Guarda Declaration on a sustainable future for Europe’s semi-natural areas

Heinrich Belting (D), Gerard Beltman (NL), Geert de Blust (B), Bart Boers (NL), Leonor Calvo (E), Paulo Castro (P), Leonardo Costa (P), Herbert Diemont (NL), Louis-Marie Guillon (F), Jan Jansen (NL), Esther Kieboom (UK), Graeham Kirkham (UK), Hilary Kirkpatrick (UK), António Lemos Santos (P), Ann Norderhaug (N), Agnar Hegrenes (N), António dos Santos Queirós (P), Eelco Schaap (P/NL), Raymond Schrijver (NL), Eugénio Sequeira (P), Paul Silcock (UK), Henk Siepel (NL), Anton Stortelder (NL), Joost Vogels (NL), António Veloso (P), Martin Woestenburg (NL).

That environmental policy is beneficial to economic growth is widely accepted. In the long term, environmental policy results in economic returns, which are often difficult to realize in the short term. For example, investments in the framework of Natura 2000, the greening of the CAP, the EU Water Framework Directive, the Soil Framework Directive and The European Landscape Convention or any policy equivalents elsewhere in Europe, may not produce short term returns, but will protect natural assets and economic returns in the long run.

Extensive farming is essential for the management of rough grazing areas such as heathland and other shrub and/or herbaceous vegetation including Corine categories such as “complex cultivation patterns” and “agricultural mosaics with significant natural vegetation”. These cover 24.2% of the European land, mostly allocated in the so called Less Favoured Areas for agriculture.

Extensive farming systems are less competitive in markets due to unfavourable conditions. Costs are not fully covered by market prices and subsidies, resulting in low incomes and a low potential for the investment. In many rural communities the social structure has been degraded by lack of employment and only old-aged people remain.

These extensive farming systems provide a range of ecosystem services such as biodiversity, amenity services, food security, landscape quality, water protection,
carbon sequestration, cultural heritage and living social structures. The cessation of these farming systems and land management and lack of a long term viable future will reduce these public goods and services. Once gone, restoration will be costly if not irreversible.

We are concerned about the level of, and lack of consistency in, support for extensive farming. There are differences in the eligibility of semi-natural land for Pillar 1 Direct Payments across Member States. Most semi-natural land is eligible in the UK and Germany, but not in Portugal or the Netherlands. There is not a level playing field, in terms of policy, competitiveness and incentive structures.

We recognize that funding is currently limited, but this should not preclude a more balanced distribution of resources in the CAP budget to increase support for extensive farming.

If the CAP is to achieve its aim of a competitive, sustainable and permanent agricultural sector, public payments need to be aligned much more closely with the delivery of public goods.

Our recommendations:

1. A consistent approach to the definition of Utilizable Agricultural Area and the area eligible for Pillar 1 Direct Payments for semi-natural areas across Europe.
2. Pillar 1 payments to be available to all extensive farming systems and extensively farmed areas, recognizing the need to adjust payment rates according to the management and labour required.
3. Pillar 2 payments should continue to be available to extensively farmed systems to provide targeted support, with a particular emphasis on positive investment for long-term sustainable benefit.
4. All payments must be directly geared towards targeted environmental and other public objectives, whether these are delivered through the current two pillar system or some future single pillar approach.
5. A more integrated and coherent funding package for the delivery of public goods and services, as defined earlier, including not only the CAP but also other EU sources, like the structural funds, as well as national and regional schemes.
6. There is an important role for measures which improve the competitiveness of extensive farming systems and help develop new market opportunities to reduce dependency on public payments.