



Policy Brief 2

March 2022



Upgrading the Agricultural Sector
with Skills in Regenerative Agriculture

Status Quo

Intensive Conventional Agriculture is one of the root causes of global warming and biodiversity loss. The spread of urbanization and the intensification of land use for agriculture have contributed considerably to GHG emissions¹, with a consequent increase in biodiversity loss². Forty percent of the EU land area is used for agriculture³, whose intensive practices are identified as a major driver of soil degradation⁴.

The current scenario will worsen without a new approach to agriculture. Farmers' well-being, the preservation of nature and the fight against climate change are deeply interrelated. Consequently, the promotion of a sustainable transition of our food system requires EU policies to be cross-sectoral, and Regenerative Agricultural possesses this wide-ranging approach. The RegAgri4Europe project calls for policies that enable a consistent and firm approach to reshape agricultural systems.

About Regenerative Agriculture

Regenerative Agriculture is a set of principles and farming practices to achieve **soil regeneration and environmental protection**, primarily by increasing **biodiversity and soil organic matter**, and through **soil carbon sequestration**.

The basic principles informing the management of Regenerative Systems are soil regeneration and environmental protection, economical productivity and profitability, human well-being, and positive social impact. As such, Regenerative Agriculture improves upon the foundation of the Ecological Standard, which is mainly concerned with product quality, and imposes a set of supplementary **ethical & quality standards** concerning:

- ❖ Farm Investments, Acquisitions & Waste Management Production, and Distribution Chains
- ❖ Soil Health & Fertility
- ❖ Animal Rights & Welfare, and
- ❖ Farmers' Quality of Life

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These principles can reduce soil degradation and reverse the impact that years of intensive land management caused, keeping farmers' and animals' well-being at heart in a symbiotic system.

However, the current legislative frameworks impede this innovative approach from fully taking hold.

The Importance of a Consistent and Forward-Looking Policy Framework

As highlighted in this project's first Policy Brief, intensive conventional agriculture is one of the root causes of global warming and biodiversity loss. Moreover, 2016 indicators were already showing that over 80% of all EU lands affected by moderate to severe soil erosion were agricultural areas and natural grassland⁵.

Despite this worrying situation, the existing policy frameworks impede Regenerative Agriculture to be adopted at a large scale, as they lack coherence, ambition, and effectiveness.

1. The European Green Deal published in 2018 has certainly motivated the reform of the existing legislative framework and the Commission has been working on new legislative proposals to reach the ambitious goals set. The two core initiatives for agriculture are the Farm to Fork Strategy⁶, which promotes the transition towards a fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly food system, and the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030⁷, which aims to reverse the degradation of the ecosystem. However, apart from the revision of the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive, the Commission has not expressed the intention to pursue other legally binding targets but invited Member States to reach the common targets through their CAP Strategic Plans⁸. Concerning climate change, with the European Climate Law⁹, the EU sets the objective to reach net-zero emission by 2050.

Consequently, proposals to align the existing legislation to the new targets have been published¹⁰, however, the existing EU climate legislative framework will remain almost invariant until 2031.

2. The 2014-2020 CAP failed to support farmers that embark on more sustainable practices such as Regenerative Agriculture, according to different estimations¹¹. Even though it provided policy instruments to favor the transition, the implementation choices made at the national and regional level were short-sighted and prioritized controllability over impact¹². The new delivery model ('National strategic Plans') of the common agricultural policy (2023-2027) significantly reduces the impact that the EU could have in leading the transition towards a climate-, soil- and environment-friendly agricultural system. It is very likely that Member States will prioritize their own objectives, while the existing performance and accountability mechanisms might fall short in promoting the environmental and climate objectives set¹³. Eco-schemes, introduced in the 2021-2027 CAP, and the 'Carbon farming initiative', which wants to promote the 'carbon sequestration by farmers and foresters'¹⁴, are promising tools recently introduced.

In November 2021, the Commission issued the EU Soil Strategy for 2030¹⁵, whose implementation will hopefully overcome the current lack of common definitions, monitoring systems, and objectives on soil protection at the EU level and a new legislative initiative on the soil will be presented by 2023.

In anticipation of this, the RegAgri4Europe project would like to recall that institutions need to support farmers that embark on more sustainable practices like Regenerative Agriculture through policies that act like a 'safety net' to allow them to experiment with new approaches.



Recommendations

The EU legislation needs to be more ambitious to unleash the potential that new agricultural approaches have in contributing to reaching the commitments that the EU has announced. In this regard, the RegAgri4Europe Project formulates the following recommendations:

1. Policies need to be consistent and adopt a holistic approach. They need to be wide-ranging and consider trade, food, agriculture, environment, and climate, which are severely interlinked issues.
2. The EU should set clear objectives and define legally-binding targets that can assure the respect of the commitments undertaken
3. Targets are not sufficient without robust monitoring and safeguard mechanisms. The monitoring systems for soil and GHG emissions needs to be upgraded. The EU, through the new Soil Directive, should also define common definitions for soil health and other soil-related issues.
4. The transition of our food system requires **public support**. The adoption of alternative agricultural practices and models requires significant investments by farmers, and this constitutes an obstacle to the transition. The spread of regenerative agriculture can only be successful through an economic support from European and national institutions. National Governments should use the policy measures that the new CAP provides to help farmers to cover the costs that the transition entail. At the same time, the European Commission should encourage Member States to comply with the recommendations set and ensure that the funds available in the new CAP are invested in regenerative farming practices.
5. Adopting a new approach to agriculture requires **a change of cultural mindset** as well. Farmers need to be equipped with the skills to implement regenerative agricultural practices. Part of the funds should therefore be allocated to training opportunities with experts so that farmers can assimilate the necessary expertise.

The challenges that the EU, and the whole world, are facing require wide-ranging policies able to identify tools and objectives consistent with the needs and challenges that the different sectors will encounter more and more frequently in the coming years. However, policies alone will not contribute to an effective solution if the tools and mechanisms promoted do not set the foundation of a cultural change that reset the existing relationship we have with nature.

An element of reparation, reconstitution, or improvement is central to Regenerative Agriculture. It is more than a technical approach, it is a philosophy, a **holistic approach, and a social movement**, where the farmer is manager and steward of the land. The application at a large scale of this social movement would massively contribute to the current environmental, and consequent socio-economic, problems. However, only a solid policy framework will be able to transform Regenerative Agriculture from a vanguardist approach to agriculture, reserved to some virtuous examples, to a well-known approach capable to reform the agricultural sector.



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RegAgri4Europe in a nutshell

Project Name

RegAgri4Europe -
Upgrading the Agricultural Sector with
Skills in Regenerative Agriculture

Consortium

- CEFE International (Germany)
- Safe Food Advocacy Europe (Belgium)
- Schloss Tempelhof e.V. (Germany)
- Skybridge Partners (Greece)
- Agricultural University of Patras (Greece)
- ACQUIN (Germany)
- AKMI (Greece)

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