

Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality
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Cc:
Enclosure(s):

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Subject: Council advisory report 'Farmers with a future'

Dear Ms Schouten,

The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli) has considered which government policy will help farmers/agri-entrepreneurs to determine their future within the boundaries of sustainability set by government and society. In other words: how can government encourage farmers to use their entrepreneurial skills to earn an acceptable income within the boundaries that the environment imposes on their business? This question is addressed in our advisory report *Farmers with a future*, which we are pleased to submit to you here.

We spoke to farmers from different backgrounds to find out what they think about building a sustainable future for themselves. They told us how they see the future of their farms. Many farmers are keen to adopt sustainable practices. They made it clear that they are not only interested in income; they also long to be appreciated more by the market and by the public. They also told us about the obstacles they are facing. Inconsistent and constantly changing policy frameworks often hinder them in their business operations. They often lack support by business partners, including lenders and retail groups to which they deliver their products. Farmers would like government, banks and value chain partners to show that they are willing and able to join them in tackling the sustainability challenges that they face. As entrepreneurs, they also want to use their own knowledge, skills and creativity – and, consequently, the satisfaction they derive from their work – to decide which sustainability measures are most appropriate for their own farms. In other words, they do not wish to be told in detail what they should do.

As we reflected on these dialogues, we realised that local circumstances largely dictate how farmers choose to work. There is no such thing as an average standard farm, an average standard location, or an average farmer. We also found that many farmers are able to combine agricultural production with other activities to earn an acceptable income. That requires a great deal of effort and investment, however, things made even more difficult by the uncertainty about future government policy. That is why tightening the rules at short notice meets with resistance from many farmers.



Policies intended to foster sustainable agriculture currently emphasise the restructuring of agricultural businesses (buy-outs, expropriation) and the adoption of ever more detailed rules on how to farm. The uncertainty that this causes in the agriculture sector is stirring up considerable resistance, even among farmers who basically see a future in operating their business sustainably.

We do not dispute that restructuring is necessary. We believe, however, that more should also be done to support agri-entrepreneurs who are willing and able to carry on their business in a sustainable manner. Government should make them part of the solution by allowing them to take responsibility for developing a future-proof (and in many cases multifunctional) business that is resilient enough to handle future developments in policy. Government support for farmers – policy, money and expertise – is indispensable for this.

It is important for government to clarify the sustainability criteria for different types of farms and to employ a performance certification system that can help individual farmers understand the steps they need to take to become sustainable. Authorities must also enforce compliance, for example based on actual emissions data, if sustainability standards are not met. Another requirement, in particular in regions that are home to many farms, is to align varied local interests with the sustainability goals, with government facilitating regional collective policymaking. Below, we break down the foregoing into six specific recommendations.

[1] National government, provinces, water boards and municipalities: Provide maximum clarity on farm-specific sustainability standards

Authorities will need to clarify the goals that must be achieved and the corresponding timeframes. These goals should be broken down into farm-specific standards, as far as possible per unit (plot/building). The standards must be set in a way that policy goals are actually met, obviating the need to tighten up standards for farmers midway.

[2] National government, provinces and water boards: Give agri-entrepreneurs as much freedom as possible within the framework of government standards

Standards set by government can be generic or specific, depending on the parameter concerned and the particular situation. In the latter case, the standards are specified in a permit. Regardless of the distinction between generic and specific standards, we recommend that they should, as far as possible, be laid down in goal-conditioned provisions and that it should be left to the agri-entrepreneur to decide on the means used to comply with the standard. It goes without saying that attainment of the specified standard must then be monitored and, if necessary, enforced (see Recommendation 4). We realise, however, that such monitoring will require considerable effort.

[3] National government: Facilitate the establishment of an integrated sustainability performance certification system and create an independent authority to set up and monitor this system

Certification has a number of advantages, certainly if value chain partners and banks make use of certification systems that are compatible with, or if possible integrated into, the national government's own certification system. The process of certification aligns the many criteria that a business is expected to meet and assesses the extent to which it complies with a current or future standard. It is then possible to differentiate between the specific circumstances of individual farms, for example by allowing for differences in the nature of farms, the technologies they use, their locations, and other factors. In addition, the certification process can be linked to systems that

reward effort going above and beyond the standard. Last but not least, certification can be related to government oversight, with the need for government monitoring decreasing as compliance with the certification criteria improves.

We advise the national government to promote the introduction of an integrated sustainability performance certification system and an associated independent authority with practical knowledge of the agriculture sector. The independent authority we are advocating can also play a coordinating role with respect to government oversight. An added advantage of such coordination is that it fosters learning from best practices.

[4] National government, provinces, water boards and municipalities: Commit to proper farm-level enforcement

Giving farmers more freedom and more responsibility for their sustainable practices makes proper enforcement all the more important. The authorities will remain responsible for oversight and enforcement. However, the outcome of reviews by the certification authority (including possible decertification for legal infringements) may actually result in less (or, occasionally, more) government oversight. It goes without saying that the responsibility for penalising farms that do not abide by the rules remains with government.

[5] National government and provinces: Be actively involved in and support regional collective policymaking

In a previous advisory report (Rli, 2019b), we argued that the national government should play a more active role in the region and join with local stakeholders in developing transition agendas. The transition to sustainable farming also requires the national government to play a prominent role in the region to support the tasks at hand.

In some regions, the tasks are shared ones between many stakeholders, for example to raise the groundwater level or restore biodiversity. Such tasks should be adapted into criteria for individual farms in regional collective policymaking processes in which the farmers themselves are involved. The national government must play an active role in such processes, with the province offering support.

[6] National government: Commit to improving the sustainability of the value chain and to changing consumer behaviour

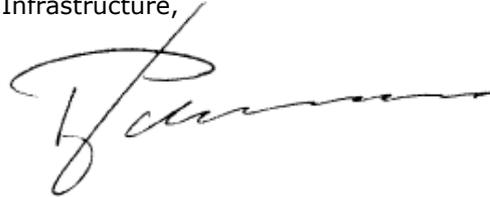
Whether agricultural businesses can become more sustainable also depends on the extent to which their partners in the food value chain and consumers alter their practices and behaviour and support them in the transition to sustainable business practices. The national government must encourage lenders, supermarket retail groups, marketing cooperatives and consumers to do more to share the responsibility for the transition to sustainability.

The enclosed advisory report *Farmers with a future* offers a comprehensive explanation of the foregoing.

Yours sincerely, Council for the Environment and Infrastructure,



J.J. de Graeff
Chair



R. Hillebrand
General Secretary

Farmers with a future

1. Transition to 'sustainable farming': inevitable, but not easy

Agriculture in the Netherlands must become more sustainable.¹ The necessary transition will have a significant impact on how farmers operate their businesses. They will, after all, need to radically change the way they work. At the same time, the transition to sustainable agriculture influences what the rest of society thinks about farmers.

The road to sustainable agriculture will not be easy. In debates on the subject, we see a vast array of sustainability measures being either advocated or rejected. Many farmers have already taken action, each in their own way. Nevertheless, there is, as yet, no consensus on how to proceed with the transition.

At the moment, the focus of public debate seems to have shifted to the question of where farms will and will not be allowed to operate in the future (Erisman & Strootman, 2021; PBL, 2021). Emotions sometimes run high, especially when it comes to buying out and, if necessary, expropriating agricultural businesses located in places where farming is no longer possible. Proposals of this kind, which involve significant sums of money, currently focus mainly on solving the nitrogen emissions problem in the Netherlands (Kuiper & Rutten, 2021).

There are bound to be farmers who give up their businesses in the years ahead, whether or not voluntarily, and that will require government policy. In this advisory report, however, we focus on the many farmers who will keep going: those who would like to continue farming and who operate their businesses at locations where they can satisfy the future demands of the environment.² We realise that any policy pertaining to those who continue with their business is bound up with the policy on those who do not in terms of available land, budgetary scope and timing. We believe, however, that policy targeting the former must not be postponed, not only because it will offer them prospects for the future but also because of the magnitude and urgency of the sustainability challenge that the agriculture sector faces. Besides addressing those who leave farming, then, the relevant policy must also look much more closely at those who stay on. What sort of government policy can help agri-entrepreneurs determine their own future, within the boundaries of sustainability imposed by government and society?

We regard this question as relevant for several reasons. The Netherlands has good quality agricultural land and the available expertise and infrastructure make it both appealing and profitable to farm here. We also expect that agriculture will remain an overriding factor in the appearance of the Dutch landscape. Land-based agriculture is a cost-effective way of preserving the landscape. It is therefore important to maintain an adequate amount of space and enough opportunity to farm sustainably in the Netherlands. It should be noted that 'sustainable agriculture' involves more than simply meeting a set of environmental requirements. It is also about social justice and financial viability (Raworth, 2017). Sustainable agriculture will only evolve if the transition to sustainable

¹ In this advisory report, we consider the goal of sustainability a given that is not open to debate.

² We confine ourselves here to land-based agriculture, which we discuss at the level of the individual farm. This report does not address broader perspectives such as the food system and rural development. We do, however, examine opportunities in the wider surroundings that would allow individual farms to pursue complementary or alternative activities.

agricultural business practices is financially viable and if farmers and their employees can earn an adequate income, including in the longer term.

Many Dutch farmers are under competitive pressure. On the one hand, the cost of labour is high and farmland is expensive; on the other hand, the price of agricultural products must remain low enough to guarantee adequate sales. As a result, many farmers cannot afford to implement sustainability measures that drive up prices. It is, in other words, not easy to operate a sustainable agricultural business.

If we consider how the agriculture sector is performing in environmental terms, however, we see that considerable progress has been made over the past thirty years: emissions of certain harmful substances (e.g. phosphate) have fallen, antibiotics use has been significantly reduced, and animal welfare has improved. But that progress appears to have stalled. Emissions of greenhouse gases and particulate matter have barely declined in recent years (CLO, 2020) and major challenges remain, for example with regard to water quality and nitrogen emissions.

Many farmers are in search of a new sustainable revenue model that will allow them to run their agricultural business in an environmentally friendly *and* profitable manner. How can they be supported in their quest? As preparation for this advisory report, we organised three dialogue sessions with farmers in which we spoke to them about their hopes for the future and what they needed to fulfil these hopes within the context of sustainable agriculture. We summarise these sessions in the following section.

2. Dialogue sessions: What do farmers want and what are their experiences?

We spoke to a number of farmers³ who told us about their aspirations and about the obstacles they are encountering in operating their businesses. This section summarises our discussions with them. The opinions presented here are those of the individuals we spoke to and do not represent the views of all farmers in the Netherlands.

How farmers see the future: Awash with plans, creativity and enthusiasm

If one thing struck us during the dialogue sessions, it was that farmers are not lacking in entrepreneurial spirit. This is true both for smaller and larger farm holdings whose owners apply more traditional farming practices and for those who are taking a completely different approach. One notable point is that farmers cannot be pigeonholed: even those running large agricultural operations that supply international value chains are also experimenting with supplementary sustainable activities. Farmers, it turns out, are quite capable of exploring creative ways to develop their business. Many of them, moreover, have a strong desire to contribute to a sustainable society. Their stories reveal an enormous level of ingenuity and adaptability.

Many farmers say that their ambition is to produce safe, healthy, good quality food using sustainable practices. Just *how* they intend to do this varies considerably. The dialogues covered the broadest possible range of revenue models and types of farms, although there were naturally also farmers who opted for a traditional, mainstream approach. One farmer's goal is to become a global market entrepreneur who invests in innovation. Another prefers to concentrate on landscape preservation because that will improve his relationship with the public. Still others have chosen to downscale their operations, opting for short supply chains and/or for a revenue model in which they deliver their own farm products directly to the catering industry. And then there are farmers who

³ See the appendix for a list of dialogue session participants.

earn income from nature conservation, care services or leisure activities. Farmers also run their operations in their own individual ways. Some work alone (with or without the help of family members), others are themselves employees, and still others employ a number of workers.

All in all, the farmers we spoke to were creative in finding new arrangements and organisational models.

The New Farming Family: Innovative concept for 'smarter farming together'

Based on the motto 'You can't change things on your own, you need others for that', the Food Hub launched the *New Farming Family* initiative in the summer of 2021. The idea is for people from outside the agriculture sector to help farmers who are looking to innovate their businesses. An online platform serves to match farmers to new 'family members' with different areas of expertise – everything from designers, chefs and soil specialists to financial experts, lawyers, civil servants and so on – who can unleash their ideas, knowledge and experience on the challenges farmers face. Where is there financial leeway? What do they want to change? And who can help them make that change? Over a six-month period, they develop plans and work up the details together into a viable revenue model (denieuweboerenfamilie.nl, 2021).

Farmers have a clear idea of what they want and they anticipate and respond to trends in society by capitalising on their personal expertise and preferences *and* on the location of their business. Farmers who operate in urban settings exploit opportunities to supplement their farming activities with care services or leisure activities; by the same token, farmers operating in rural settings add landscape preservation or nature conservation into the mix.



Image:
Studio Ronald van der Heide

We also asked the participating farmers how they view the more distant future. Many of them said it was important for their potential successor to be proud of the business and to feel appreciated.

Downside: Barriers and obstacles

The dialogue sessions also addressed how participants *experience* their lives as farmers. How do government laws and rules affect the satisfaction they derive from their work, what sort of relationship do they have with lenders and with the parties that buy their products? And to what extent do they feel appreciated by society? The stories that emerged in response to these questions were negative. Farmers say that they run into all sorts of barriers and obstacles on a daily basis.

Erratic and inconsistent government policy

Whenever the discussion turned to government policy, the mood changed. Many farmers struggle with the laws and rules imposed on the agriculture sector, especially because the rules are constantly changing and they never know precisely where they stand. Time and again, farmers have to modify their business operations and are given almost no time at all to do so. 'Seems like we never do enough,' one farmer sighed. Another said, 'It doesn't add up. It's counterproductive.'

Farmers perceive inconsistencies between different types of policies. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality encourages livestock farmers and arable farmers to swap land as part of the transition to circular agriculture. That may sound like a good idea, but it means ploughing up the occasional plot of grassland to convert it into arable farmland. Doing so produces carbon dioxide, which is unfavourable from the perspective of climate policy. Additionally, European Union subsidies encourage farmers to manage grassland 'in perpetuity' and *not* to plough it up.

Farmers are under the impression that government comes up with new ad hoc rules following every incident. This forces them to repeatedly undertake new investments. Their autonomy is undermined in this way; they feel increasingly powerless and their motivation is gradually ebbing away. The farmers who participated in the dialogue sessions told us that they wanted to do things right, but sometimes simply no longer knew how. Many are outright opposed to government policy. Some distrust politicians. That distrust runs quite deep and has a long history. Farmers have long felt ignored and unappreciated. In their view, they are constantly being told that they are not doing things right and should do things differently.

Frequent interference and a lack of practical knowledge on the part of policymakers

Another point raised during the sessions was interference by the national government. Farmers feel that the authorities (but also their partners in the value chain) lay down rules telling them precisely how to attain the required level of sustainability and by which means, down to the tiniest detail. How does this leave any room for creative entrepreneurship? Farmers believe that government policy hinders them in coming up with smart solutions and attaining their personal goals. They feel as if they are being straightjacketed. In their view, the policy limits their capacity to decide for themselves how to 'do things right'.

The farmers also told us that they sometimes question policymakers' practical knowledge. In their opinion, the contradictory and counterproductive nature of some rules suggests a lack of expertise at the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality.

Unfair treatment by government

Farmers also aired their grievances regarding unfair competition. Most were well aware there are environmental limits to what they can and cannot do on their farms. But they questioned why the requirements in the Netherlands are sometimes stricter than in other countries. Farmers want to operate on a level playing field, but that is sometimes not the case. For example, some farmers would like to use modern plant breeding techniques that are conducive to sustainability and are

permitted elsewhere, but the European Union prohibits certain types of genetic modification, such as the CRISPR-Cas9 technology. 'As entrepreneurs, we naturally face competition in the international marketplace. But we should be given a fair chance to compete.'

Some farmers also feel that they are put at a disadvantage compared to other sectors of the economy. For example, they think that government has been more lenient towards the aviation, manufacturing and energy sectors in its policy on reducing nitrogen and carbon emissions. They also feel that government is treating them unfairly in its policy in other respects. For example, it supports agrivoltaics by subsidising solar parks on farmland. Farmers who take advantage of this and build a solar park on one of their plots benefit from this policy. However, neighbouring farmers who want to acquire that plot to expand their arable farming operations can no longer do so because the subsidisation policy drives up land prices, making it too expensive for them. 'This is how we lose good farmland,' argued the farmers who participated in our dialogue sessions.

There are other ways in which farmers perceive government policy to be unfair. They notice, for example, that certain sustainable forms of agriculture are constantly being showcased (certain concepts such as 'Kipster', 'Herenboeren', and organic or nature-inclusive agriculture) while other farmers who are trying to operate more sustainably are ignored. Many farmers feel that they are being pitted against one another in this way. 'We can't let different groups of farmers become estranged from one another. This isn't about leaders and followers. Everyone is simply following their own transition pathway.'

Lack of trust and appreciation from society

One thorny issue is the public's perception of farmers. The farmers participating in our dialogue sessions told us that the public's critical attitude is painful for them and for the many well-intentioned farmers who do not deserve such criticism. They feel that some segments of society regard them as polluters and even as cheats. Society does not trust them, they believe. They feel that their efforts go unappreciated, in particular the progress they have already made towards sustainable agriculture, for example lowering nitrogen emissions and cutting back on antibiotics and pesticides. This progress is rarely acknowledged by the public or by politicians, according to the farmers. The focus is almost exclusively on what more they need to do.

Lack of support from the business community

We also talked to the farmers about the business side of their operations. What support are they receiving from the parties they need to keep their business up and running and to protect their position, for example lenders, supermarket retail groups, marketing cooperatives and a representative organisation such as the Netherlands Agricultural and Horticultural Association (LTO Nederland)? This proved to be another sensitive topic. The farmers participating in our dialogue sessions told us that they are often very disappointed by the level of support they receive from the business community. They feel that banks, marketing and retail organisations and lobby groups struggle to accommodate the many different types of farms operating in the sector and the autonomy that farmers display in their business strategies and working methods.

Some farmers who apply for loans to invest in sustainable practices are refused by their bank, even though the same bank's top executive professes to be committed to sustainability. The loan terms and conditions offer little evidence of such commitment. Credit rating agencies still use old methods to assess investment proposals, based on production increases and economies of scale. They reject farmers who apply alternative business strategies in pursuit of sustainability.

Similar problems often occur in their dealings with retail groups. Some farmers feel that they are being squeezed by large supermarket retail groups. For example, they are required to deliver products that comply with eco-labels such as 'On the way to planet proof', but the extra costs that farmers incur to meet the corresponding, and sometimes extremely exacting, sustainability requirements are not always reflected in the price they are paid. Consumer sales appear to be more important than more sustainable production methods.

Some farmers also feel that lobbying organisations such as LTO Nederland and marketing cooperatives such as FrieslandCampina do not represent them as effectively as they used to. They claim that these organisations focus exclusively on the average standard farm, but that doesn't help if your own farm is non-average and non-standard. Some farmers are therefore turning to other bodies and joining initiatives aimed at 'buying locally', such as ikwileerlijkkezuivel.nl ('I want fair dairy'), so that they can get support for their sustainable practices from their local community.

Ikweleerlijkkezuivel.nl

Under the slogan 'Fairer, greener and more digital', dairy farmer Rik Hoogenberg of Hezingen came up with the initiative ikweleerlijkkezuivel.nl. The idea is simple: consumers will use an app to order custom dairy products that are produced locally and then delivered to their door, just like the milkman used to do. The concept is Hoogenberg's attempt to correct the imbalance in the dairy value chain, in which farmers are paid unfair prices for their products and power is concentrated in the hands of a few large companies. The aim of the initiative is to ensure that every farmer is paid a fair price for their products, with platform participants receiving 20% to 30% more for milk. The project's success depends on its investors. A crowdfunding campaign has been launched to raise the necessary investment capital. The first version of the online dairy supermarket is due to be launched in 2022 (Van Raaij, 2021).

Some farmers are also exploring how to open international markets to such local sustainability initiatives.

What do farmers need?

Despite all the problems they face, the farmers who attended our dialogue sessions display immense drive. They love their work and are committed to making the best of it. They exude plenty of positive energy. Farmers are not only interested in their income. What they need most is a value chain in which the costs and benefits are distributed fairly. They also believe it is important for government and the banks to become more knowledgeable and to understand the transition to sustainable agriculture well enough to offer farmers proper assistance in adapting their businesses. Also crucial for them is for government to show itself to be a reliable partner. They want to be sure that government policy will be stable and based on real expertise. Unless the policy frameworks are clear and consistent, they will not run the risk of investing in sustainable practices. Policymakers should also take the diversity among agri-entrepreneurs into account. They should not prescribe in minute detail what farmers must do, because in farming, one size does not fit all.

WHAT DO FARMERS NEED?

1st, 2nd + 3rd session Combined

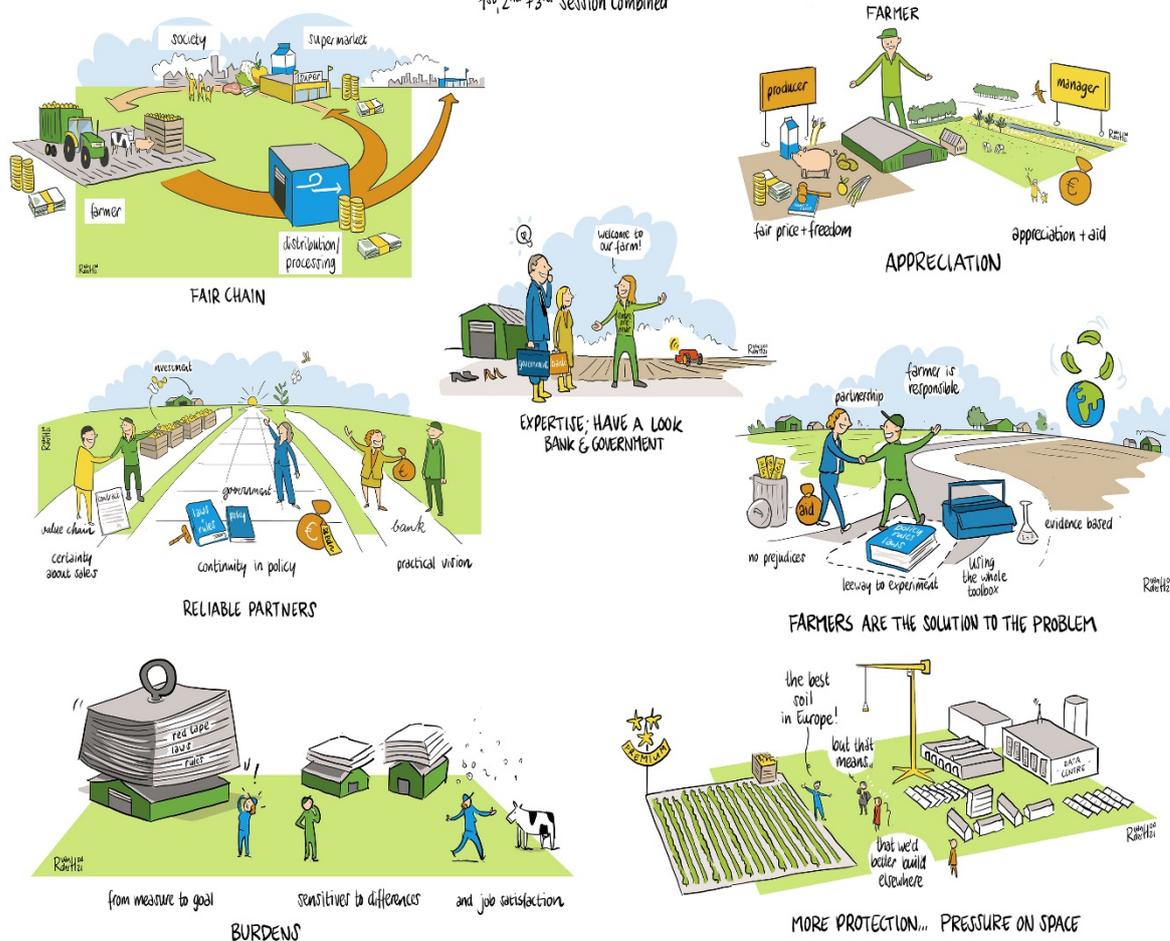


Illustration: Studio Ronald van der Heide

3. Reflections by the Council: Give farmers ownership of the sustainability problem

A general impression emerged from our dialogue sessions with the farmers. The participating farmers did not always concur with society and the authorities regarding the sustainability standards imposed on them. At the same time, each one made it clear in their own way that, as entrepreneurs, they needed to have the freedom to apply their own knowledge, skills and creativity – and, consequently, the satisfaction they derive from their work – towards determining the best way to live up to those standards in their businesses. They also longed to be appreciated more by the market and by the public. They said that they and their value chain partners want to be seen not as the cause of problems in the food production value chain, but rather as the *solution*. And finally, they argued that agriculture should be considered a fully-fledged sector like any other, one

whose interests are taken fully into account when determining how space in the Netherlands is to be apportioned between the various economic sectors.

With regard to this general impression, we would like to note the following:

- Tension between farmers and the public/political authorities is understandable and to a certain extent unavoidable, given the transition that the agriculture sector is facing. This tension has arisen not only in the agriculture sector, but elsewhere as well
- Farmers are business owners and as such, they are responsible for their business and for the associated risks. In this respect as well, they are essentially no different from business owners in other sectors
- At the same time, there are good reasons – from both a socio-economic perspective and a landscape/nature perspective – for government to pursue a policy aimed at creating the right conditions for farmers to continue their businesses in the future, provided they can do so while meeting sustainability criteria.

In this section, we reflect on points raised during the dialogue sessions that we consider important as farmers move into that future. We have supplemented the relevant notions that emerged then with information obtained in interviews, literature reviews and other sources.

There is no such thing as an average standard farm at an average standard location

It struck us that the farmers participating in the dialogue sessions size up the sustainable performance of their agricultural businesses mainly by looking at the quality of their products (environmental impact per kilogram) rather than the impact of their activities on the environment (environmental impact per hectare).⁴ The food products market – and farmers' competitiveness within that international market – is clearly their main reference point. This is understandable, as farmers operate in a market in which better quality products make money, whereas a smaller environmental footprint only *costs* money, at least at first.

Nevertheless, many farmers are now convinced that they can play a role – whether or not alongside their farming activities – in nature conservation (e.g. by planting hedgerows), leisure activities (e.g. farm campsites), care services (such as daytime activities for the disabled), innovation (hydroponic leeks) or energy generation (solar panels or wind turbines on their land), allowing them to forge their own future. They are poised to implement all sorts of creative, multifaceted solutions and to adapt their revenue model accordingly. But there will also continue to be farmers who focus solely on sustainable food production.

Individual farmers' business plans vary so much that government policy based on an 'average standard farm' is of little use, in our opinion. We have also noted that a farm's location is becoming an increasingly crucial factor in determining the form that an individual farmer's sustainable practices takes and the related revenue model. This diversity was illustrated by the farmers at our dialogue session, whose farms are scattered all across the country. For farms located near a nature reserve, water quality and the groundwater level will be major issues; for farms located near built-up areas, limiting fine particle emissions and odour nuisance is arguably more relevant. Revenue models must be adapted accordingly.

⁴ In the Netherlands, a densely populated country, most environmental issues are regional. To determine the severity of environmental pollution in a region, environmental impact per hectare is therefore more important than environmental impact per kilogram.

Government policies that recognise this diversity therefore create opportunities for alternative business practices that are ecologically friendly and will generate the earnings needed to pay for the transition to sustainability. At present, however, government policy largely fails to acknowledge the diversity of the agriculture sector. It is often laid down in highly detailed statutory rules and tailored to an average standard farm at an average standard location – something that does not exist in real life. We outline below exactly where we think the policy falls short and what the consequences of these shortcomings are in practical terms.

Attempts to negotiate with the sector as a whole are fraught with difficulty and breed resistance

Given the diversity of farms today, it is no longer enough to take the traditional approach to solving sustainability issues by negotiating with the agriculture sector as a whole. The agreements that government has so far concluded with the whole sector fail to do sufficient justice to the differences between the various types of farms. A government measure that works well for one type may turn out to be detrimental to another once implemented, so when policymakers develop solutions for the entire sector, some parties will always be left disadvantaged and dissatisfied. They will grudgingly comply with the demands while bracing themselves to resist new policy interventions. An example of this sort of resistance is the Farmers Defence Force (Hotse Smit, 2021). We believe that negotiations with the agriculture sector should focus more on *co-creating solutions* in a way that shows sensitivity to the needs and requirements of individual farms.

Generic policies provoke unwanted behaviour among farmers

Because farmers' local circumstances increasingly dictate both the challenges they face and the most appropriate solutions, government must allow them the leeway to implement that policy in a way that best suits each one's local situation. Generic policies no longer work in the current context and yet government is still developing generic sustainability measures for the agriculture sector. One example is climate change policy, which is based on a percentage for the whole sector. In such cases, individual farmers do not know what the measures will mean for their personal situation. This uncertainty causes them to anticipate what might be coming, for example by buying extra livestock so that they have a margin to 'give up' when the rules are tightened. This is how situations are perpetuated that will eventually have to be rectified by introducing even stricter policies and more stringent interventions.

Juridified policies often prove ineffective in practice

The farmers we spoke to during the dialogue sessions gave various examples that point to a long-standing trend: government policy and policy rules are becoming increasingly divorced from reality. More and more measures are being prescribed down to the smallest detail in statutory rules, a process known as 'juridification'. This tendency does not always help farmers to attain sustainability goals.

One example is the rule that maize must be harvested before 1 October⁵ and that a catch crop such as grass or winter rye must be sown to reduce nitrogen leaching. An explicit rule dictating precisely how it must be implemented puts farmers in a straightjacket, blocking solutions that might better suit an individual farm's local circumstances. Government would do better to simply prohibit nitrogen leaching into the soil or surface water, or to stipulate that land not lie fallow for more than three weeks. That would allow farmers to decide for themselves what to plant and when.

⁵ The deadline in 2021 was extended to 31 October.

The counterproductiveness of detailed regulation was also recently pointed out by PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency in a policy letter on the nitrogen crisis (PBL, 2021). If government chooses to set very strict nitrogen goals for the longer term, the risk is that policy choices that prove ineffective in practice will be retained for too long, according to PBL. In some regions, for example, investing in certain low-emission practices may result in residual emissions that, in the long run, exceed the goals set for the environment. Additional measures may then be required. Investment in low-emission sheds, for example, would then need to be depreciated at a faster rate. PBL also points out the risk that stringent rules can lead to a 'spatially indiscriminate' policy approach, resulting in largely ineffective nature restoration in the places where it is most urgent.

Policies that do not take agricultural business operations into account inhibit investment by farmers
The farmers who attended our dialogue sessions said that government policies are constantly changing, forcing them to adapt their business operations time and again at short notice.

In and of itself, we consider it justifiable for government to alter its policy, for example on the basis of new insights or democratic decisions. Government policy is simply one of the risks that every business owner must face. However, it is our view that government should, in all fairness, consider farmers' business cycles and the transition phase of their farms when shaping policy. The changes they prescribe will otherwise have too much impact on investment depreciation terms, crop rotations and other matters, making it impossible for farmers to make the necessary investment in time.

Proliferation of discrete measures is unmanageable for farmers

Another complaint, also discussed above, concerns the *proliferation* of policies: an endless stream of new rules, each governing a different aspect. We cannot disagree with the farmers about this. To date, government policy has focused primarily on individual aspects of sustainability. For example, discrete policies have been developed for the EU water quality targets and for various EU emission reduction targets. And it doesn't end there. With the Netherlands joining other nations in committing to full climate neutrality by 2050, the agriculture sector faces an even greater long-term challenge that will have more far-reaching consequences than the present nitrogen measures. That is why we believe government should take a comprehensive approach to measures in the agriculture sector, and stop simply imposing one individual measure after another on farmers.

Tight government control prevents farmers from engaging in the search for solutions

Our final observation is that government, by issuing highly detailed, prescriptive policies, is monopolising the problems. As a result, many farmers feel little sense of ownership over the sustainability problems affecting their sector. This can easily lead to a reaction in which farmers push the boundaries of what is allowed. We already see this happening on the ground, in fact. We mentioned above the purchase of additional livestock prior to an anticipated tightening of sector-level regulations. Another example illustrating a lack of problem ownership is that some farmers advocate investing in air scrubbers as a solution, and then fail to make adequate use of them.

Things turn out differently in practice

The problem goes beyond resistance by farmers, however. Municipal and provincial authorities sometimes also seem reluctant to endorse the national government's rigid regulatory regime. For example, they rarely, if ever, withdraw a permit when a livestock farm fails to meet the requirements of the Nature Conservation Act, even though they are obliged to do so (Raad van State, 2021). In addition, they continue to issue new permits to farms, even though the desirability

of doing so is questionable given the uncertainty about the environmental impact (Kuiper & Daalder, 2021 and NOS.nl, 2021). Permits are frequently issued for techniques whose environmental benefits have been demonstrated in models or pilot schemes but then fail to materialise in practice. For example, the Central Netherlands District Court recently found that housing animals in a certified shed system does not necessarily say anything about actual emissions. This led to the cancellation of permit decisions for 17 agricultural businesses and one slaughterhouse (Rechtbank Midden-Nederland, 2021). The result of this state of affairs is that sustainability goals are not being met and emergency regulation will be inevitable in the longer term.

4. Recommendations

Policies intended to foster sustainable agriculture currently emphasise the restructuring of agricultural businesses (buy-outs, expropriation) and the adoption of ever more detailed rules on how to farm. The uncertainty that this causes in the agriculture sector is stirring up considerable resistance, even among farmers who basically see a future in operating their business sustainably.

We do not dispute that restructuring is necessary. At the same time, however, we believe that more should be done to support agri-entrepreneurs who are willing and able to carry on their business in a sustainable manner. Government should make them part of the solution by allowing them to take responsibility for developing a future-proof (and in many cases multifunctional) business that is resilient enough to handle changes in policy. Government support for farmers by means of policies, money and expertise is indispensable for this.

It is important for government to clarify the sustainability criteria for different types of farms and to employ a performance certification system that can help individual farmers understand the steps they still need to take to become sustainable. Authorities must also enforce compliance, for example based on actual emissions data, if sustainability standards are not met. Another requirement, in particular in regions that are home to many farms, is to look for ways of applying regional sustainability objectives at the level of individual farms, with the national government and provinces supporting farmers in regional collective policymaking.

Below, we break down the foregoing into six specific recommendations and provide an explanation for each one. For each recommendation, we identify which tier or tiers of government we are specifically addressing.

[1] National government, provinces, water boards and municipalities: Provide maximum clarity on farm-specific sustainability standards⁶

It is important for farmers to have clarity about which sustainability standards they are obliged to adhere to on their own farm. Farmers need this clarity to ensure timely and appropriate investments that will make their business operations more sustainable or to adapt their revenue models.

The national sustainability policy has several goals, each of which has corresponding standards. These standards are set by different authorities. For example, phosphate and nitrate standards for complying with the EU's Nitrates Directive are set by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. whereas the ceiling for ammonia emissions by livestock farms is determined by the relevant

⁶ By sustainability standards, we mean environmental standards, animal welfare standards, biodiversity indicators, social welfare standards for employees, and so on.

province and is used to assess applications for permits under the Nature Conservation Act, among other things.

Despite these standards, the identified goals are not always achieved. For example, PBL (2020) found that if the current policy is maintained, a little less than half of the Netherlands' surface waters will fail to meet the nitrogen and phosphorus targets set for 2027. This is because the standards defined for these emissions are inadequate. Other targets, for example for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, have been established for the sector as a whole and have not been worked out for individual farms. As a result, farmers do not know what they need to do to stay within the limits. It is therefore very likely that the policy will have to be amended again soon.

In view of the above, we recommend that the various authorities responsible for setting standards provide maximum clarity for individual farmers about the sustainability standards they are required to meet. We advise making use of reference years. In other words, set standards not only for the next few years but also, where possible, for the periods thereafter (e.g. for 2030 and 2050) – something particularly important for young farmers. Ideally, the standards should be broken down into standards per plot of land and per building (shed), since these are the units that agri-entrepreneurs rent, lease or buy.

In addition, standards for individual farms should reflect the fact that not all types of land use are universally possible in agriculture. Every type of soil has its limitations from both an agricultural and an environmental perspective. As we have previously advised (Rli, 2020), land use should be tailored to the type of soil ('function follows soil').

[2] National government, provinces, water boards and municipalities: Give agri-entrepreneurs as much freedom as possible within the framework of government standards

Standards set by government can be generic or specific, depending on the parameter concerned and the particular farm's situation. In the latter case, permit standards are specified according to soil type, distance to water or proximity to nature or housing. Regardless of the distinction between generic and specific standards, we recommend that they should, as far as possible, be laid down in goal-conditioned provisions and that it should be left to the agri-entrepreneur to decide on the means used to comply with the standard. It goes without saying that attainment of the specified standard must be monitored and, if necessary, enforced (see Recommendation 4). We realise, however, that the necessary monitoring will require considerable effort.

[3] National government: Facilitate the establishment of an integrated sustainability performance certification system and create an independent authority to set up and monitor this system

Certification is a means of monitoring and verifying whether a farm complies with the demands of government or value chain partners. Certification is already being used for organic farming and for numerous sustainability labels (*On the way to planet proof*, *Beter Leven Keurmerk*, *Beter voor Koe*, *Natuur en Boer* and so on). Farmers are subject to numerous performance certification processes and regulatory bodies that stipulate – sometimes in general terms but sometimes also very specifically – how they are to operate.

Certification has a number of advantages, certainly if value chain partners and banks make use of certification systems that are compatible with, or if possible integrated into, the national government's own certification system. The process of certification aligns the many criteria that a business is required to meet and assesses the extent to which it complies with a current or future standard. It is then possible to differentiate between the specific circumstances of individual farms, for example by allowing for differences in the nature of farms, the technologies they use, their locations, and other factors. In addition, the certification process can be linked to systems that reward effort going above and beyond the standard. Last but not least, certification can be related to government oversight, with the need for government monitoring decreasing as compliance with the certification criteria improves. Value chain partners and the national government can make a case for taking a similar approach to sustainability performance certification in the EU's Farm-to-Fork strategy, making it easier for businesses to access international markets.

In our opinion, the following steps can lead to a sustainability performance certification system of this kind:

- Authorities provide clarity on the sustainability standards that farmers must adhere to (see Recommendation 1). The standards are based on what is possible in the region and are specified for each individual farm, where feasible and necessary. The standards pertain to groundwater level, water quality and minerals (in air and soil), crop protection agents (active ingredient per hectare), greenhouse gases, energy, nature, landscape, animal welfare and social welfare for employees in the next few years, in 2030 and in 2050
- A new, independent authority established by government explains how compliance with the sustainability standards will be ascertained. Actual measurement data should be used wherever possible. Indicator-based methods will be necessary in a number of cases, however, because the sensor technology is not advanced enough to perform actual measurements of all relevant parameters
- Farmers ensure that their records (dashboard/sustainability report) provide evidence of their sustainability performance
- Once a year, the independent authority performs a review, noting possible points of improvement, non-compliances and infringements of the law. If the review reveals infringements and more than a certain number of non-compliances, decertification follows. If there are many points for improvement and non-compliances, a consultant must be called in at the farmer's expense
- Depending on their progress, specific performance (e.g. bird conservation) or early compliance with standards set for 2030, for example, farms can be granted a higher certification rating (bronze, silver or gold). This system corresponds to the national Strategic Plan that the Netherlands is preparing under the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (see boxed text).
- Value chain partners may access the certification outcome if the farmer authorises the relevant body to share this information. Value chain partners can also require such authorisation in their terms of delivery, however
- The authorities are notified of any cases of decertification. They are responsible for administering penalties (see Recommendation 4).

We realise that it takes time to develop a sustainability performance certification system of this kind, and that it cannot be introduced overnight. We advise the Government to introduce the system gradually and in phases, making use of existing registration systems as much as possible.⁷

⁷ In the future, some farms will be issued an environment and planning permit under the Dutch Environment and Planning Act. The certification authority can then help municipalities by providing information on the status of these farms.

Plans for a payment scheme under the Common Agricultural Policy based on a sustainability rating

As we previously advised (Rli, 2019a), the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality is currently preparing a proposal to replace the per-hectare payments under the Common Agricultural Policy with a system of 'eco-schemes'. Under such schemes, farmers will receive per-hectare payments in accordance with a points system based on scores showing their performance on meeting various climate, soil, water and landscape goals (e.g. carbon sequestration, better soil and water quality, reduction in use of crop protection agents, and improvements in the quality of nature). In this system, farmers must achieve a minimum number of points for each goal. The number of points they accumulate determines their sustainability rating, e.g. bronze, silver or gold. Organic farming is, by definition, rated gold (LNV, 2021).

We believe that the national government should promote the introduction of an integrated sustainability performance certification system and an associated independent authority (with practical knowledge of the agriculture sector). We have outlined the advantages of this above. The independent authority we are advocating can also play a coordinating role with respect to government oversight. An added advantage of such coordination is that it fosters learning from best practices.

We recommend also using certification as a basis for the aforementioned system of differentiated per-hectare payments, which the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality intends to incorporate into the Netherlands' CAP Strategic Plan. Similarly, certification can serve as a basis for transition subsidies or for rewarding farmers who render eco-system services, for example landscaping, carbon sequestration, water retention, biodiversity restoration (field margins, herbaceous grassland, farmland and meadow bird conservation), access to footpaths, and so on. To supplement the payments under the Common Agricultural Policy, government can conclude generous long-term contracts for these services that will give farmers the necessary confidence to invest and adapt their business strategy.

[4] National government, provinces, water boards and municipalities: Commit to proper farm-level enforcement

Giving farmers more freedom and more responsibility for their sustainable practices makes proper enforcement all the more important. The authorities will remain responsible for oversight and enforcement. However, the outcome of reviews by the certification authority (including possible decertification for legal infringements) may actually result in less (or, occasionally, more) government oversight. It goes without saying that the responsibility for penalising farms that do not abide by the rules remains with government.

[5] National government and provinces: Be actively involved in regional collective policymaking

In our advisory report *The Sum of the Parts* (Rli, 2019b), we argued that the national government should play a more active role in the region and join with local stakeholders in developing transition agendas. The transition to sustainable farming also requires the national government to play a prominent role in the region to support the tasks at hand.

In some regions, the tasks are shared ones, for example to raise the groundwater level or restore biodiversity. Such tasks should be adapted into criteria for individual farms in regional collective

policymaking processes in which the farmers themselves are involved. The national government must play an active role in such processes, with the province offering support.

As we described in the previous section, diversity in the agriculture sector has rendered traditional lobbying and advocacy practices obsolete. The focus there is exclusively on allocating the profits or losses resulting from the negotiations. As things now stand, one farmer's gain may be another's loss, giving rise to unstable compromises (Smit, 2021). Recent case studies, for example on Schiermonnikoog (Van der Linde, 2021) or in Buijtenland van Rhoon (May & Verdaas, 2019), show how difficult regional collective policymaking can be. Farmers who face the daunting task of becoming more sustainable deserve tailor-made support.

It is important that regional collective policymaking should focus on joint problem-solving. In other words, the point is not so much to overcome differences but rather to invest in mutual respect and trust. Those participating in the policymaking process should do the following:

- recognise their interdependencies: farmers, authorities, value chain partners, consumers and other stakeholders need one another to attain sustainable agriculture
- be open-minded about the interests of all the stakeholders (farmers may be afraid of losing their livelihood, consumers may be afraid that food will become too expensive)
- search for objective answers to shared questions (e.g. how much productivity will a farmer lose after embarking on biodiversity activities?)
- care about one another (mutual respect leading to appreciation and trust)
- work together to determine the subsequent steps.

Many regions will be required to embark a new round of 'land use planning'. Some farmers are simply at the wrong location given their ambitions, while others have plots of land that they can no longer farm owing to stringent emission criteria or the impact of climate change, for example subsidence, salinisation or flooding. Spatial planning for housing, energy facilities, nature and woodland conservation or infrastructure may also require a reconsideration of existing land use. It is precisely in such cases that land exchanges (and the occasional relocation of a farm) may be appropriate. It may be useful in such situations to work towards solutions by engaging in co-creation.

[6] National government: Commit to improving the sustainability of the value chain and to changing consumer behaviour

The national government must encourage lenders, supermarket retail groups, marketing cooperatives and consumers to do more to share the responsibility for the transition to sustainability. Whether agricultural businesses can become more sustainable depends heavily on the extent to which their partners in the food value chain and consumers alter their practices and behaviour and support them in the transition to sustainable business practices. This is an ongoing point of concern. Farmers who switch to sustainable business practices need to seek out other sales outlets, adjust their production techniques and secure realistic prices for their sustainable products, especially in the conventional agricultural value chain (Baltussen et al., 2021). That means that value chains must cooperate closely to reverse the downward trend in food prices so that farmers receive a fair price for their sustainable products (Baltussen et al., 2018). New local value chains will also need to be created and new markets established, especially around cities. Farmers will also have to focus even more on the rapidly growing international market for organic food (Bionext, 2021). Value chain partners can help to unlock these markets for Dutch farmers. We advise the national government and the business community to pursue a sustainability strategy in Europe as well, based on sustainability performance certification, more goal-conditioned and less prescriptive policies, and the application of new technologies.

In addition, the national government should support the relevant stakeholders in concluding voluntary sustainability pacts. If the value chain partners fail to make sufficient progress towards sustainable practices and behaviour, the national government will have to impose measures (see boxed text).

Suggested regulatory measures for a more sustainable value chain

- Require the retail sector to have a fixed percentage of sustainable products on sale or on the shelves
- Require value chain partners to purchase a fixed percentage of sustainable products. For example, abattoirs would be required to source a fixed percentage of the animals they slaughter from sustainable livestock farms
- Set up a certification system for supermarkets and hotels/restaurants that have a certain percentage of sustainable food products in their product range. Following the Danish example, eco-labels could be awarded in the categories bronze (30-60% organic), silver (60-90% organic) and gold (90-100% organic)⁸
- Raise VAT on non-sustainable food products or lower VAT on sustainable food products
- Introduce a statutory restriction on the geographical distance (e.g. no more than a radius of 500 km) between a sustainable livestock farm and the source of its cattle feed.

Concluding remarks

In the foregoing, we described the direction in which government policy should move to promote sustainable practices in agriculture on the one hand and to offer farmers a future on the other. We expect that this will make it easier to highlight all that farmers have already achieved and will

⁸ It is partly thanks to this state-regulated certification system for the catering industry that Denmark leads the way in organic food consumption. The impact of the certification system is significant, as compliance is also mandatory for school cafeterias and childcare facilities (Food Nation, 2019).

continue to achieve. This may lead to greater public appreciation for their efforts, something that they are currently lacking.

APPENDIX Responsibility and acknowledgement

Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli)

The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (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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Jos Verstraten, Dairy farmer/member of the Boerenraad core group
Bjørn Volkerink, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality
Shera van den Wittenboer, Board of Government Advisors
Kees van Zelderen, Organic dairy farmer/member of the Boerenraad core group

Dialogue session Southern Netherlands, 19 February 2021, 10 a.m. to 12 noon

Anton Bartelen, Arable farmer
Thomas Broex, Fruit grower
Jos Verstraten, Dairy farmer
Pieter Vlemminx, Pig farmer

Dialogue session Central Netherlands, 19 February 2021, 2 to 4 p.m.

Gert-Jan Eggink, Dairy farmer
Pieter Evenhuis, Arable farmer
Annette van Gaalen, Suckler farmer / Leisure business
Douwe Monsma, Arable farmer
Leon Noordam, Arable farmer

Dialogue session Northern Netherlands, 22 February 2021, 10 a.m. to 12 noon

Evelien Drenth, Arable farmer
John Huiberts, Bulb grower
Klaas Schenk, Arable farmer
Wim Timmermans, Dairy farmer

Meeting with farmers, 18 November 2021

Evelien Drenth, Arable farmer

Pieter Evenhuis, Arable farmer

Annette van Gaalen, Suckler farmer / Leisure business

John Huiberts, Bulb grower

Douwe Monsma, Arable farmer

Leon Noordam, Arable farmer

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