The debate over the role of forests in the future Common Agricultural Policy

Key findings from a discourse analysis of actor coalitions

1. Background and objectives

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is possibly the policy of the European Union (EU) that affects European landscapes the most. In the absence of a “common EU forest policy”, it is also influential on forests. Since its introduction in 1962, the CAP has undergone several reform processes, but has also been characterized as resistant to major change. In 2013, inter alia, several “greening” instruments were integrated into the policy to put more focus on environmental aspects. In 2020, the CAP will be reformed once more. This raises the question of what the CAP should look like in the future, and more specifically, how it may (or should) impact Europe’s forests and forest management.

Against this background, this policy brief examines how interest groups during the CAP 2020 reform process put forward their views on the role forests can play in the CAP post 2020. More specifically it addresses the following two questions:

• What coalitions of actors formed during the CAP 2020 reform process on forest-related policies?
• What opportunities and challenges do these coalitions perceive with respect to the role of forests within the future CAP?

The role of forests in the current CAP

In 2000, the structure of the CAP as we know it today was introduced. It is based on two pillars: The first is dedicated to direct payments to farmers. The second pillar, also called the “Rural Development Policy”, aims to support people living in rural areas through improvement of environmental, social and economic conditions. Through the second pillar, landowners can apply for financial support for initiatives that improve the conditions in rural areas, including forest-related activities like “forestry measures”.

2. Key findings

a) Actor coalitions and their main perspective on the role of forests in the future CAP¹

Two main actor coalitions were identified when analysing how interest groups put forward their visions for forests in the future CAP: a “landowner coalition” and a “nature conservation coalition”.

¹The key findings portrayed in this policy brief present a simplified picture of complex interview material. The actor coalitions are not homogenous groups of actors who share the same interpretations on all aspects of the role of forests in the CAP. They have been identified based on shared storylines found in the interview material and do not only consider which interest groups are working together.

Method

The study is based on a document analysis and 12 interviews with key stakeholders of EU-level interest groups, carried out in 2018. It applies a political science theory looking into the importance of political discourses and storylines: When actors debate complex topics such as the CAP, they draw on storylines or narratives as a simplifying way to frame, express and understand a topic. A storyline includes the perceived problem and solution for the topic – in other words, the storyline shows the actor’s opinion on the topic. Coalitions of actors are formed when several actors share the same storylines. Storylines can also be used to influence how other actors interpret problems.
The landowner coalition consists mainly of farmers and forest owners who shared a storyline of forests being multifunctional by delivering various services, such as timber, bioenergy, ecosystem services and mitigating climate change. As forests are essential for making a living for the landowner, these multifunctional uses should be economically sustainable. In the view of the landowner coalition, one of the main problems of the current CAP is the bureaucratic burden that the landowners have to overcome when applying for funding through the CAP. This applies specifically for forestry measures that are characterized by long-term durations and difficult to account for impacts, in contrast to the shorter-term perspectives in farming. This calls, according to this coalition, for the solution to lower administrative burdens as much as possible, and at the same time for recognizing the multifunctional use of forests financially in the CAP.

Similarly, the nature conservation coalition did not see much difference between the two sectors. Intensive forestry is seen as agriculture, and thus harmful to the environment and biodiversity in the EU. This coalition emphasized that agriculture is the main driver of biodiversity decline in the EU and that the CAP is contributing to this negative development. The two coalitions were also divided when it came to their views on nature. The landowner coalition put more emphasis on the importance of nature as a place of production of goods and services, while the nature conservation coalition underlined the intrinsic value of nature as a place for biodiversity to a higher extent. Additionally, the respective coalitions were unified by shared perceptions of their counter-coalition. The landowner coalition perceived the actors in the nature conservation coalition as being economically ignorant or even irresponsible, while the nature conservationists characterized the landowner coalition as being mainly driven by their particular economic interests. Furthermore, the relationship between the actors in the two coalitions was characterised by significant distrust and disagreements over scientific knowledge.

Both coalitions saw this polarization as a factor blocking collaboration between the interest groups of the coalitions. These findings are in line with existing literature on coalition building in EU policymaking, where coalitions of landowners and nature conservationists have also been identified, and distrust between both sides has been described as preventing cross-coalitional collaboration, even if joint interests could be identified.

Reference and further reading
- This policy brief is based on the Master thesis of Camilla Dolriis titled “Coalition formation and perceptions of nature: A discursive struggle over the role of forests in the future Common Agricultural Policy” conducted at Aarhus University, Denmark, in collaboration with the European Forest Institute’s Bonn Office.
The debate over the role of forests in the future Common Agricultural Policy

Key findings from a discourse analysis of actor coalitions

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<th>The two actor coalitions on the role of forests in the future CAP</th>
<th>Landowner coalition</th>
<th>Nature conservation coalition</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Role of forests</strong></td>
<td>Forests are multifunctional: Provider of timber, climate change mitigation, ecosystem services and jobs in rural areas. As forests are an economic basis for living for the land owner, these multifunctional uses should be economically sustainable for the owner</td>
<td>Forests should (mainly) provide ecosystem services and should enhance biodiversity and climate change mitigation. Forests (and the CAP in general) should for public money provide public goods to society</td>
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<td><strong>Relationship between forests and agriculture</strong></td>
<td>Agriculture and forestry are not two competing sectors, but have the same need for e.g. infrastructure in rural areas, even though they provide different services to society</td>
<td>Intensive forestry poses similar threats to environment, biodiversity and the climate than agriculture does</td>
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<td><strong>Problem definitions</strong></td>
<td>Lack of coherent EU forest policy and (financial) recognition of the services that forests provide</td>
<td>The imperative of the CAP to “Feed the world” is wrong and leaves little room to address forest-related issues in the areas of biodiversity, climate change mitigation and other ecosystem services</td>
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<td>Bureaucratic burden going along with forestry measures</td>
<td>The CAP is not providing public goods for public money</td>
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<td>The CAP is not fit for the forest sector and its specific demands</td>
<td>The CAP does not prescribe sustainable forest management criteria</td>
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<td><strong>Solutions</strong></td>
<td>Lower the bureaucratic burden of the CAP and forestry measures, and increase the financial incentives for forest owners to apply for the measures.</td>
<td>CAP money should be linked to (environmental) objectives to ensure that the policy is providing public goods.</td>
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<td>Recognise (financially) the multifunctional use of forests, e.g. through payments for ecosystem services and climate change mitigation</td>
<td>Owners of all types of land-area (not only agricultural land) should be able to receive CAP funding</td>
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<td><strong>Actors</strong></td>
<td>European forestry associations (private and state forest owners), National forestry association, European landowners and farmers, European research organisation</td>
<td>European environmental NGOs, National nature conservation agency</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3. Take home messages

Based on the findings illustrated above, and further information gathered during the interviews, the following conclusions can be drawn in relation to the role of forests in the future CAP:

Opportunities for a better inclusion of forests in the future CAP

The Rural Development Policy can provide a good foundation to address forest specific issues, but needs to improve to meet such expectations

The majority of all actors shared the view that the Rural Development Policy (pillar 2 of the CAP) has potential to positively affect forests and their future management. The nature conservation coalition highlighted its connection to environmental objectives (in contrast to pillar 1), while the landowners were generally supportive of forestry measures in a broader sense. Even though all stakeholders pointed to aspects that would need to be improved, such as the funding basis, bureaucratic procedures or environmental safeguards, all stakeholder groups with an interest in forest issues focussed on this policy.

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The creation of storylines that are convincing to different actor groups at the same time are key to a successful policy approach. When comparing the storylines of the coalitions, two storylines seem to be compatible and (possibly) persuasive across one of the two coalitions: Forests as a provider of ecosystem services and forests as provider of climate change mitigation. While these two major roles of forests are consensual for many, actors still have different views on how these visions should be realised. Suitable compromises could for instance be achieved through coupling the provision of ecosystem services to functioning (financial) incentive systems, to meet the different problem and problem solution perceptions put forward by the two coalitions.

Cross-coalition alliances among the actors can provide new opportunities for an overall greater inclusion of forests in the CAP. Even though the study found that there are two coalitions with the farmers and forest owners on the one side, and the environmental NGOs on the other, there are possibilities for cooperation across coalitions. If actors share a common goal, e.g. payment for ecosystem services provided by forests as mentioned above, working together is possible despite the actors’ different motivations. Cross-coalitional alliances have occurred in past CAP-reforms and might provide leverage to advance inclusion of forest issues under the CAP in general, which one side alone will likely not be able to achieve.

Challenges for a better inclusion of forests in the future CAP
The non-existence of a common EU forest policy makes it difficult to address forests on EU-level. In contrast to agriculture, there is no common EU forest policy approach, but forest issues are tackled by different EU policies, and at the member state level respectively. This constrains options to comprehensively address forests at the EU level, including under the CAP, which is predominantly perceived as an agricultural policy and is deeply rooted in the well organised agricultural policy sector.

EU member states with a strong agricultural or forestry sector have no interest in substantially reforming the CAP. According to the interviews, EU member states with a strong agriculture or forestry sector are not supporting substantial reforms of the CAP towards a larger inclusion of forests. Member states with a strong agriculture sector rely heavily on subsidies from the CAP for their farming sectors, while member states with a strong forest sector do not welcome EU regulation on European forests. Together this results in a shared interest of several EU member states with important primary sectors to not increase the CAP’s contribution to forest issues.

The historical roots and path dependency of the CAP will prevent major change. According to the majority of the actors interviewed, a radical reform of the CAP is unlikely to happen in the near future. The CAP is one of the oldest policies of the EU, and perceived by many as having a key objective for the European population: Food security. The interest organisations representing the agriculture sector are influential in the EU, and as the CAP is the EU policy with the highest budget, there are strong interests at stake when reforming it. However, if forests were increasingly perceived as contributors to climate change mitigation and ecosystem services in the future, this might open new windows to more substantially include forest issues under the CAP, especially since the per-hectare investment needed to generate positive outcomes might be much smaller in forest areas than in agriculture.

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