

ADVISORY LETTER

Ms C.J. Schouten,
Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality
P.O. Box 20402
2500 EK The Hague

Date: 22 mei 2019
Reference: RLI-2019/1194
Cc:

Appendices: 3

Re: Rli advice 'European Agricultural Policy: Working Towards Circular Agriculture'

Dear Ms Schouten,

At your request the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure has considered how to make best use of the common agricultural policy (CAP) in your endeavour to establish a circular agricultural system, and what this means for the Dutch CAP Strategic Plan.

The Dutch government's aim for 2030 is a circular agricultural system with cycles closed at the most local level possible, with the Netherlands leading the field in this form of agriculture. This is an ambitious goal that requires a whole new approach from Dutch farmers and growers, and also from the agribusiness sector, involving radical changes in farm structure, production processes and everyday working practices. It is essential that these changes are viewed as improvements that can be made to farm management and business operations and that offer good prospects for the future. Such an approach will require flexibility and variety. It will be best served by a dynamic national CAP Strategic Plan in which schemes and payments are reviewed annually or otherwise periodically and amended in line with new insights and the progress being made towards circular agriculture.

The proposed new eco-schemes offer just such possibilities. In contrast to the basic income support in Pillar I of the CAP, these schemes can be tailored to match the existing diversity of farm types and farming styles. The different possibilities and priorities of individual farms can best be reflected in an integrated points system based on critical performance indicators that encapsulate the essence of circular agriculture. Forward momentum can be triggered by periodically raising the minimum standards in the indicators.

By 'integrated' we mean that the indicators taken together cover all the relevant environmental and sustainability aspects of circular agriculture and that each indicator contains a minimum standard. The points system can be used for multiple purposes, including private sustainability schemes, certification, quality labels and such like.



From the above, and other considerations, the Council comes to the following recommendations (described in more detail in the attachment to this letter):

[1] Earmark a growing proportion of the Pillar I budget for eco-schemes. Periodically adjust the requirements of the eco-schemes in the light of practical experience and the most recent insights. Use a proportion of the CAP Pillar II budget for initiatives that can serve as a 'breeding ground' for eco-schemes in Pillar I.

The Dutch allocation of EU agricultural funding can be used effectively to support the gradual introduction of circular agriculture by tactically redistributing funds between individual CAP budgets. This is the best approach to take because it accommodates the learning processes involved in the development of circular agriculture. It also allows farmers to choose the most appropriate eco-schemes to help them develop their farms in the desired direction. Research, practical experience and experiments funded from the Pillar II budget will provide input to the advocated gradual introduction of eco-schemes in Pillar I. Initially, 30% of the Pillar I budget can be used to finance eco-schemes; thereafter this percentage can be raised incrementally.

[2] Link the eco-schemes to private sustainability schemes, subject to oversight by an independent organisation.

Linking eco-schemes to existing sustainability schemes will give farmers a stronger and unambiguous incentive to green their operations, encourage the agribusiness sector to make the transition to circular agriculture and increase the effectiveness of government spending. It will also reduce farmers' uncertainty about the size of payments for eco-schemes. In the Commission's proposals these will be annual commitments and so different numbers of farmers will be able to take part each year. As the management and oversight of these schemes will be in the hands of private organisations (accredited and supervised by government), implementation will be lean, bureaucracy kept to the minimum and the possibilities for synergy increased.

[3] For the implementation of the eco-schemes use an integrated points system based on transparent performance indicators that show how much progress the farm is making towards circular agriculture.

Under a points system farmers will be able to choose between different schemes (which may vary from 'entry-level' to more ambitious schemes) according to their specific needs and circumstances. A points system will also allow for annual reviews in which the eco-schemes can be made more ambitious or broadened in scope by setting higher standards or additional priorities (for example on climate-friendly farming), all within the existing system. The government will be responsible for designing the points system and the eco-schemes.

[4] Ensure that agricultural knowledge is available to support the transition to circular agriculture on all fronts: experimentation, the exchange of lessons learned, building knowledge on farming practices and translating this into independent advice to farmers.

It is advisable to review the current agricultural knowledge system against the transition to circular agriculture to identify any knowledge gaps and assess the quality of advice on offer. Specific attention should be given to exploiting the knowledge gained from experimentation and to developing and disseminating independent advice (coaching and supervision) on farming practices for soil improvement, biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation and adaptation. The CAP can

be used to make good any shortfalls so that the agricultural knowledge system is properly equipped to provide the necessary support.

[5] Transfer a substantial sum from the Pillar I budget to Pillar II. Ensure that this amount is at least equal to the reduction in the Pillar II budget proposed by the Commission and that it is sufficient to support the necessary innovations for climate-smart and circular farming.

The Pillar II measures serve not only to drive forward progress with Pillar I policy, but also to provide public services in the field of water and nature and to support the relationship between agriculture and nature in the form of agri-environmental management. Sufficient funds must be available for these services as well, which is why it makes sense to transfer substantial funds from the Pillar I budget to the reduced Pillar II budget.

If the Dutch CAP strategy takes such a dynamic and flexible approach, it can bring about a shift towards circular agriculture within the next seven year policy period. If during this period the momentum behind national policy measures for nature and water management is maintained, the Netherlands will be prepared for the eventuality of further reductions in the CAP budget in future.

Attached to this advisory letter is an explanatory memorandum and two infographics: 'European agricultural policy for circular agriculture' and 'Evolution of the common agricultural policy'.

Yours sincerely, Council for the Environment and Infrastructure,



J.J. de Graeff
Chair



Dr R. Hillebrand
General Secretary

Explanatory memorandum to the advisory letter 'European Agricultural Policy: Working Towards Circular Agriculture'

1 Introduction

Dutch post-war agricultural policy has been highly successful in creating an increasingly competitive, export-oriented agricultural sector producing a wide range of affordable food products. The Dutch agri-food sector now exports products to the value of €90 billion each year, while food imports amount to €60 billion.¹ The figure for exports includes products that are not produced in the Netherlands, such as coffee, margarine, cocoa and oranges. Of the exported domestic agricultural produce, much of the production by the livestock farming sector is dependent on imported animal feed raw materials. Dutch agriculture is therefore deeply embedded in a system of international trade.

Since the 1970s, however, the downsides of increasingly efficient production have slowly but surely become increasingly apparent, primarily in the form of impacts on nature, the environment, public health and more recently on climate and biodiversity. The Dutch government's response to these adverse effects has included legislation on manure and fertilisers and stricter rules on the use of pesticides, but this has not been enough to restore the balance. Both the Dutch government and the European Commission are convinced that a more harmonious relationship between agriculture and nature and the environment is now urgently needed. Measures to improve the sustainability of agriculture are needed to reduce both its climate impacts and its vulnerability to climate change, to conserve and restore biodiversity, improve soil conditions and to increase the resilience of the sector. Moreover, a more sustainable agriculture would be able to count on broader public support.

The downsides are also economic. The emphasis on lowering costs and increasing the scale of production has undermined the resilience of small family farms. In addition, the current income support system (area-based payments) mainly favours large farms, which amplifies income disparities.

European context: the common agricultural policy

Dutch agricultural policy cannot be seen in isolation from the European context within which it operates. The EU's agricultural policy, the common agricultural policy (CAP), has to a large extent made it possible for Dutch agriculture to develop as it has. The European dimension is therefore a key factor in the realisation that changes have to be made in Dutch agriculture.

Across Europe, too, awareness has grown of the disadvantages of an agricultural policy dominated by a drive for increasing efficiency and economies of scale. European self-sufficiency in most of the main agricultural products was achieved or exceeded in the 1980s. Since then, a number of incentives to increase production have been removed in stages and various measures have been introduced to restrict production, such as price reductions and milk quota. The CAP has also been reformed and reoriented towards new social objectives (see Infographic 1, 'Evolution of the common

¹ Dolman, M., G. Jukema & P. Ramaekers (ed.) (2019). *De Nederlandse landbouwexport 2018 in breder perspectief*. Wageningen, WUR/Wageningen Economic Research.

agricultural policy', attached). It now includes measures to improve environmental conditions and foster rural development. However, the policy has had little success in restoring biodiversity and improving soil quality, especially in the Netherlands where production is generally intensive and geared towards international trade.

When the current CAP was drafted, the climate impacts of agriculture were not yet a prominent theme and so in the last policy period little progress has been made on that score. The European Commission's proposals for the next CAP period aim to change that. They are much more oriented towards sustainable agriculture and food production and incorporate rural development, environmental, nature conservation and climate issues. Another new element is that member states will have greater freedom to decide how to use their CAP funding, setting out how they plan to meet the common CAP objectives in a national CAP Strategic Plan.

The Dutch ambition: 'circular agriculture' in 2030

In her recent vision document 'Agriculture, Nature and Food: Valuable and Connected. The Netherlands as a leader in circular agriculture'² the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality has set out the government's vision of establishing a circular agricultural system by 2030. The minister links this concept to objectives for nature, environment, climate, biodiversity, landscape and animal welfare, including the protection of soil quality and reducing the use of plant protection products.

Circular agriculture

There are multiple definitions of the term 'circular agriculture', some rather abstract and some more practical. There are broad descriptions that cover all sorts of phenomena related to, but not synonymous with, closing cycles, such as sustainability, climate, environment and biodiversity. There are also narrower definitions restricted to agricultural land, the raw materials applied to them, the products removed from them and the relationships between the two; or, even simpler, the nutrients applied to and removed from the land. A completely circular agriculture is impossible, as that would require a whole food system approach. The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure follows the line taken in the minister's vision document and adheres to a concept of circular agriculture that meets multiple objectives and which will have to take shape on the farm through the application of critical performance indicators.

The vision document states that agricultural policy measures will have to meet nine criteria. The first criterion is that measures must contribute towards 'closing cycles, cutting emissions and reducing wastage of biomass throughout the whole food system.' The other criteria describe various related objectives, including climate targets, an attractive countryside, the social and economic position of farmers, biodiversity, natural values and animal welfare (see Table 1).

In an explanatory letter of 22 January 2019³ the minister emphasised the need to remain alert to the linkages between the various objectives. She concludes that 'careful use of raw materials,

² Tweede kamer (2018). *Landbouw, natuur en voedsel: waardevol en verbonden. Nederland als koploper in kringlooplandbouw*. Brief van de minister van landbouw, Natuur en Voedselkwaliteit aan de Tweede Kamer van september 2018'. Vergaderjaar 2018-2019.

³ Tweede Kamer (2019). *Beleidsbrief Realisatie LNV-visie 'Waardevol en verbonden'. Brief van de minister van Landbouw, Natuur en Voedselkwaliteit aan de Tweede Kamer van 22 januari 2019*. Vergaderjaar 2018-2019.

resources and biomass should be inseparably linked to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and restoring biodiversity.’ The draft Climate Agreement,⁴ the agriculture minister’s letter to parliament on a Soil Strategy,⁵ the Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery⁶ and the advice of the Commissie Grondgebondenheid (Commission on land-based agriculture)⁷ also set objectives in these areas that are endorsed by the government, civil society organisations and business. This, too, lends support to the importance of coherence between the various objectives in the transition to circular agriculture.

In this advice, all the aspects of circular agriculture are considered as a coherent whole that serves the goals underlying the criteria in the ministry’s vision document. In view of the urgency and importance given to climate and environment by the European Commission, greater priority will have to be given to these topics within this cluster of objectives and criteria. Wageningen University and Research (WUR)⁸ talks of ‘a search by farmers, interested people, companies and researchers for the optimal combination of ecological principles and modern technology.’ This makes it difficult to formulate precisely defined goals for 2030 in advance, although the direction to be taken is clear. According to the minister, steps in this direction are being made by trendsetting businesses that are driving the process forward with innovations, experiments and investments in circular systems: ‘Many more innovations are needed. Crucial to this is sharing the knowledge gained and putting it into practice on the farm.’ Green education is also considered to have a key role to play.

Request for advice and reading guide

Taking note of the European Commission’s proposals for the new, reformed CAP, the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality asked the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure for advice on the following question:

How can the reformed common agricultural policy assist the transition to circular agriculture, and what does this mean for the content of the national CAP Strategic Plan?

The rest of this memorandum is devoted to answering the minister’s question. First, the objectives of the CAP for the period 2021–2027 are set out in section 2. The question of how the national CAP Strategic Plan could link the CAP objectives to the transition to circular agriculture is addressed in section 3. Recommendations are given in section 4, followed by some explanatory remarks (section 5) and concluding observations (section 6).

⁴ Sociaal-Economische Raad (2018). *Ontwerp van het klimaatakkoord*. Den Haag, SER.

⁵ Tweede Kamer (2018). Bodembeleid. Brief van de minister van Landbouw, Natuur en Voedselkwaliteit aan de Tweede Kamer van 23 mei 2018. Vergaderjaar 2017-2018, 30015, nr. 54.

⁶ *Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery; Taking Action for a Richer Netherlands; Together for Biodiversity* (2018). Agrifirm, Boerenatuur and eleven other organizations.

⁷ Commissie Grondgebondenheid (2018). *Grondgebondenheid als basis voor een toekomstbestendige melkveehouderij*. LTO Vakgroep Melkveehouderij, Nederlandse Zuivel Organisatie (NZO).

⁸ Wageningen University and Research (2018). *Kringlooplandbouw: een nieuw perspectief voor de Nederlandse landbouw*. Wageningen, WUR.

2 The common agricultural policy 2021–2027

The new CAP as proposed by the European Commission⁹ gives the member states more freedom than before to decide how and where to invest their CAP funding. The member states are required to draw up national CAP Strategic Plans in which they state what they want to achieve with their own national agricultural policy and how they intend to do that while meeting the overall CAP objectives. In its plan, each member state has to analyse its own situation in a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats).

Objectives

The Commission distinguishes between three general and nine specific objectives. The general objectives are (1) 'to foster a smart, resilient and diversified agricultural sector,' (2) 'to bolster environmental care and climate action' and (3) 'to strengthen the socioeconomic fabric of rural areas.' These general objectives are to be pursued through nine specific objectives. The specific objectives of the CAP display many similarities with the criteria formulated by the agriculture minister for the transition to circular agriculture discussed in the introduction to this advice. The Dutch criteria and the European objectives are listed side by side in Table 1.

The Commission's nine objectives, which are to be pursued under the two pillars of the new CAP, are complemented by a 'cross-cutting' objective, which is not limited to one or other of the two pillars, but for practical reasons has been included in Pillar II. This objective is 'modernising the sector by fostering and sharing of knowledge, innovation and digitalisation in agriculture and rural areas,' to which end use will be made of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). This CAP objective mirrors the priority the minister places on learning from practical experience and the role of education and training in the transition to circular agriculture.

In the next CAP period the focus will shift from rules and compliance to monitoring and rewarding concrete results. Another aim is to simplify the system to reduce the administrative burden.

⁹ European Commission (2018). *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council*. Brussels: European Commission. COM(2018) 392 final, 2018/0216 (COD)

Table 1: Objectives of the CAP and the criteria in the Dutch ministerial vision document

Criteria (Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality)	Agreement	CAP objectives
(1) contribute to closing cycles, cutting emissions and reducing wastage of biomass throughout the food system	++	(e) sustainable development and efficient management of natural resources such as water, soil and air
(2) contribute to sustainable fish stocks without damaging the natural environment		[common fisheries policy]
(3) strengthen the socioeconomic position of farmers and growers in the supply chain	+++	(a) support viable farm income and resilience (c) improve farmers' position in the value chain
(4) contribute towards climate targets for agriculture and land use	+++	(d) contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation as well as sustainable energy
(5) enhance the appeal and vitality of the countryside and contribute to a thriving regional economy	++	(h) promote employment, growth, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, including bio-economy and sustainable forestry
(6) benefit ecosystems (water, soil, air), biodiversity and natural values of the farmed landscape	+++	(e) foster sustainable development and efficient management of natural resources such as water, soil and air (f) contribute to the protection of biodiversity, enhance ecosystem services and preserve habitats and landscapes
(7) contribute to animal welfare (8) contribute to recognition of the value of food and to strengthening the relationship between farmers and consumers	+	(i) improve the response of EU agriculture to societal demands on food and health, including safe, nutritious and sustainable food, food waste, as well as animal welfare
[research, technology and digitalisation tie into Dutch vision]	0	(b) enhance market orientation and increase competitiveness, including greater focus on research, technology and digitalisation
[young farmers deserve 'special attention' but are not mentioned in the criteria]	0	(g) attract young farmers and facilitate business development in rural areas
(9) strengthen the position of the Netherlands as a developer and exporter of integrated solutions for climate-smart and ecologically sustainable food systems	0	

Policy tools

What policy tools does the European Commission propose using to achieve the objectives summarised above? As in the current period, the structure of the CAP for the next period will comprise two pillars:

- *Pillar I* contains payment schemes not only to provide income support to farmers, but also (and more ambitiously than before) as an incentive for sustainable agriculture and food production,

particularly in relation to environment and climate. The European Commission proposes that income support to farmers will depend on the provision of public services in the field of environment, nature and climate.

- *Pillar II* contains interventions relating to other aspects of nature and rural areas. These payments will be made to various recipients and will not be in the form of per-hectare payments. At least 30% of this budget must be dedicated to environmental and climate measures. Fostering innovation is also included in this pillar.

A new element in the Commission’s proposals is the division of Pillar I into a budget for basic income support and a budget for ‘eco-schemes’. The eco-schemes concern agricultural practices at the farm level with ambitious objectives for environment and climate (see Figure 1). Support will be in the form of annual payments and farmers will have to apply each year. Member states will be free to decide how much of their Pillar I budget to spend on eco-schemes, as long as it is more than 0%, but it can also be as much as 100%.

Pillar I		Pillar II
Direct payments per hectare		Interventions for rural development
Basic income support for sustainability	Eco-schemes for climate and environment	Support for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agri-environment-climate management commitments • Natural or other area-specific constraints • Area-specific disadvantages resulting from certain mandatory requirements • Investments • Knowledge exchange and information • Cooperation • Young farmers • Risk management tools
Mandatory. The direct payments are linked to obligations under existing legislation and additional environment and climate requirements: conditionality.	Voluntary participation. Member states decide on content to encourage farmers to go further than the basic requirements.	
Complementary redistributive income support (support will be cut back if the maximum per farm is exceeded) Complementary income support for young farmers (2% of Pillar I budget)		
Cross-cutting objective <i>Modernising the sector by fostering and sharing of knowledge, innovation and digitalisation in agriculture and rural areas, and encouraging their uptake.</i>		

Figure 1. Components of the new CAP

The CAP interventions that could be used to support the transition to circular agriculture consist of three components:

- *Pillar I: Basic income support for sustainability* The ecological effect of these payments is relatively small. Farms must meet the conditionality requirement, which means meeting the statutory management requirements under EU and national law plus additional, more ambitious requirements on climate and the environment designed by the member states. The ‘greening’ system included in the current CAP will be incorporated into the new CAP as part of these basic requirements.

- *Pillar I: Eco-schemes* It makes sense to provide higher payments for efforts that go beyond the baseline requirements for basic income support. This does mean that the eco-schemes and associated funding can benefit fewer farmers in total than under the basic income support. On the other hand, a range of possible eco-schemes can be devised to ensure that significant progress is made towards circular agriculture. The concrete results obtained can then serve as a source of inspiration for farmers not yet participating in the schemes.
- *Pillar II: Interventions for rural development* Pillar II payments are based on co-financing by the member states. The main aims of second pillar support are to foster agri-environmental management, improve soil and water quality, compensate for area-specific constraints or disadvantages, encourage investments and stimulate cooperation between farmers. The second pillar also supports experimentation with ambitious circular farming practices. These payments reach fewer farmers than the Pillar I measures and as such will not be enough to bring about a widespread shift to circular agriculture. Nevertheless, Pillar II payments can be used to generate the knowledge and experience needed to make this transition with the help of the eco-schemes under Pillar I.

Budget

In the next period the CAP budget available for the EU-27 will be €365 billion. This is 5% less than the previous budget, with the cuts coming mainly at the expense of Pillar II. The Pillar II budget for the Netherlands under the current CAP is €86.4 million; for the next period it will be €73.2 million. The new CAP gives the member states far greater freedom to transfer budget between the two pillars and between the two components of Pillar I. Transferring budget between the three main components of the CAP will therefore be an important part of the toolkit for fostering circular agriculture through the implementation of the CAP. The basic income support for sustainability is the only budget component with limited possibilities for increase: no more than 15% can be transferred from Pillar II to Pillar I. In theory, a member state could choose to use almost all that amount to increase the budget for basic income support for sustainability, but this would raise the Pillar I budget by just 1.5% (see Table 2). This does not appear to be a promising strategy for stimulating environment- and climate-friendly farming practices as it would provide insufficient incentive to farmers to make the effort to go beyond what is required under the basic conditionality requirements. On the other hand, it will be much easier to transfer budget from basic income support for sustainability to the eco-schemes (within Pillar I), as the Commission has not put any limit on this. Substantial transfers from Pillar I to Pillar II (the budget for which has been significantly reduced in the Commission's proposal) is possible under certain conditions¹⁰ to a maximum of 30%.

¹⁰ To a maximum of 30%, of which 15% must be for interventions addressing environmental and climate objectives.

Table 2. Allocation of EU funds between the pillars and maximum transfers in the new CAP

	Pillar I	Pillar II excl. co-financing
Proposed amount	€704 million	€73 million
With maximum transfer to Pillar I	€715 million	€62 million
With maximum transfer to Pillar II	€478 million	€299 million

Like the European Commission, the Dutch government has stated its intention¹¹ to rely less on the use of income support in agricultural policy and put more emphasis on payments to farmers for developing innovations for sustainability and providing public services such as agri-environmental management. Transferring budget to the eco-schemes and to the support schemes in Pillar II presents the best opportunity to optimise support for the transition to circular agriculture.

3 Principles and considerations for the national CAP Strategic Plan

The Dutch government’s aim is to establish circular farming systems by 2030 and that the Netherlands leads the field in circular agriculture.¹² This is an ambitious goal. Even though, as stated above, this goal has not been defined in clear-cut terms, it is clear that it requires Dutch farmers and growers to make radical changes to their farm structure, production processes and everyday working practices. The transition to circular agriculture ‘presents them in particular with a major challenge and demands a great deal from them,’ writes the agriculture minister in her vision document ‘Agriculture, Nature and Food: Valuable and Connected’.

The Council has identified a number of principles for the national CAP Strategic Plan which link the ambition of establishing a circular agricultural system with the objectives of the CAP.

Dynamic policy design

The changes needed to establish circular agriculture cannot all be made at once, primarily because circular farming methods are still under development in an ongoing process of research, experimentation and innovation. Given that the Dutch strategy for the CAP will have to stimulate this process, it makes sense to design a dynamic policy. Under such a policy the schemes and payments to farmers should be reviewed annually or otherwise periodically to allow adjustments to be made in the light of new insights and to bring standards increasingly in line with the requirements of circular agriculture. At the same time, farmers and growers need to have clear long-term targets towards which they can progress by amending their farm management in stages. It is therefore essential that the goal is clear and that the system of support from the CAP is fixed for the longer term. It is also important that the government’s priorities are in line with the objectives of the Climate Agreement, the Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery and the circular economy programme.

¹¹ Tweede Kamer (2018). *EU-voorstellen: Gemeenschappelijk Landbouwbeleid COM (2018) 392, 393 en 394*. Brief van de minister van Buitenlandse Zaken aan de Tweede Kamer van 13 juli 2018. Kamerstuk 34965.

¹² Ministry of agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Netherlands (2018). *Agriculture, , nature and food: valuable and connected*. Den Haag.

Freedom to farm

It is crucial that farmers consider all the changes they are asked to make towards the transition as being desirable, necessary and feasible. The key is to design the changes in such a way that farmers perceive them as opportunities to make improvements in their own farm management practices. The Dutch CAP strategy must offer farmers the opportunity to find their own route towards circular agriculture, making use of the innovative concepts that will emerge from research and experimentation. The eco-schemes proposed for the new CAP meet this need. In contrast to the basic income support in Pillar I, they can be tailored to match the diversity of farm types and farming styles. To make the transition to circular agriculture, therefore, it is essential during the next CAP period to shift the critical mass of direct payments under Pillar I from basic income support to the eco-schemes. Farmers must also have the security of knowing that they can make use of these eco-schemes over a long period. The Council advises the minister to raise these points in the negotiations with the European Commission.

Integrated points system for sustainability

The eco-schemes could be based on an integrated points system based on performance indicators showing what the farmer has to achieve to meet the objectives for biodiversity, climate, soil, water, animal welfare, etc.: in short, the objectives that go to make up a circular agriculture system. Examples of such a points system are currently being used or being developed for dairy farming and arable farming. The number of performance indicators should be kept to a manageable number by choosing those that together encapsulate the essence of circular agriculture. Each should consist of a scale with a minimum standard and a series of steps towards a maximum performance level. This would do justice to the different possibilities and priorities of individual farms: some will score more points on one indicator while others will perform better on other indicators; all will be able to work towards circular agriculture in a way best suited to their particular form of farm management. By 'integrated' we mean that the indicators taken together cover all the relevant environmental and sustainability aspects of circular agriculture and that each indicator sets a minimum standard; this will ensure that no objectives are overlooked or avoided.

Linking eco-schemes to sustainability schemes

The points system could be used for multiple purposes, including private sustainability schemes, certification, quality labels and such like. A key advantage of a points system is that it allows eco-schemes to draw on existing or future sustainability schemes developed by various organisations, such as food companies, farmers' collectives, regional partnerships, conservation management organisations and other civil society organisations. An integrated points system avoids friction between different schemes and commitments – plus the associated bureaucracy – and creates the conditions for synergy. This is important, because it is not just farmers but also companies and other parties in the agribusiness chain (storage, transport, supply, support and retail) that will have to adapt their operations, and because they provide farmers with information, advice and resources. As circular farming often involves extensification of production, the food industry may have to look at reorienting towards smaller production volumes, possibly for export. At the same time, markets for products from circular agriculture will have to be found in market segments where there is a willingness to pay for new services such as nature conservation, cutting carbon emissions, etc. to allow the costs of such social goods and services to be incorporated into the market price.

Linking the eco-schemes with sustainability schemes follows the principle of equivalence (see Infographic 2, 'European agricultural policy for circular agriculture'). The government designs the eco-schemes and can decide to set a range of easier and more demanding schemes according to the objectives to be achieved and the number of points that can be obtained. Sustainability schemes can be designated as equivalent to eco-schemes, as is the case in the current CAP with organic farming (SKAL certification mark) and sustainable arable farming (the Skylark Foundation). Farmers that take part in an equivalent sustainability scheme could then apply for and receive the payment approved by the government for the relevant eco-scheme. Management and oversight of compliance would be the responsibility of the organisations offering the sustainability schemes, with checks by government to determine the adequacy of the oversight by these organisations. This will ensure equivalence and prevent double bureaucracy.

Linking sustainability schemes to the eco-schemes is not only efficient and effective, but it would also provide an extra incentive to farmers to take part and prepare for higher standards or more demanding eco-schemes. The system would generate the necessary momentum if the minimum requirements for the eco-schemes are raised over time and the sustainability schemes gradually incorporate all the requirements of circular agriculture.

4 Recommendations

On the basis of the considerations set out above, the Council makes the following recommendations.

[1] Earmark a growing proportion of the Pillar I budget for eco-schemes. Periodically adjust the requirements of the eco-schemes in the light of practical experience and the most recent insights. Use a proportion of the CAP Pillar II budget for initiatives that can serve as a 'breeding ground' for eco-schemes in Pillar I.

The Dutch allocation of EU agricultural funding can be used effectively to support the gradual introduction of circular agriculture by tactically redistributing funds between individual CAP budgets. This is the best approach to take because it accommodates the learning processes involved in the development of circular agriculture. It also allows farmers to choose the most appropriate eco-schemes to help them develop their farms in the desired direction. Research, practical experience and experiments funded from the Pillar II budget provide input to the advocated gradual introduction of eco-schemes in Pillar I. Initially, 30% of the Pillar I budget can be used to finance eco-schemes; thereafter this percentage can be raised incrementally.

[2] Link the eco-schemes to private sustainability schemes, subject to oversight by an independent organisation.

Linking eco-schemes to existing sustainability schemes will give farmers a stronger and unambiguous incentive to green their operations, encourage the agribusiness sector to make the transition to circular agriculture and increase the effectiveness of government spending. It will also reduce farmers' uncertainty about the size of payments for eco-schemes. In the Commission's proposals these will be annual commitments and so different numbers of farmers will be able to take part each year. As the management and oversight of these schemes will be in the hands of private organisations (accredited and supervised by government), implementation will be lean, bureaucracy kept to the minimum and the possibilities for synergy increased.

[3] For the implementation of the eco-schemes use an integrated points system based on transparent performance indicators that show how much progress the farm is making towards circular agriculture.

Under a points system farmers can choose between different schemes (which may vary from 'entry-level' to more ambitious schemes) according to their specific needs and circumstances. A points system also allows for annual reviews in which the eco-schemes can be made more ambitious or broadened in scope by setting higher standards or additional priorities (for example on climate-friendly farming), all within the existing system. The responsibility for designing the points system and the eco-schemes lies with the government.

[4] Ensure that agricultural knowledge is available to support the transition to circular agriculture on all fronts: experimentation, the exchange of lessons learned, building knowledge on farming practices and translating this into independent advice to farmers.

It is advisable to review the current agricultural knowledge system against the transition to circular agriculture to identify any knowledge gaps and assess the quality of advice on offer. Specific attention should be given to exploiting the knowledge gained from experimentation and to developing and disseminating independent advice (coaching and supervision) on farming practices for soil improvement, biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation and adaptation. The CAP can be used to make good any shortfalls so that the agricultural knowledge system is properly equipped to provide the necessary support.

[5] Transfer a substantial sum from the Pillar I budget to Pillar II. Ensure that this amount is at least equal to the reduction in the Pillar II budget proposed by the Commission and that it is sufficient to support the necessary innovations for climate-smart and circular farming.

The Pillar II measures not only serve to drive forward progress with Pillar I policy, but also to provide public services in water management and nature conservation and to support the relationship between agriculture and nature in the form of agri-environmental management. Sufficient funds must be available for these services as well, which is why it makes sense to transfer substantial funds from the Pillar I budget to the reduced Pillar II budget.

5 Explanatory remarks on the recommendations

Eco-schemes at the core of a dynamic system

The gradual shifting of the CAP Pillar I budget from basic income support to the eco-schemes will help to drive forward the transition towards circular agriculture. In this process, a number of factors will, ideally, all pull together in the same direction: the growing conviction of farmers and their enterprise and initiative; the demand for sustainable products; marketing initiatives by agribusiness to meet this demand; financing by banks; support for sustainable farming by nature conservation and environmental organisations; the increasingly strict regulatory requirements on agriculture; and, not unimportantly, public opinion on health aspects, environmental and climate impacts, biodiversity and animal welfare.

The conditions set by government for receiving basic income support for sustainability (conditionality) can also pull in the same direction as they increasingly resemble the principles of circular agriculture, while the eco-schemes continue to raise the sustainability bar. This upward movement towards circular agriculture in Pillar I will be 'fed' with new business models, techniques and practices from Pillar II. These innovations will be generated and nurtured in experiments, pilot projects and field trials. A key condition is the provision of investment aid for promising techniques on the verge of practical application. An example is the investment aid for the development of robot and sensor technology for precision farming (or 'smart farming') to reduce the use of energy, fertilisers and plant protection products. Other example are investments in climate mitigation and climate adaptation. This dynamic system is one of innovation and impetus (Pillar II), dissemination in the market for food or public services (Pillar I, eco-schemes) and incorporation into standards (Pillar I, conditionality).

Earmarking 30% of the new Pillar I budget for eco-schemes right from the start, as was the case in the current CAP, will be an immediate and significant step forward in the direction of circular agriculture. In subsequent years, a growing proportion of the direct payments can be transferred in stages from basic income support to the eco-schemes. The eco-schemes will therefore take up a growing share of the Pillar I budget and the subsidised sustainability schemes will increasingly assume the characteristics of circular agriculture.

To create extra budget for eco-schemes, consideration can be given to restricting basic income support to farms that meet a certain minimum area requirement. This would exclude farm businesses that are in the process of winding down (and which could lease land to young farmers) and farms and horticulture businesses with high return crops for which basic income support accounts for a marginal fraction of total income. 'Capping' basic payments under Pillar I makes less sense, because this would not free up much more budget and for the ecological effect it is necessary for bigger farms to take up eco-schemes.

Towards an integrated points system

The points system will be formulated in consultation with the parties involved and adopted and benchmarked under the responsibility of the government, which will then design the eco-schemes to reflect this system (and the chosen priorities). Linking eco-scheme payments to an integrated points system will give farmers the freedom to adopt innovative sustainability techniques for circular agriculture in ways that meet their particular situation and needs. Taking part in a sustainability scheme will gain them points on performance indicators that reflect the essential characteristics of circular agriculture. Together these indicators will represent, in a measurable and verifiable form, the objectives for circular agriculture, climate, nature, soil and biodiversity. Different aspects of policy or specific priorities can be reflected in the indicators by adjusting weightings or the number of points awarded, for example by awarding more points for climate-friendly farming. Ideally, the number of indicators should be kept to a minimum in the interests of simplicity and transparency. The Biodiversity Monitor for Dairy Farming, which consists of a small, integrated set of key performance indicators (KPIs), could serve as a model.

Points system

Points system:

- ❖ To be developed in consultation with farmers and other parties across the agricultural value chain, but independently of their interests.
- ❖ To be adopted by the government, assisted by an independent body of experts.
- ❖ Consists of key performance indicators (KPIs), inspired by the Biodiversity Monitor for Dairy Farming and the Biodiversity Monitor for Arable Farming.
- ❖ Minimum levels (points) per indicator.
- ❖ Regularly evaluated and calibrated using existing measurement systems and input from research, and adjusted if necessary.
- ❖ Coherence between KPIs and minimum requirements ensures movement in the right direction across the board.
- ❖ Works with market initiatives (sustainability schemes) as well as the CAP.
- ❖ Helps farmers to transition to circular agriculture because it clearly shows what steps can be taken. Incorporation into farm management is recommended.
- ❖ Government eco-schemes: easier and more demanding variants, plus region-specific versions. More points are needed for the more demanding eco-schemes. Sustainability schemes guarantee that number of points.

The points system will ensure momentum behind the shift to circular agriculture is maintained because the minimum standards in the eco-scheme indicators will be incrementally raised over time. The payments for the eco-schemes will change accordingly, as they reflect the number of points obtained and the coupling of sustainability schemes with the various types of eco-schemes. This also reflects the fact that farmers are not rewarded simply for making changes under the eco-schemes, but for achieving a certain level of sustainability: the system will reward farmers who already meet many of the performance indicators for circular agriculture (e.g. organic farmers).

The performance indicators and corresponding points tallies will have to be reviewed periodically to assess their effectiveness, and where necessary adjusted. Climate and the environment will have to remain priorities within the point system, given the European Commission's position, and the Council draws attention to the importance of the soil, including soil flora and fauna, which must also be reflected in the system.

Cooperation between farmers on the development of circular farming practices could be included as an indicator in the points system, as long as it has a contractual basis, as such cooperation can facilitate progress towards circular agriculture. For example, specialist farms within a certain area could enter into an agreement to operate as a single virtual 'mixed farm' within which waste or residual products from one farm are used by another, as proposed in the advice by the Commissie Grondgebruik (commission on land use).¹³ Active participation by farmers in the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), either as suppliers or users, could also be included in the points system.

¹³ The advice by the Commissie Grondgebondenheid of 12 April 2018, *Grondgebondenheid als basis voor een toekomstbestendige melkveehouderij*, proposes a range of twenty kilometres within which farms could operate in this way.

In the Council's opinion, working with a points system as described here would be a good way of implementing the eco-schemes in Pillar I while at the same time working on the concrete development of circular agriculture. Basic income support for sustainability within the same pillar could then be made conditional on simple measures derived from the points system that would also be easy to monitor,¹⁴ such as hectares with herb-rich grassland, hectares with at least a one-in-four rotation, or hectares where a 'rest crop' has been grown in one of the previous three years. Landscape elements should be included in the area used for calculating direct payments to discourage farmers from neglecting their maintenance.

To reduce the administrative burden on farmers it is crucial that when the points system for the eco-schemes is introduced the exchange of all relevant data between farms and their suppliers and customers, as well as with the public authorities (invoices, delivery notes, laboratory analyses, etc.), is fully digital. Technically speaking, the agricultural sector could be entirely paper-free within a few years, but at the moment businesses in the agri-food chain lack the incentive to make information available to farmers in a digitally readable form.

Linkage with sustainability schemes in the market

According to the Council it is not necessary for the government to design numerous detailed eco-schemes. A limited number will be sufficient (for example, an easier and a more demanding variant and possibly a few more for specific areas or problems, such as peat meadows). It makes sense to make use of the equivalence principle that member states can employ under the current CAP for practices that qualify for green direct payments. Participating in an approved sustainability scheme run by private sector or civil society organisations would then, under the principle of compliance by default, automatically confer the possibility of taking part in an approved government eco-scheme. The sustainability scheme in the market would have to work with the same points system as the CAP eco-scheme.

Applications by providers of sustainability schemes for equivalence with the eco-schemes would be assessed by an independent body of experts, who would also ensure that approved schemes are verifiable and enforceable. To limit the administrative burden it would be advisable also to include food safety certification, such as Global G.A.P., in this process as well (see box).

¹⁴ Oversight of compliance is the responsibility of the Netherlands Enterprise Agency. Details can be submitted in advance in the 'combined returns' (*Gecombineerde Opgave*).

Equivalence of sustainability schemes and eco-schemes

How it works:

- ❖ Sustainability schemes apply to an independent committee.
- ❖ The committee assesses the scheme for feasibility and decides whether or not the equivalence principle can be applied, and if so, to which eco-scheme.
- ❖ The farmer participates in one or more sustainability schemes.
- ❖ The farmer applies to the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) to enrol in an eco-scheme on the basis of participation in a sustainability scheme under the equivalence principle.
- ❖ The organisation that has registered the sustainability scheme is responsible for oversight of compliance, for example through certification of farmers.
- ❖ The public authority reviews the oversight by the organisations (oversight of oversight).
- ❖ New requirements or measures are included in the points system following successful experiences with innovations, experiments, etc. in Pillar II.
- ❖ Over-subscription in a year is compensated by releasing more money from basic income support or by cutting back on the easier eco-scheme to push up performance levels.

Equivalence with existing sustainability schemes will ensure that the implementation of policy remains transparent to farmers and other businesses. At the same time, it will ensure that ongoing sustainability initiatives, such as 'On the way to Planet Proof milk' and the Biodiversity Monitor mentioned above, all push in the same direction and reinforce each other. In addition, linking eco-schemes to commercial sustainability schemes will provide an extra incentive for the participating farmers. To be eligible for more income support, they will ask their buyers about the availability of sustainability schemes, which in turn will trigger these companies and cooperatives to take sustainability measures and actively participate in the development of circular agriculture. And that in turn can lead to an improvement of the farmers' position in the agri-food chain.

Fostering circular agriculture with knowledge from research, practice and experiments

Inspiration and innovation from the experimental sphere do not find their way into practice automatically. And it is precisely because the type of knowledge needed for the development of circular agriculture comes mainly from experimental practice that there is no ready-made system available for sharing and disseminating this knowledge. What is needed for an uninterrupted flow of knowledge and expertise from Pillar II to the eco-schemes in Pillar I and dissemination into general agricultural practice is a well-functioning Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS).

One of the purposes of such a system is keeping farm advisers and suppliers (vets, advisers from suppliers and buyers, accountants, agricultural consultants, etc.), as well as farmers and growers, up to date with the latest knowledge and techniques. One of the requirements of the European Commission is that advice to farmers should be independent. The European Innovation Programme (EIP) proposed by the Commission could play a key role in this knowledge transfer process alongside national and provincial innovation policy. In addition, lessons can be learned from previous experiences with practice networks, such as *Telen met Toekomst* (Growing with a Future) and *Koeien & Kansen* (Cows & Opportunities).

Reflective monitoring is a valuable technique for learning from experiments (see the Council's report 'The Sum of the Parts'). Successes should be shared as much as possible. Cooperation is important

because the fruits of provincial innovation schemes and similar initiatives should be put to good use elsewhere in the country as well. The provincial authorities should work with national government to ensure that farmers from different provinces can work together on experimental circular agriculture practices, while still respecting different regional priorities. That would make it more attractive for national and international companies to take part as well. Consideration should also be given to exploiting research possibilities under the Top Sectors innovation policy and the EU Horizon Europe framework programme.

Transferring budget from Pillar I to Pillar II

In the current CAP period, support for public services such as agri-environmental management is included in Pillar II and so it would be reasonable to assume that this will be the case in the new CAP period. The combination of agriculture and nature fits fairly and squarely within the objectives of circular agriculture in the broad sense adhered to here. It follows, therefore, that the innovation and knowledge activities in the second pillar must not come at the expense of the existing funding for agri-environmental management. There must be sufficient funding for public services in the field of water and nature as well as for actions that generating knowledge and inspiration to catalyse the transition to circular agriculture.

As indicated above, the European Commission's proposals for the Pillar II budget include a considerable reduction (15.3%) in the allocation of funding to the Netherlands. The Council is of the opinion that there should be sufficient financial scope to support research and innovation for climate-smart and circular farming as well as for public services in the field of water and nature, because all act as catalysts and sources of inspiration for the transition to circular agriculture. Accordingly, the Council argues for a substantial transfer of funds from the Pillar I budget to the reduced Pillar II to bring the budget for the second pillar (EU proposal: €73.2 million) up to at least the same level as in the present CAP period (€86.4 million).¹⁵ Further transfers may be needed to cover the measures to be taken for climate policy and closing cycles. Also, long-term conservation management agreements may in time prove to be more efficient than the eco-schemes.

6 Concluding observations

Reducing production calls for a different mindset and a new agricultural business model

The circular agricultural system presented as a model for the future of agriculture in this advice will be of benefit to nature conservation, environmental care, animal welfare, biodiversity, landscape and climate. Farming this way will keep the social costs and benefits better in balance. Overall, farming will be less intensive and less geared to high volume production than at present and the total production capacity will be reduced – a highly radical move given the Dutch agricultural tradition. Reduced production volumes will in all likelihood lead to lower exports (at least to other regions in the world) and lower imports, because transporting goods and products to distant markets involves carbon emissions and loss of nutrients from the cycle. Farmers will have to produce more for the Dutch market and markets in neighbouring countries. Some agribusinesses, though, will be able to expand production for and in foreign countries and/or profit in other countries from innovative

¹⁵ Based on: Tweede Kamer (2018). *EU-voorstellen: Gemeenschappelijk Landbouwbeleid COM (2018) 392, 393 en 394*. Brief van de minister van Buitenlandse Zaken aan de Tweede Kamer van 13 juli 2018. Kamerstuk 34 965.

expertise inspired by circular agriculture, in line with the ninth criterion in the ministerial vision document of 2018 (see table in section 2). All this will require a different mindset throughout the agri-food chain.

It is essential that CAP budgets are used for the transition to sustainable agriculture without delay
Since its inception the CAP has evolved from a means to protect European agriculture, farmers and growers into an inclusive policy that also promotes social objectives for the environment, nature, climate and rural development. At the same time, political pressure is growing to reduce the European agriculture budget. It is to be expected that in time the financial incentives for the social objectives of the CAP will be reduced and that the sustainability goals will increasingly be considered as conditions for a licence to produce. It is therefore essential for the continuity of Dutch agriculture and agribusiness that the sector moves towards a sustainable model as a new standard. For this reason the Council argues in this advice that the Dutch CAP budgets be used as a dynamic instrument to engineer a step-by step transition process. We need a circular agriculture and the agriculture minister is right to set out a clear deadline for achieving this in her vision document. It would be expedient to make the best possible use of the funds available in the intervening period.

Gradual phasing out of direct income support is no threat to the level playing field within the EU
Fostering a shift to circular agriculture using the eco-schemes in the CAP, as proposed by the Council, will lead to an increase in the budget for the eco-schemes in Pillar I at the expense of the budget for basic income support. If the Netherlands does this alone, the agricultural sector could object on the grounds that it will endanger the 'level playing field' for farmers within the EU. French farmers, for example, might receive higher per-hectare payments than Dutch farmers. Although all member states are obliged to provide eco-schemes, the ambition levels of the schemes may vary considerably between member states.

On the other hand, a consequence of the former market and price policy is that Dutch per-hectare payments under the current CAP are among the highest in Europe. Lowering these payments to pay for the eco-schemes would therefore help to counter criticism from other member states that national payments should be brought into line with each other. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the level playing field in Europe is also influenced by other factors, including the agricultural knowledge system, the available infrastructure, the tax regime and the presence of agricultural supply and processing industries. On these points, Dutch farmers are in a better position than their colleagues in many other EU countries.

Communication with the public will remain crucial

Agriculture cannot thrive without public approval. This applies not only to the current export-oriented agriculture, but just as much to circular agriculture, which in an open market could easily face stiff competition from cut-price bio-industry products. It is therefore essential to nurture and cultivate the relationship between farmers and consumers. One of the effects of eco-schemes should be to bring consumers into contact with circular agriculture and its products, for example by allowing consumers to experience how farmers produce the food they buy, physically, virtually or by other means. Also, part of the Pillar II budget should be used for communication between farmers and consumers.

To prevent products being imported from countries where the climate and environmental standards are lower, it will be necessary to ensure continued alignment between EU and international trade policies.

A strategy is needed to create support within the EU for the Dutch approach

The approach argued for in this advice differs in certain respects from what has been usual under the CAP until now. In particular, the developmental character, the points system for results and the linkage with sustainability schemes run by civil society and commercial parties may be considered unorthodox by other parties within the EU who have less experience with public-private cooperation. The Council therefore recommends developing a strategy to garner support for this approach in the European Commission and other EU member states. Previous situations in which the Netherlands has positioned itself in a leading role (such as the Minas nutrient registration system) have demonstrated the need for such a strategy.

National efforts should be maintained with a view to the possible phasing out of the CAP

It is possible that in the longer term the income support payments (and possibly other parts of the CAP) will gradually be phased out. If this were the case it is not inconceivable that the public services in the field of water and nature under Pillar II would be made a national responsibility and that the income support functions under Pillar I would be phased out or transferred to national income policy, which would aggravate the debate about the disparities created by the current income support payments. With this scenario in mind, there is even more reason to devote the current CAP budgets fully to supporting the transition to circular agriculture and, at the very least, maintain the national and provincial agri-environmental schemes in support of climate, biodiversity, nature and water management objectives.

The resilience of Dutch agriculture

Given the challenges facing Dutch agriculture, particularly but not exclusively those posed by the climate and biodiversity crises and by geopolitical developments, it is crucial to increase the resilience of Dutch agriculture. Circular agriculture will do just that. Shifting payments from basic income support to eco-schemes based on a points system and to Pillar II, as argued in this advice, will create more opportunities to incorporate biodiversity into farm management; payments will go to the farms that make progress towards circular farming practices rather than simply to the farms with large areas of land.

The CAP can trigger the shift towards circular agriculture by creating a dynamic system of innovation and impetus (Pillar II), dissemination in the market for food or public services (Pillar I, eco-schemes) and incorporation into standards (Pillar I, conditionality).

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The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur, Rli) advises the Dutch government and parliament on strategic issues concerning the sustainable development of the living and working environment. The Council is independent and offers solicited and unsolicited advice on long-term issues of strategic importance to the Netherlands. Through its integrated approach and strategic advice, the Council strives to provide greater depth and breadth to the political and social debate, and to improve the quality of decision-making processes.

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