CAP eco-schemes: Not all that glitters is gold, warn NGOs

Fewer than a fifth of eco-schemes, designed to reward environmentally-minded farmers in the EU, are likely to deliver on their stated environmental objectives according to a new report by prominent European NGOs which analyses member states' green plans for the agricultural sector.

The report, published on Tuesday (30 November) by the **World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), European Environmental Bureau (EEB**) and BirdLife Europe, is the first attempt to systematically catalogue and assess the 166 eco-schemes currently proposed in 21 member states' national action plans across the EU.

Through these plans, EU countries will set out how they intend to meet the nine EU-wide objectives of the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) while at the same time responding to the needs of their farmers and rural communities.

This includes an individually tailored list of so-called 'eco-schemes', a new instrument designed to reward farmers that choose to go one step further in terms of environmental care and climate action.

But it is currently unclear as to how EU countries will use this new policy instrument in their National Strategic Plans, the drafts of which are to be submitted to the Commission for approval by the end of the year.

While it is based only on drafts and currently available information, **the new report gives an indication of the direction of travel for many EU countries** and whether the €48.5 billion EU funding earmarked to be spent over 5 years in the post-2022 CAP is likely to pay dividends.

According to the report, as they currently stand, member states' proposed eco-schemes will fall "very short" of expectations. National experts concluded **that only 19% of eco-schemes are deemed likely to deliver on their stated environmental objectives**, while 40% would need significant improvements to be effective and 41% are "completely misaligned".

The assessment also concluded that many well designed schemes that are likely to deliver are either underfunded or likely to be outcompeted by less demanding and/or more financially attractive schemes.

Among the schemes listed as the worst examples included precision farming projects, which the report points out include no benchmarks or requirements for actual input reductions, and eco-schemes for no-till farming, which it warns "do not have any safeguards on the use of herbicides", including the hotly–debated glyphosate, nor requirements to apply crop rotations and constant soil cover.

"Not only does no-till have limited benefits as a standalone practice, but these schemes could even lead to increases in herbicide use, as the most common alternative strategy to ploughing for weed suppression," the report warns.

It was also critical of a number of eco-schemes targeted towards intensive livestock production, which "do not tackle the underlying drivers of pollution or excessive antimicrobial use" and could become "polluter-gets-paid" subsidies for intensive animal farming, the report warns.