate change mitigation and adaptation, sustainable development, and protection of biodiversity. Member states are obliged to include eco-schemes in their Strategic Plans while eco-schemes are voluntary for farmers. Eco schemes are not capped and are 100% financed by the EU. These incentives should reward the introduction of human-edible plant protein crops in arable rotations.

- In order to encourage sustainable land use, mandatory coupled support should be set up for nitrogen-fixing leguminous crops, sustainable wood products, agroforestry, fruit and vegetables.
- The farm advisory system (FAS) and the agricultural European Innovation Partnership (EIP-AGRI) should emphasise human-edible plant proteins in research and advice. Building a strong research network is the solution to further develop environment-friendly agriculture practices.

Under Pillar 2:

- Agri-environment-climate measures (AECM) are another payment mechanism in the Rural Development Programme, which is also used on a voluntary basis for farmers aiming at incentivising practices that go beyond prerequisites, but it requires national or regional co-financing. This tool should be used in a complementary way to support plant protein production and supply chain in rural areas. The results-based approach of AECM offers an effective measure to provide financial support in return for the completion of environmental and climate objectives. Pillar 2 should not be used to support animal farming businesses, which make it more difficult for environmental targets and ambitions to be achieved.

These proposals would help the EU lead the way for sustainable, healthy and equitable food and farming systems.



campaigns@vegansociety.com
www.vegansociety.com/growgreen
[@GrowGreenTeam](https://www.instagram.com/GrowGreenTeam)

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