



CAP vs Farm to Fork: Will we pay billions to destroy, or to support biodiversity, climate, and farmers?

The EU's current model of agriculture directs billions in EU taxpayers' money to fuel climate change, destroy biodiversity, and even undermine farmers' livelihoods. While the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is approaching a key vote, freedom of information requests show that farmers and agribusiness lobby group Copa-Cogeca, along with pesticides and food industry giants, are doing their best to stop the CAP reform from aligning with the new Farm to Fork strategy of the Green Deal.

1. Introduction

The post-summer 2020 start in the Brussels bubble was remarkably hot, and not just in temperature. The European Parliament is set to vote in October on the post-2020 reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which lays claim to more than a third of the EU budget.

The existing CAP, along with trade deals and market liberalization, has for [decades supported a farming system](#) that is both socially and environmentally broken. It favours those farmers with the largest land area, big land owners and companies. In essence the CAP has become an indirect subsidy to support EU-based food companies' international competitiveness.

Many – if not most - farmers depend on the CAP to stay out of bankruptcy after nearly all agricultural markets were liberalized, with a related collapse in prices. Farm subsidies are currently even [fuelling authoritarian regimes](#) in Hungary and [Czech Republic](#).

Yet while the CAP has helped the food industry and larger landowners, it has not prevented many farmers – both in Europe and in low-income countries – being driven into exploitation and indebtedness, or out of business altogether.

The CAP has failed to support farmers in making the transition towards sustainable farming and food sovereignty. Industrial farming practices are a major cause of biodiversity decline and a huge contributor to climate catastrophe.

The CAP has been supported by a close network of interests that block any change. This network is formed of a diverse group: ministries of agriculture across Europe, DG Agriculture officials, and the majority of members of the European Parliament's agriculture committee, have long teamed up with the big farm lobby group [Copa-Cogeca](#) and a wide array of food and agribusiness corporate lobby groups to keep the status quo mostly unchanged.

Enter the Von der Leyen Commission. Her [agenda for Europe](#) includes change to the way we produce, consume, and trade; restoring ecosystems, aiming for zero pollution; and supporting farmers' ability to make a living. The plans have been elaborated in the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy, presented by Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans, and the Environment and Health Commissioners Virginijus Sinkevičius and Stella Kyriakides. Targets have been set for 2030: 50 per cent reduction in the use of pesticides, 50 per cent reduction in antimicrobials,¹ 20 per cent reduction in fertilizer use. Also, by 2030 25 per cent of EU farmland should be under organic production – a tripling from today's situation.

The crisis we live in require drastic measures, which is why environmental groups call for even more ambition. For example, a European Citizen Initiative supported by CEO ('[Save Bees and Farmers](#)') calls for an 80 per cent pesticide reduction target by 2030. The Green Deal plans also contains serious gaps, such as not tackling dairy and meat overproduction. Having said this, nothing even close to these targets has ever been proposed by any previous Commission. Indeed, this sent shockwaves through the industries involved and their political allies.

To have a chance to succeed, it is essential that the CAP post-2020 becomes fully aligned with the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity targets. This is precisely why big farming and industry lobbies see pushing through the current CAP text – elaborated by the previous Juncker Commission –, that is not aligned with the Green Deal, as their best chance to derail these green strategies. A number of member states – and notably the German EU Presidency – are backing this disastrous plan.

Indeed, environmental lawyers ClientEarth [concluded](#) that no alignment of the CAP with the Green Deal would lead to great inconsistency. The Commission would be violating its legal duties, the organisation stated. In July 2020, [environmental groups called on Commission Vice-President Timmermans](#) "to take action to fully align the CAP reform proposal with the Commission's own climate, environmental and biodiversity commitments". They pointed out that independent assessments of the 2018 CAP reform proposals showed that these will fail to lessen the damage done to climate and biodiversity.

And the farmers? Many are facing precarious situations and are locked into farmers unions that do not support the transition to a new food system that the current climate, ecosystem, and biodiversity crises urgently requires. Indeed, some of these organisations push big business positions that run counter to many farmers' interests. In Brussels, Copa-Cogeca – a hybrid lobbying group consisting of of farmers' unions and companies – often sides with pesticide giants like BASF, Bayer-Monsanto and Syngenta, and with food multinationals like Mondelez, Nestlé, and Unilever.

¹ Antimicrobials (notably antibiotics) are heavily used in industrial livestock production, leading to resistant superbugs that kill an estimated 25,000 people annually in the EU alone, according to the WHO.

This report is based on several Freedom of Information requests to the European Commission, asking for lobbying communication and meeting reports related to the CAP and Farm to Fork Strategy, as well as interviews with experts and other sources. It looks at:

- the (coordinated) attacks on the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies by an alliance of lobbies, politicians and officials;
- the attempts to prevent the much-needed reform related to who benefits from CAP funding;
- the way in which Copa-Cogeca and wider agribusiness enjoy privileged access to key decision making for agriculture, notably via expert groups. One section focuses on the power of the French farmers' organisation FNSEA. (See case study 2.)

Box 1. CAP reform post-2020 – a recap

The proposal for the CAP post-2020 reform was published by the former Juncker Commission's (DG Agriculture) in 2018. After years of critique about the CAP's failings, this reform was supposed to make it greener and fairer. Importantly also, in the Commission's reform proposal, member states were given far reaching responsibility and control over how the CAP subsidies would be spent in the future. The now agreed [CAP budget](#) amounts to €391.4 billion for 2021-2027.

The proposals brought far too little meaningful change with regards to the issues of environment and inequality. The proposal was strongly criticized, for instance by [a European Court of Auditors report \(2020\)](#) which concluded that it would not do enough to halt the decline of biodiversity on farmland.

An internal evaluation published by DG Agriculture [states that](#) "biodiversity monitoring evidence indicates that the combined effects of the CAP have not been sufficient to counteract the pressures on biodiversity from agriculture".

[Researchers at Lund and Utrecht](#) universities showed how billions in EU agricultural subsidies are misspent, [saying that](#) "drastic change is required to reduce inequality and protect the environment", and making concrete recommendations how to shift support to farmers for implementing environment- and climate-friendly practices.

Célia Nyssens, Agriculture Policy Officer at the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), says that² while the Commission's proposals bring some welcome changes from the previous situation, they still contained important flaws. Giving member states more flexibility can be used for good, but also for bad: "The member states and the European Parliament's Agriculture Committee have actually further weakened the Commission's proposal. The lack of willingness of member states to challenge the status quo is most likely related to pressure coming from powerful national farm lobbies operating hand in hand with the agriculture ministries", she says.

This was the reason for a spectacular falling out between the Parliament's Environment Committee and Agriculture Committee before the summer of 2020, resulting in the Environment Committee refusing to continue their negotiations.

2. Copa-Cogeca's capture of EU Agricultural Policy: "a matter of tradition"!

Copa-Cogeca presents itself on its [website](#) as the representation of 22 million farmers and their families and 22,000 agri-cooperatives. Its secretariat in Brussels currently consists of 37 employees. [Copa](#) and [Cogeca](#) together registered a lobby spend of up to €2.5 million euros in 2018, according to the European Lobby Transparency Register.

In addition, the European Commission reimburses travel costs each time Copa-Cogeca national representatives come to Brussels for meetings of expert groups. Apart from this, some of its members also have their own offices in Brussels, as with the French FNSEA; or they have a secretary working from Copa-Cogeca's offices.

One of the oldest lobby groups around, Copa-Cogeca enjoys enormous and privileged access to the EU institutions. In a groundbreaking article in December 2019, [The New York Times](#) rightly pointed out that "European leaders have historically treated [Copa-Cogeca] not as mere recipients of government money, but as partners in policymaking."

As the NYT article reveals, Copa-Cogeca is granted private audiences with the Council's president prior to important meetings of European agriculture ministers (Council meetings). Environmental groups are denied the same opportunity, and have even been told that Copa-Cogeca's privileged access is a "matter of tradition".

According to Juliette Leroux,³ Agriculture Adviser to the Green group in the European Parliament, Copa-Cogeca does not even need to lobby very hard in the European Parliament, since "they have very outspoken defenders in the Agriculture Committee, like EPP spokesperson on agriculture Herbert Dorfmann, and the committee chair Norbert Lins, also EPP. Lins has sometimes been quite vocal on twitter, for instance attacking the European Court of Auditors for [their analysis](#) of the CAP proposal, even though as committee chair he ought to behave more prudently". She adds, "A large part of this committee sees Copa-Cogeca as partners in agriculture policy making, exactly like DG Agriculture does."

Another example is the [Civil Dialogue Groups](#) in DG Agriculture; these are dominated by Copa-Cogeca, its close allies, and industry lobby groups. In one group, the Copa-Cogeca delegation fills no less than 28 out of 72 seats. Copa-Cogeca, allied organisations and industry together occupy 68.4 per cent of seats in the arable crops group, and 73.6 per cent in the milk group. In 2019 Copa-Cogeca [chaired no less than eight out of thirteen](#) Civil Dialogue Groups.

Yet some of Copa-Cogeca's key interests and lobbying positions can actually clash with farmers' interests.

Copa-Cogeca is, as the name suggests, a twin organisation. Copa represents the farmers, Cogeca the agri-cooperatives. Copa was set up in 1958, just one year after the Treaty of Rome was signed, and Cogeca in 1959. A few years later, the two organisations merged their secretariat in Brussels.

The agri-cooperatives were originally farmer-owned processing and trading companies, as well as financial services providers. They were supposed to support farmers by defending their collective interest. However, the largest have now turned into multinationals themselves, such as FrieslandCampina or Rabobank, whose interests often clash with those of farmers.

3 Interview with Corporate Europe Observatory



Photo: Will Norbury | blissuh / Unsplash

To illustrate, dairy processors for example are looking to get the cheapest possible milk supplies, while farmers are looking for a fair price. European Milk Board's (EMB) Vice-President Sieta van Keimpema confirms to Corporate Europe Observatory that many farmers' organisations have become intertwined with the industry, which does not have the same interests. The dairy cooperative FrieslandCampina, Netherlands' biggest dairy company, is a case in point. Van Keimpema:

FrieslandCampina buys the milk off 85 per cent of Dutch dairy farms. They dropped the goal of the original cooperative to give farmers the best possible price for their milk. They supported the abolition of the milk quota, and now there is over-supply on the milk market; prices have dropped as a result.

EMB's vision is that farmers should get a decent price for their products, that cover the cost of production, including all the environmental and food safety measures they are required to take. Then you won't need subsidies.

Agricultural policy expert Gérard Choplin, a long-time insider from the political battles around the CAP, concludes: "By mixing up the interests of producers and cooperatives, the Copa-Cogeca does not defend producers." [In an article on the 2009 dairy crisis](#) following the abolition of the milk quota, Choplin noted that in Belgium in the midst of that crisis, the lowest price was paid by a cooperative, not private industry.

Sure enough FrieslandCampina [recently predicted](#) a large further decrease in the number of Dutch dairy farmers from fifteen to ten thousand, mostly due to "lack of a good future prospects, low income, and high investments".

As exposed in the shocking film '[The Milk System](#)', German farmers' worries that milk prices would drop following liberalization were quelled by their own organisations, who told them that China would buy up the surplus. This did not materialize since China pumped up its own milk production massively. Van Keimpema confirms that Dutch farmers were told the same thing by the Copa-member LTO. This is a clear example of how producers' interests can be sidelined by Copa-Cogeca and its organisational members.

Belgian Henri Lecloux,⁴ retired farmer and representative of the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), said that Cogeca has the upper hand over Copa. In Copa, he says, “there are people who *are* in favour of controlling the market, to defend farmers’ income. Not in Cogeca, which has a very pro-market liberalization stance, driving down the price farmers get for their products.” He also noted a strong ideological overlap between the dominant departments of the European Commission and Copa-Cogeca, with a shared focus on international competitiveness and growth.

Taking a closer look at the membership lists of [Copa](#) and [Cogeca](#), in some countries there is a remarkable overlap. In some countries, the cooperatives are members also of Copa, even though they do not represent farmers. In this way they have a voice in both organisations, ensuring the maximum chance for their business interests to be represented.

For instance, Copa has three Czech member organisations, only one of which represents farmers. The other two are the Agricultural Association of the Czech Republic (AACR) and the Agriculture Chambers, whose national federation also belongs to Cogeca. Zuzana Vlasatá, journalist at the Czech media outlet *Denik Referendum*, comments that “the AACR represents mostly the vast agricultural cooperatives that in the past were run by the state. After the Velvet Revolution, they were transformed into private companies, but remained big. In short: they are representatives of the industrial approach in agriculture.”

In the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, Copa’s member is the Boerenbond, while the Cogeca member is Aveve/Boerenbond. The Boerenbond has a holding, MRBB, that consists of dozens of companies selling animal feed, pesticides and fertilizers, and financial services. Flemish daily *De Standaard* [described](#) how in times when many farmers were on the brink of poverty, Boerenbond’s holding was flourishing. The paper noted that Flemish farmers do criticise their union for its economic power, but depend on it for advice on subsidies and EU regulations, or for financial advice.

Despite strongly diverging interests internally, Copa-Cogeca’s members have to come to unified positions on key topics, and this means there are winners and losers. Within Copa too, different sectors of farmers have opposing views. In the view of Henri Lecloux, the large-scale cereal farmers have been a dominant force in Copa, and they have been pushing for a pro-liberalisation and free trade agenda within the organisation.

In the view of Juliette Leroux, Copa-Cogeca does not really fight for fairer distribution of CAP subsidies: “It is the large cereal growers and big livestock farmers who receive the most because they have the largest surfaces. However, the dairy farmers are often losing out, also due to trade liberalization. It is a mystery to me why they are still supporting this failing model through their membership in the big farm unions.”

Indeed, why would farmers still pay their membership fee, if their organisations in Brussels do not defend their interests? Henri Lecloux explains that in various countries and regions, such as France and Wallonia, the big farmers’ unions have made themselves indispensable to farmers for the services they are able to provide, such as help in applying for the subsidies, and understanding all the legislation impacting farming.

But at the same time, farmer unions with diverging visions have attracted many new members across Europe. For instance, the European Coordination of Via Campesina ([ECVC](#)) unites organisations of small and medium-sized farmers who strive for food sovereignty (which entails a profound democratisation of the food chain), market regulation and agro-ecology. The [European Milk Board](#), instead of export subsidies and free trade agreements, wants a fair price for farmers that covers the cost of production including the environmental or other conditions that they are obliged to respect.

4 Interview with Corporate Europe Observatory

3. Farm to Fork and Green Deal opposed by big farm lobby and pesticide industry

Since autumn 2019 when the European Green Deal was taking shape, numerous attempts have been made by Copa-Cogeca and industrial lobby groups, as well as actors within the EU institutions, to try and undermine the Farm to Fork Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy, and rush through the CAP post-2020. In a meeting in November 2019, farm lobby Copa-Cogeca first warned the Commission [about the costs](#) that the Farm to Fork plans would generate.

Copa-Cogeca then invited Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans, who leads on the European Green Deal, to attend its February 2020 assembly. In this meeting, Timmermans pointed out how the CAP had both failed to ensure a good income for all farmers, and to achieve green goals. The [meeting report](#), obtained by Unearthed, Greenpeace UK's investigative media team, shows that while he got some praise, Timmermans was also told that the Farm to Fork's pesticide targets would "drive farmers out of business".

Commission Vice-President Timmermans for his part [told the organisation](#) that in his view "the European Green Deal will only be successful in the area of agriculture if it ensures income for farmers", which the CAP failed to do. How this will be guaranteed though, is the concern of all farmers' organisations. The EMB's Van Keimpema says that "our farmers want to produce more sustainably, but there is no guarantee how they will be compensated for these new measures. Currently profit margins are so low that farmers have to put in free labour. This does not allow for new investments."

Internal opposition

DG Agriculture was not happy with the Farm to Fork plans either. In June 2020, investigative journalism platform [Follow the Money](#) revealed how agriculture officials in February 2020 internally tried to fight the Farm to Fork targets. Top official [Tassos Haniotis wrote](#) in an internal document to other parts of the Commission that the target for increasing organic production was "excessive", and that "reducing the volume or value of a long set of very diverse substances is, from the point of view of public health, meaningless". He ignored the beneficial impact such a cut would have on the environment.

Haniotis even brought in climate change as a reason for not being too ambitious in cutting down on the use of pesticides, because of an increased risk of plant diseases. However it is precisely large-scale industrial monoculture cropping, [that is most vulnerable](#) to such plant diseases.

Pushing for postponement

Nevertheless the Commission pressed ahead with potentially ambitious targets on pesticide and fertilizer reductions. But then the Covid-19 crisis hit Europe. A delay of the presentation of the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies by at least two months became unavoidable. But lobby groups used the Covid-19 crisis to argue for further postponement.

On 2 April 2020 Copa-Cogeca [sent a letter](#) to Vice-Commissioner Timmermans (European Green Deal), and to Commissioners Kyriakides and Wojciechowski (Health and Agriculture, respectively) and their cabinets, calling for the "postponement of the presentation and adoption of the Communication on the Farm to Fork Strategy" while at the same time calling for "reaching a rapid decision on the ongoing legislative processes on the CAP post 2020". To increase impact, this letter was followed by [similar messages](#) coordinated with Copa members, such as the Dutch LTO.



A few days later the organisation also [called on MEP Norbert Lins](#) (EPP), Chair of the European Parliament's Agriculture Committee, to postpone "any decisions that are made without proper and adequate reflection". The farm lobby group probably knew its call would not fall on deaf ears here, because the EPP had already [published a statement](#) on 27 March 2020 calling for postponing the Farm to Fork "at least until after the summer". EPP's agriculture spokesperson Herbert Dorfmann argued that "it is surely not the right moment to impose additional rules on farmers. We are facing the biggest crisis that the agricultural sector has seen in decades." Norbert Lins MEP himself too tweeted support for this position, despite his role as Chair of a related key committee.

This echo chamber of calls for delay (and potential derailment) had no substance, as it was clear that the Green Deal strategies would in fact [not have an immediate effect](#) on farmers.

In contrast, Commissioner Kyriakides [told Copa-Cogeca](#) that both the Farm to Fork and the Biodiversity Strategy should be adopted "as soon as possible". As she explained, "the ambitions of the Farm to Fork Strategy will also have to be reflected in the CAP post 2020, so Member States will have to consider the objectives and targets of the strategy in their CAP strategic plans. Therefore Member States need clarity on these objectives and targets."

Not realistic

In late March 2020, pesticide lobby group the European Crop Protection Association (ECPA) [met with DG Agriculture](#) top officials and provided [a position paper](#) about the targets. ECPA said they understood that the Commission was under pressure “to respond to civil society”. In the meeting ECPA said that pesticide reduction goals “must be realistic and based on science.” And indeed, “the 50 per cent reduction figure disclosed is not considered realistic by the crop protection industry”.

ECPA also said it would soon “show how much the industry is investing and will invest in bio-pesticides and digital agriculture to help farmers use less chemical pesticides”.

In the same manner, the ECPA position paper, while seemingly embracing the Green Deal, called for “a careful assessment of trade-offs based on evidence, not rhetoric”. When implementing a pesticide reduction target, ECPA wanted an indicator to be added that would measure “the consequences that farmers will face if no alternative solutions are brought on time to the market”. Old claims – [often rebutted](#) – were repeated about organic agriculture being less productive and produce more greenhouse gas “due to more interventions in the field”.

None of these claims were supported with a single source of evidence, however.

Industry on the defence

All of this is clearly unsettling the agribusiness industry. Predictably, ECPA produced a report with figures that sought to prove economic damage due to the EU’s pesticide legislation. ECPA commissioned this [‘Low Yield Report’](#), obtained by Unearthed, from consultancy Steward Redqueen. It claims that due to the EU’s decisions to remove certain products from the market, farmers’ toolbox to protect their crops “has become depleted”. The report complained that “the socio-economic impact of this depletion has received much less attention than the environmental, biodiversity and health impacts of pesticides”.

Another argument used by [ECPA in a meeting with](#) Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides was that pesticides should not be “singled out by being the only input with reduction target, fertilisers and antimicrobials should also be covered”. The reasoning behind this call may be to strengthen the industry’s resistance by attempting to ensure that other industries, sensing a threat, may join the attack.

Syngenta, for its part, tried the national route. In April 2020 the company’s Warsaw office [requested](#) “an informal confidential, constructive and open discussion” with a Polish member of the cabinet of Agriculture Commissioner Wojciechowski (which was declined). They wanted to discuss some big questions on the future of agriculture in the EU, and how their industry would fit in with that. Syngenta also [requested two different meetings](#) to cabinet members of the Health Commissioner, which were also declined. Due to the Covid-19 crisis, Syngenta was informed that the Commission was not having individual meetings with companies, only their trade associations.

Syngenta tried again by saying that due to “anti-trust law compliance, individual companies cannot share sensitive information on innovation with the trade association”. Syngenta went as far as to claim that “the path towards more sustainable agriculture will be driven by individual companies that are investing in bringing innovations to farmers.”

European Green Deal published

Nevertheless, on 20 May 2020 the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy [were published](#), and included the new targets. The Commission also published [an analysis](#) of the links between the CAP reform and the Green Deal. It concluded that the Commission's CAP proposal "has the potential to accommodate the Green Deal ambitions"; on the condition that member states and the European Parliament would reinforce, and not weaken it.

But green NGOs [responded that](#) the CAP proposal had shortcomings to begin with, and that instead of relying upon member states' voluntarily action to implement the new targets, the Commission should make proposals to include them in the CAP legislative proposal.

Heavy lobbying against Farm to Fork

In the wake of the publication of the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategy targets, on 18 June 2020, Copa-Cogeca held its [Praesidia meeting](#), and invited Health Commissioner Kyriakides. Their message to her was three-fold: more funding would be needed; an impact assessment should be done to measure the effects on current farming; and reduction targets should be "based on science". Copa expressed they felt "left out" even though "the farming sector is most impacted" by the Farm to Fork. Questions from Copa-Cogeca members related to how farmers were supposed to compete on the world market, and "there is a lot of idealism in the Farm to Fork".

Copa-Cogeca's invocation of farmers' livelihoods seems rather opportunistic here, given it was rather unconcerned about farmers struggling to compete when in 2014 it [published](#) a "Common Declaration on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment" (TTIP) [together with the lobby groups of big business](#) (Business Europe) and supermarkets (EuroCommerce), in which they stated how they "strongly believe that TTIP will offer great opportunities for promoting trade and investment". Of course trade liberalisation is one of the biggest causes of the drop in farmers' livelihoods.

Copa-Cogeca followed up [with a letter](#) again targeting the Farm to Fork ambitions, saying that "imposing a reduction in the use of inputs in agricultural production is neither realistic nor desirable". To this, Commissioner Kyriakides countered that "ambition is necessary because of the urgent need to reduce air, soil and water pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, increase animal welfare, reverse biodiversity loss and tackle antimicrobial resistance". She said that most of these issues are directly related to farming practices, and that the Farm to Fork strategy should ensure farmers are better compensated for more sustainable production practices.

In the meantime, the pesticide industry also continued to try to get a handle on the situation. On 11 June 2020 ECPA [had a meeting](#) with the Health Commissioner where she pointed out that "more can be and should be done to reduce the overall risk and use of pesticides", for instance by promoting Integrated Pest Management (IPM), also using non-chemical methods to protect crops.

Kyriakides also wanted ECPA's support in supplying the "industry data needed to understand what is going on in Member States concerning pesticides". This had already been raised with ECPA in two earlier meetings with officials. However, [in the meeting report](#) it was noted that ECPA did not react to this call from the Commissioner during the meeting. However, the report continued, the day before the meeting, "ECPA sent an email to the Commission explaining that they are not in a position to provide data on the uses of the most common active substances supplied by their members in different Member States."

As recently [reported by Politico](#), there is at present no reliable and comparable data as to what pesticides are being used in what quantities in the different EU member states. Having such data is crucial to obtaining the 50 per cent cut in pesticide use. Since companies keep data on pesticide sales secret, the big question is how they will be made to disclose them.

On 25 June 2020, CropLife and BASF organised a [mysterious closed roundtable](#) with the Agriculture Commissioner, organised by the Ambrosetti Club Europe. Mysterious, because Corporate Europe Observatory was refused access to the invitation letters and the list of participants to this meeting, as it was claimed it would “harm the commercial interests” of the organiser.⁵

In the same month, [Bayer wrote to Commissioner Wojciechowski’s cabinet](#) that they were in a process to “share their thoughts, views and proposals with the Members of the European Parliament and at Member States level, through our industry associations of course, but also directly engaging as Bayer”. They were also keen to share them with “the relevant Commission’s Directorates, at the highest level”.

In the meeting that followed on 24 July 2020, [Bayer told Commissioner Wojciechowski’s cabinet](#) that the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies would force the company “to reinvent itself, particularly as a provider of solutions”. Worth noting, in this meeting Bayer confirmed its participation in discussions in some member states on their CAP strategic plans. Perhaps it is not a wild to guess to speculate that Germany is among them?

National farm lobbies chip in

Copa-Cogeca also mobilised its national members to weigh in.

Right at the start of the Covid-19 lockdown, the [Deutschen Bauernverband \(DBV\) had a phone conference](#) with the Agriculture Commissioner’s deputy Head of Cabinet, Cathérine Geslain-Lanéelle about the Farm to Fork. DBV admitted that “discussions within the Bauernverband are not very advanced and that for them it is not clear, if they have to be afraid of the new developments or if they could see it as a chance”. While Bauernverband acknowledged that “the green component” is important for the future, “efficiency and productivity are indispensable elements and less efficient system [sic] would not be acceptable”.

In [its input to the Farm to Fork](#) Strategy dated 13 March 2020, DBV makes call for additional resources – beyond the CAP – and research to help farmers reduce pesticides, which is fair enough. But it also echoed the pesticide industry saying that “a political reduction target of x percent is rejected as it is counterproductive. New groups of active substances are needed... especially in the view of climate change.”

Dutch Copa-member [Land- en Tuinbouworganisatie \(LTO\)](#) and the French FNSEA also weighed in against the Farm to Fork measures. LTO complained that “pesticide reduction measured in kilogrammes does not say anything about the environmental impact”, emphasising it would bring the message to decision-makers in The Hague. But this complaint was both exaggerated and premature, as the Commission proposed takes into account not only quantities used, but also the harmfulness of products.

5 CEO is appealing this decision.

4. Battle over CAP funding: who benefits, who will lose out?

According to [Eurostat](#), more than one out of four farms disappeared in the EU between 2003 and 2013. Behind this simple statistic is hidden the personal misery of four million families. It also underlines how the CAP tends to favour the biggest farms, leaving many others to go under. Despite the billions of taxpayers' euros spent, the CAP was simply not designed to maintain the livelihoods of these farmers. A variety of political groups, smaller farm organisations, and civil society have made [countless calls](#) to install a maximum (also called ceiling, or cap) to the subsidies that each farm could get, to ensure more equality. Money saved in this way could then get redistributed towards small operators, rural development projects, or the adoption of greener farming methods.

Instead, large swathes of public money [were pocketed](#) by some of the world's richest land-owners such as the Queen of England and the Prince of Monaco, and by corporate sectors like sweet makers, asphalt producers, and luxury catering companies. Despite powerful indignation for many years over such a situation, the Brussels bastion resisted any change.

In addition, shocking examples of (legalised) corruption and profiteering through land grabbing by government leaders and their friends in newer member countries like Hungary (Orban) and Czech Republic (Babiš) [were exposed](#), but still no visible action was taken.

In its [2018 proposal](#) for a CAP reform post-2020, the Commission finally did propose a compulsory ceiling to the CAP subsidies of €100,000 per farm. However, employment-related costs for farm workers could be subtracted from that amount, which would still help large players. The Agriculture Committee in the Parliament agrees to a mandatory cap, however it is still debating at what level. The Council, however, is blocking the proposal and has agreed on a position for a voluntary cap, which would again leave countries free to channel large funds to already rich owners.

In the [analysis](#) of European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), the Commission proposal would only affect very few of the biggest farms; according to European Commission figures, less than one per cent. "By not limiting the number of assets taken into account in the cap per farm, this measure only affects factory farms slightly, or has no effect at all", said ECVC. The organisation proposed a ceiling of €60,000 per farm.

Indeed, a preparatory paper for a meeting with a lobby group of big farmers from Romania [written by DG Agriculture officials](#) put forward the argument that the exemption of labour costs "recognizes the important role of larger farms in rural employment, and considerably mitigates the potential effect of reduction of subsidies on these farms".

Copa-Cogeca, unsurprisingly, [lobbied against putting a mandatory cap](#) on the subsidies. In a bilateral meeting with DG Agriculture in February 2018, Copa-Cogeca "expressed concerns about capping". In [preparatory document](#) for a meeting with the presidents of Copa and Cogeca in October 2019, DG Agriculture noted that the organisations "strongly object [to] mandatory capping". Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans, however, [in a meeting with Copa-Cogeca](#) in the beginning of 2020, underscored that the CAP's benefits "are limited to a smaller number of farmers and landowners".

Indeed, big farmer lobby groups at national level have been pushing their governments to turn the mandatory cap into a voluntary one. When in July 2018 a high level official of DG Agriculture was to meet with the Bulgarian Minister of Agriculture, Rumen Porodzanov, as usual a [scene setting document](#) was prepared for him. This paper noted that according to "the big Bulgarian producers" the Commission's proposal for a cap would not be efficient nor appropriate for Bulgaria, and that "the Bulgarian government will probably take this line and argue in favour of voluntary capping".



Photo: no one cares | @no_one_cares / Unsplash

The Commission in this document noted that Bulgaria was at that point setting a voluntary cap at €150,000 support per farm. If that scenario would be continued, inequality in how support was distributed would remain, the paper said: “20 per cent of biggest beneficiaries/largest farms [sic] would still get 90 per cent of direct payments”. This, it was concluded, would be “worse than the EU ratio, and the highest concentration of support”.

Right-wing populist Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Andrej Babiš owns companies that [receive tens of millions of euros](#) in CAP funding; unsurprisingly, then, the Czech Republic is [very strongly opposed](#) to putting any limit to the amount of money that a farming entity can claim, and [wants voluntary capping](#). A [Commission document notes](#) that Czech Republic “has the highest average size of agricultural holdings in the EU”, and that “the owners of the largest holdings have substantial influence on national politics”.

Babiš, a billionaire who [made his fortune via Agrofert](#), a massive agricultural and chemical conglomerate benefitting from both EU CAP funds and biofuels policy, has been under investigation for fraud regarding subsidies. A report by the European Parliament’s Budgetary Control Committee, from April 2020, said that [Babiš should not negotiate](#) on the EU’s next seven-year budget, and should resign as Prime Minister or sell his business if the conflict of interest was confirmed.

One Copa member, the Association of Private Farming of the Czech Republic (supporting family businesses and “the production of quality and environmentally friendly food products”), [welcomed the proposal of a mandatory cap](#). This shows that not all Copa members agreed with its position against the mandatory cap.

However, the President of the Agricultural Association of the Czech Republic, which is a member of both Copa and Cogeca, and which claims to represent “agricultural entrepreneurs” [sent a lobby letter opposing an upper limit on subsidies](#). He claimed that a cap would lead to less employment and less animals, with “irreversible” impacts on soil quality as a result.

Going further, he said that the cap would impact the newer EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe more than the older ones, and that these regions “will be further exposed to populist arguments of extreme political forces, and anti-EU rhetoric will be heard more loudly”. Ironically, it is Prime Minister Babiš himself who is known for his strong anti-EU rhetoric in internal politics.

Zuzana Vlasatá, journalist at the Czech media outlet *Denik Referendum*, comments that the Agricultural Association “are representatives of the industrial approach in agriculture. That explains why they are against capping – they don’t want to lose income from subsidies”.

An extensive analysis of this debate, and the positions taken by the different institutions, was [made by Berlin-based NGO ARC2020](#), specialised in agricultural policy. At the time of writing, the Agriculture Committee in the Parliament has agreed to a mandatory cap; however the different political groups are still debating at what level. The Council, however, under the German EU Presidency chaired by CDU/CSU Agriculture Minister Julia Kloeckner, is taking the opposite view. The member states have agreed on a position for a *voluntary* cap, which would again leave countries free to channel large funds to already rich owners.

In the 2018 CAP proposal, the Commission also tried to respond to the critique that large swaths of subsidies went to people or corporations who are not actually farmers at all. Then-Commissioner Phil Hogan introduced some criteria to define who is a “genuine farmer”.

This may sound encouraging, but this can still go terribly wrong and *harm* certain groups of farmers instead of helping them. Take Copa-Cogeca’s attempt to set a definition of a “genuine farmer”. In November 2019 it wrote to members of the European Parliament, putting forward [a list of methods on how to define](#) a ‘genuine farmer’ who would be eligible for receiving EU support. In this proposal, member states would be left free to choose “one or more” of these methods for their use. The options included “a certain percentage/level of income that must come from farming”, “a defined threshold of eligible hectares for direct payment support”, or “a minimum level of farming activity, eg having a minimum stocking density or a minimum area of land under tillage”.

Such criteria may lead to certain groups of producers to be excluded from any EU support, depending on what their national governments decide. Juliette Leroux, Agriculture Adviser to the Green group in the European Parliament, warns that producers with small plots of land for growing vegetables or small fruit production, or who have no surface area at all like beekeepers, may not get subsidies, even though they are economically very active. Leroux observes that this proposal “is telling of what Copa thinks is agriculture and what is not. If you exclude small farmers, you can make them disappear. This goes against stated aim of the CAP!”, she says.

However, the text that is currently discussed in the Parliament’s Agriculture Committee does not stand up for small producers, and backs the same idea as Copa’s. If not changed, this could lead to EU countries opting to define “genuine farmer” as meaning a minimum hectare or turnover, below which farmers would be excluded from support.

5. The big clash: CAP vote rushed through to undermine Farm to Fork?

Seeing that the CAP reform that started two years ago is not at all aligned with the Farm to Fork plans, one opportunity to do that would have been for the Commission to withdraw its 2018 CAP reform proposal. This has not happened. Another opportunity would have been for the Parliament to postpone its plenary vote on the CAP, and this is not happening either.

So what about the member states? Well, the German EU Presidency and German Agriculture Minister Julia Kloeckner seem hell-bent on reaching a deal on the CAP before the end of 2020, disregarding Farm to Fork. She also granted Copa-Cogeca the traditional⁶ high-level privileged access.

On 20 July 2020, Copa-Cogeca [tweeted thanking](#) the German EU Presidency and German Agriculture Minister Julia Kloeckner for meeting with Copa-Cogeca's Secretary-General Pekka Pesonen and Copa's President Joachim Rukwied, also President of Deutschen Bauernverband, just ahead of the council meeting. At this Council meeting, led by Kloeckner, the EU countries agreed on a position in favour of the voluntary cap to CAP subsidies, not the mandatory one....

At the end of the summer, another Agriculture Council meeting on the CAP took place in Koblenz.

In a letter dated 26 August, 400 civil society organisations [called upon the agriculture ministers](#) to spend taxpayers' money on an agriculture policy that is in line with the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, and that replaces per hectare payments with the principle of "public money for public services". They said:

[T]he post-2020 CAP reform represents a major opportunity for the EU's food and farming sector to transition into a sustainable system. We challenge the German presidency to bring the CAP reform in line with climate and biodiversity goals, and to end the decline in farm diversity and numbers. The path you are currently on is failing in all these areas, whereas you should use the ongoing negotiations to write a new page for our agriculture. Do not compromise our future! Act!



Copa-Cogeca on the other hand, was invited in Koblenz and [granted the floor](#) to directly address all EU agriculture ministers.

⁶ In 2018 during the Austrian Presidency Copa-Cogeca similarly had a high level event featuring Commissioner Phil Hogan and various DG Agriculture top officials as speakers. EU Presidencies have indeed become corporate lobbying hotspots, with some even receiving corporate sponsorship. (See Corporate Europe Observatory's 2019 report '[Captured states: when EU governments are a channel for corporate interests](#)')

But [as reported](#) by NGO ARC2020, who follows the CAP closely, in a Council document dated 3 September 2020 the German Presidency made some proposals that would actually weaken some of the CAP's environmental aspects, such as eco-schemes (a [policy tool](#) to promote environmentally beneficial practices).

In the run up to the October plenary vote in the Parliament, lobby events are accelerating.

Agriculture Committee chair Norbert Lins (EPP) and Mazaly Aguilar MEP (from the Spanish far right Vox party) were the speakers in a [webinar](#) organised by the Consumer Choice Center, an [organisation paid](#) for by Big Tobacco (and previously the Koch industries), just before the summer break. It is unclear why MEPs – especially Lins as committee chair – would choose to participate in any event organised by a tobacco-backed organisation, [taking into account](#) the UN agreement the EU is a signatory to that aims to block tobacco-lobbying.

There are also several corporate-sponsored, high-level events organised by well-known Brussels media outlets. In both cases, Conservative MEP Herbert Dorfmann is the only speaker from the Parliament. On 1 October 2020 the lobby association of food multinationals, FoodDrinkEurope, presented [a Euractiv event](#) entitled “The Business End of Farm to Fork: How can companies help deliver truly sustainable food systems?”, where Dorfmann spoke along with a FoodDrinkEurope lobbyist. No NGO or other diverging voice was invited.

And on 12 October 2020 [Politico is bringing an event](#) sponsored by pesticide lobby group ECPA to discuss the impact of the Farm to Fork strategy on the “competitiveness of European farming”. The event will be introduced by ECPA's Director General Géraldine Kutas and will feature Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides, Herbert Dorfmann again, a WWF speaker, and a representative of CEJA (an organisation closely aligned with Copa-Cogeca) on the panel.

Other, global developments should also to be take into account.

At Politico's online Food and Agriculture Summit on 25 September 2020, the US Under-Secretary of Agriculture for Trade Ted McKinney called the EU's Farm to Fork strategy “misguided”. Regarding the reduction targets [Politico quoted](#) McKinney as saying “I think we're setting up for a battle royale if those aspects of Farm to Fork go [ahead].” He also claimed that 35 countries have already written to the EU about it.

But US agricultural economist Charles Benbrook⁷ dares to hope that messages like these may be something of⁸ the past under a potential Biden administration. In the US too, farmers are very aware that the environment is degrading, the climate is changing, and that political support for subsidies is dwindling. Benbrook says that in a possible US Green Deal scenario, added funding for farmers “will be justified by, and win sufficient support *because* of investments in soil health, water quality, and soil carbon sequestration. As a result, the posture and pressure from the US on the EU on trade and farm supports will dramatically change compared to today”.

7 Communication with Corporate Europe Observatory

8 Communication with Corporate Europe Observatory

6. Conclusion

The science and everyday reality show us that business-as-usual scenario for the EU's agriculture policy is not a viable option for the climate, biodiversity, food production and farmers. The CAP must be aligned with the European Green Deal objectives, or the green promises of the Von der Leyen Commission will be strongly undermined. The CAP must also be adjusted to distribute subsidies more fairly among farmers, and support them in meeting the green objectives. Otherwise, public support for this massive spending programme will dwindle even further.

As this report has shown, an alliance of Copa-Cogeca with industry and agriculture decision-makers is headed in the opposite direction, rushing ahead to get a deal on the CAP, while putting the brakes on the Farm to Fork measures. EU institutions and member states, responsible to these and future generations for doing everything in their power to address the climate and biodiversity crises, will have to be pushed to take immediate measures against the privileged access granted to these lobby groups blocking any progress, such as exemplified by the civil dialogue groups and the access to Agriculture ministers ahead of Council meetings.

The lobby documents obtained for this research have shed light on what is only the beginning of a big lobby battle against the EU Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies. Tactics used by Copa-Cogeca and the pesticide industry include calls for delay and impact assessments, national lobbies contacting officials or Commissioners of the same nationality, and making claims that the proposed targets would not be realistic nor effective.

Just when public awareness has risen to a critical level about climate and biodiversity collapse, this lobbying could mean that CAP billions may not get spent to pay farmers to adopt ecological production methods. Farmers should be given guarantees that investments in that direction will pay off, with prices reflecting true costs and generating a decent living. Only in this case will farmers be able to support the green objectives; and that support is crucial. That support is hard to get as long as farmers' representatives are intertwined with agribusiness interests, and their incomes are being threatened by free trade agreements.

There are many proposals. Ten years ago, the ground-breaking UN-led International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) resulted in [the report 'Agriculture at a Crossroads'](#), showing ways to shape a resilient agriculture that can feed people, sustain livelihoods and human health, and be environmentally and socially sustainable. Forty authors recently published [a new book](#), 'Transformation of our food systems – the making of a paradigm shift', ahead of the UN's 2021 Food System Summit. This book builds on the IAASTD report, and points at the need for a paradigm shift in the perception of the global food system.

The lobby documents have also shown how combatting inequality by putting a mandatory limit on how much one farmer can receive in subsidies, is being opposed by the majority member states as well as Copa-Cogeca. Even the definition of what a 'genuine farmer' is, might exclude certain small producers from access to support when Copa-Cogeca's advice is being followed. This means that the new CAP again risks to support big land owners over the average farmer.

Social movements, progressive farming organisations and every concerned citizen will have to be most alert in the coming time, and closely scrutinise every step taken by the EU institutions and member states that impact on our food and agriculture.

Case study 1: Privileged access for Copa-Cogeca and industry in DG Agriculture

Copa-Cogeca enjoys a close relationship with DG Agriculture; indeed, their respective offices are located right across the street from one another. The European Landowners Organisation (ELO) is also located at the same address as Copa-Cogeca. Documents obtained by Corporate Europe Observatory illustrate the nature of the close relationship between the public officials at DG Agriculture, and the lobby group; this goes beyond the typical institution-lobbyist connection.

To further its lobbying Copa-Cogeca often collaborates with industry associations such as pesticide lobby group ECPA, food lobby group FoodDrinkEurope, or commodity trader lobby group CELCAA. For example in April 2019 Copa-Cogeca, FoodDrinkEurope, and CELCAA had [a joint meeting](#) with DG Agriculture.

This was just one month before the European elections. At the meeting the lobbyists and officials held a joint brainstorm about a “high level agri-food event with important trade angle”, to be held in autumn 2019 targeting the incoming MEPs. The lobby groups indicated that they preferred an exhibition-style event within the European Parliament, “to showcase the importance of trade for agriculture and food and to ensure presence of MEPs”.

The lobby groups were clearly expecting DG Agriculture’s support for such an event. Sure enough, DG Agriculture officials replied that they would help arrange several Commissioners to appear: “our Cab[inet] will liaise with the cabinets of those Csrs [Commissioners] to prepare the ground”. In addition, it is noted that while DG Agriculture would not contribute with money, they “expressed availability to help where possible in the organisation of the event.”

While it is unclear whether this event happened eventually, [a previous event with the same set up](#) did take place one year earlier. This event featured the participation of Phil Hogan, then-Agriculture Commissioner, as well as “lead negotiators from DG AGRI and DG TRADE”. Hogan became Trade Commissioner in the Von der Leyen Commission until his resignation in August 2020.

Apart from frequent bilateral lobby contact, in meeting officials or on the phone, Copa-Cogeca can rely on ample face time with DG Agriculture officials through the so-called Civil Dialogue Groups (CDGs) (also termed Commission expert groups). These groups serve to provide DG Agriculture with advice on new policy and legislation, including on the CAP.

Expert groups of the Commission had previously come under fire, as numerous of these groups were dominated by industry ‘experts’, and therefore were in fact mere lobby platforms. [In 2011](#) and [again in 2014](#) the European Parliament decided to freeze the budgets of all of these groups, demanding that an end should be made to industry’s domination over them.

As [Corporate Europe Observatory reported](#) in 2014, in DG Agriculture’s expert groups, “80 per cent of the members came from large farming organisations and the food industry (eg supermarkets, commodity traders etc)”. Copa-Cogeca alone occupied a stunning 442 out of the total 943 seats. If a group’s meeting was scheduled at a time not convenient for COPA members, sometimes the Commission would reschedule.

After an investigation, in 2015 the European Ombudsman Emily O’Reilly [concluded](#) that DG Agriculture should explain how it had improved balance between economic and non-economic interests in its groups. The 80 per cent economic versus 20 per cent non-economic [had not changed](#). She also advised to limit the size of the groups, to avoid smaller organisations being marginalised.

The response from the Commission was that it has an 'open door policy' where anyone can apply to become part of a Civil Dialogue Group. This completely ignores the structural inequalities (financial, power) between different farm groups, between industry and NGOs, etc.

Up until today, the situation has not fundamentally improved.

In the [Civil Dialogue Group](#) on Direct Payments and Greening, the Copa-Cogeca delegation fills no less than 28 out of 72 seats. Copa-Cogeca, allied organisations and industry together occupy 68.4 per cent of seats in the arable crops group, and 73.6 per cent in the milk group.

In 2019 Copa-Cogeca [chaired no less than eight out of thirteen](#) CDGs. This gave them considerable influence over the agenda of these meetings, as well as for instance what external speakers are invited. In a meeting about the functioning of these Civil Dialogue Groups in December that year, several participants [expressed discontent](#) with the situation, and asked for a Code of Conduct for the chairs and vice-chairs of the group, "to avoid abuse of power during meetings".

Chairs are supposed to be neutral and not act on behalf of their organisation in the groups. Organisations with just one member in a group, would not even try to obtain a position as chair, as they would not be able to fully participate.

In this meeting, the Commission mentioned the option to "rationalise the number of meetings", to improve efficiency. This would have been welcomed by civil society organisations, who have limited capacity to take part in such groups. But the obtained documents show that Copa-Cogeca argued in the opposite direction.

[In January 2018 the organisation wrote](#) bilaterally to DG proposing for instance that "more regular meetings between the Chairmanships of the CDGs should be organised" on international issues. They also suggested building in "more flexibility" when it comes to the number of meetings, for instance in case of a "relevant policy reform". This would again add to the number of meetings.

Attached to the proposals was Copa-Cogeca's own internal meeting agenda, noting it would like to "strongly encourage the Commission to take due note of the calendar of internal meetings of Copa and Cogeca to prevent potential conflicting dates". The organisation expressed great appreciation to DG Agriculture, expecting "the continuation of the contacts with DG AGRI services, which we strongly believe contributes to the success of EU policies."

In another bilateral meeting with the Commission in February 2018, Copa-Cogeca even [questioned the role of NGOs](#) in the Civil Dialogue meetings, and proposed a dedicated workshop just between Copa-Cogeca and DG Agriculture, "to discuss about the future of CDGs". In November 2018, at yet [another bilateral meeting](#) with DG Agriculture on this topic, Copa-Cogeca demanded "active involvement as regards the composition of the CDGs after 2020". This means the organisation is determined to keep these groups within their control and not lose ground to NGOs for instance.

In response to DG Agriculture's suggestion to have more virtual meetings using web-conferencing, the organisation replied that this could be explored "as an option for urgent ad-hoc meetings", but underlined that "lobbying remains a face-to-face activity".

Célia Nyssens, Agriculture Policy Officer at the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), confirms that "the reform of these dialogue groups has not changed as much as it was supposed to. They are still very much dominated by Copa-Cogeca and economic interests." Nyssens finds that these meetings could have been made more useful, but that Copa-Cogeca is blocking changes to that end. For instance, NGOs like EEB have been calling for a reduced number of participants to these meetings to allow for a more interactive format and meaningful debate, which Copa-Cogeca opposed.

In February 2019 [another 'stocktaking meeting'](#) on the civil dialogue groups took place, to which all its members were invited. The participants' list attached to the meeting report revealed the balance of power at that point: out of 44 stakeholder attendees, three were farming/farmer unions with differing views and three environmental or health NGO representatives. The rest of the seats were occupied by Copa-Cogeca (11) and a large variety of industry associations.

Sieta van Keimpema (EMB) says that the civil dialogue meetings should have ensured a true dialogue and an opportunity for the Commission to obtain information. Instead, "the days were filled with presentations, time for discussion was extremely short". Henri Lecloux also says that in the meetings of the CDG on milk, the time was taken up to a large extent by presentations by Copa, Rabobank (member of Cogeca), and Eurocommerce representing the supermarket chains.

Another evaluation of these expert groups is under way, but Van Keimpema says that "Copa-Cogeca and the industry do not want to give up their seats, and we are not even able to bring so many people." Signs that DG Agriculture intends to change the approach regarding the composition of the groups have yet to appear.

Case study 2: FNSEA, France's agribusiness war machine in the name of farmers' defence

Copa-Cogeca has always been a key player in Brussels CAP debates, but the national farmers' associations that make up its membership, such as the French Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles (FNSEA) also play a fundamental role. More so since many important aspects of the CAP are being increasingly [renationalised](#).

Its motto might be "The united voice of farmers and their cooperatives in the European Union", but Copa-Cogeca's positions have to accommodate sometimes conflicting views: the various national federations of farmers and cooperatives composing its membership represent rather different types of agriculture and, sometimes, agribusinesses. As a consequence, national farmers' unions such as the FNSEA often need to, and do, lobby EU decision-makers for their own interests in addition to Copa-Cogeca's activities.

France receives the [highest amount](#) of CAP subsidies in the EU, and its government considers the CAP a strategic national priority in EU budget negotiations. Successive French governments' positions in Brussels have remained close to those of the FNSEA,⁹ regardless of political orientation. On 18 September 2020 FNSEA's President Christiane Lambert was [elected Copa's President](#), the first woman to ever be elected to these two positions.

FNSEA is much more than just a farmer's trade union: it has been the co-manager, together with large sections of the French State, of France's agricultural system for the past 50 years.¹⁰ Created in 1946, FNSEA has by far remained the largest farmers' union in France, with its young farmers' branch Centre National des Jeunes Agriculteurs (CNJA – now JA).

Key to the union's "[war machine](#)" power are the local agricultural chambers, who provide very important services to farmers such as navigating CAP subsidies and providing technical support and training. France's 111 agricultural chambers have a total budget of [€750 million](#), and FNSEA currently controls the absolute majority in [all of them but seven](#). The national federation of agriculture chambers (APCA) lobbies decision-makers in Paris and Brussels, where it is the other French full member of COPA.

Despite [an agrarian ideological tradition professing the unity of the agricultural world](#), the FNSEA represents many different farming interests, with a composite membership representing regions, categories of farmers, and [31 specialised associations](#) (cereals, oilseeds & protein crops, milk, meat, fruits & vegetables, wine etc).

"Farmers" are by no means a politically and economically consistent group. [Internal negotiations are permanent](#) within the union to combine, for instance, the interests of crop growers and livestock farmers, wine producers, small and large farms... While crop growers such as the powerful associations of French wheat ([AGPB](#)) and sugarbeets ([CGB](#)) producers have historically tended to [dominate](#) the union, these negotiations are never easy. The four other farmers trade unions in France, Coordination Rurale (more conservative), Confédération Paysanne and the much smaller MODEF (both more progressive) are all [splinter groups](#) from the FNSEA; but never managed to seriously challenge its dominance. The JA formally belongs to the FNSEA, but has some political autonomy and tends to defend [more progressive positions](#).¹¹

9 Fouilleux, Eve, and Matthieu Ansaloni. *The common agricultural policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

10 For French readers, the book *La forteresse agricole: une histoire de la FNSEA* (Fayard, 2004) by investigative journalist Gilles Luneau is an absolute must-read on the subject.

11 For instance, French MEP Jérémy Decerle, a farmer and former JA president until he was elected an MEP in the Renew group (on the LREM list created by current French president Macron), is [calling](#) these days to "rethink the CAP subsidies per hectare to get them to support workers more", which departs from FNSEA's position on the matter.

The FNSEA is also the only farmers' union sitting in the French Agriculture Council (Conseil de l'Agriculture Française – CAF), an organisation it [created](#) in 1966 that includes the Crédit Agricole (the largest bank providing loans to French farmers), the Mutualité Sociale Agricole (French farmers' health and pension fund) and Groupama (a farming insurance that has now become a global insurance company).

According to the FNSEA's [EU lobbying registration](#), all the organisations members of the CAF are represented in the EU through a common lobbying structure called the [European Bureau of French Agriculture](#) (Bureau Européen de l'Agriculture Française – BEAF), with a [lobbying budget](#) between 300,000 and 400,000€ per year. The BEAF also represents many specialised national associations who also belong to the FNSEA, including the powerful associations of French wheat ([AGPB](#)) and sugarbeets ([CGB](#)) producers – AGPB for instance [chairs](#) COPA's cereals working group. FNSEA also [declares](#) a 800,000€-900,000€ lobbying budget in Paris.

Opposing the European Green Deal in Brussels

FNSEA's [position](#) on the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies has been hostile from the start. Already clear in its [March 2020 submission](#) to the public consultation, this is reinforced in FNSEA's [letters](#) to French Commission officials such as Industry Commissioner Thierry Breton, and [Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle](#), then-Deputy Director of the EU Agriculture Commissioner's cabinet.¹² FNSEA used very strong language, opposing engaging farming "on the path to degrowth, with uncertain environmental benefits". It asked for spanners to be put in the wheels, calling for impact assessments on farmers' revenues for each measure "that could be seen as a constraint or a norm", opposing quantitative pesticides and fertilisers reduction targets as these would be "disconnected from any scientific approach", and that existing toxic pesticides are only replaced "once an alternative is available". They did not utter a word on the need for CAP subsidies to be spent on supporting farmers towards more environmentally friendly practices. FNSEA opposes any hard, binding environmental measure at the EU level that would be tied to CAP subsidies, hoping it can sufficiently influence France's own Strategic Plan¹³ to its wishes.

For this, it can try to use its various lobbying and political allies in Brussels. It finds common ground with Copa-Cogeca and many of its other members, but FNSEA also belongs to dozens of specialised EU lobby associations through its own internal specialised associations – there is more or less one for each different agricultural product in Brussels – and most oppose the Farm to Fork Strategy (see for instance the [position](#) of UECEBV, the EU lobby of livestock and meat industries).

Other structures, such as the [European Landowners Organisation](#), think-tanks such as [Farm Europe](#), and lobby consultancies can all help by providing insights, lobbying services, and access to decision-makers.

FNSEA's interests in Brussels of course count on the support of France's Permanent Representation and the French Agriculture Minister at Council meetings. The French Government's current position may also, nevertheless, be influenced by voters generally very supportive of the Green Deal, with an eye on the 2022 presidential elections.

¹² Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle is the former Director-General of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) (2006-2013), and was the EU candidate for the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). She was previously the Director-General of the French Ministry of Agriculture and Food. She has now left Wojciechowski's cabinet and become Director of Veterinary and Plant Health Questions, Food and Forestry in the Council's General Secretariat's DG LIFE (Agriculture, Fisheries, Social Affairs, Health).

¹³ Under the proposed new CAP, each member state is expected to draft a Strategic Plan to tailor the CAP's implementation to its own context, the latest step in this policy's renationalisation.

In the European Parliament, FNSEA's interests have lost a bit of weight in the current legislature because of the relative demise of their traditional ally, right-wing party Les Républicains (LR), member of the European People's Party. With only one MEP left in the The Agriculture Committee, LR has been replaced by Macron's more centrist party La République en Marche (Renew group) and the extreme-right party Rassemblement National, the latter usually considered too extreme by the others to have much influence in the committee, now [dominated](#) by German and Italian MEPs. But the EPP itself remains an ally: as we write, MEP Norbert Lins, the EPP chair of The Agriculture Committee, is echoing the position of the agribusiness industry by [calling](#) the Vice-President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, to do an impact assessment of the Farm to Fork strategy, taking into account the impact the strategy might have on farmers' income and agricultural production levels in the EU, a tweet "liked" by Copa-Cogeca, Euroseeds (the seeds lobby), the European Landowners Organisation, a BASF lobbyist, a sugar industry lobbyist, one of Farm Europe's directors...

Despite its opposition to a green CAP reform, the union is well aware that climate change is a reality for farmers, with more and more droughts, late frosts, and extreme weather events, and it has recently adopted a new [strategy](#) to "turn the climate challenge into an opportunity for agriculture". Their plan, however, is entirely voluntary. It includes reaching carbon "neutrality" by 2050 by cutting CO₂ emissions, increasing carbon sinks, and using 100 per cent carbon-free energy sources, which positions their members to benefit from public subsidies planned for the ecological transition at the national and EU levels. Some of this is laudable of course (such as increasing carbon sinks through eg agroforestry even though the ways soils can really stock CO₂ in the long run remain largely [unknown](#)), but voluntary measures are weak, and some proposals such as subsidising the production of agrofuels are worrying; as the [EU's biofuels policy debacle](#) demonstrated, the latter are incentives to destroy biodiversity and burn soil carbon.

Representing farmers, but which ones?

Farmers' despair and political [violence](#) in France gives FNSEA a lot of leverage, all the more so that there has always been a strong support for farmers in the French public opinion (much less for the agribusiness industry). As such the union tends to get what it wants from French governments, including recently a [derogation](#) on the use of neonicotinoid pesticides to treat sugarbeets despite France's banning these destructive insecticides in 2018.

But whether the union is really using this leverage to address the root causes of farmers' woes is debatable, because it is dominated internally by both large, export-oriented crop growers, and agribusinesses. Just as with Copa-Cogeca, agribusiness interests are very powerful within FNSEA, and for decades the union has embraced the industrialisation of agriculture.

The blurring within the union of the interests of farmers with those of large agribusiness corporations was never as visible as under FNSEA's former President, [late Xavier Beulin](#). Beulin was born a farmer, was FNSEA's chairman between 2010 and 2017, and also Chief Executive of multinational corporation [Avril](#), the largest oilseed and protein crop processor in France.¹⁴ Avril's main shareholder is the French Federation of Oilseed and Protein Crop Producers (FOP), itself one of the specialised associations of the FNSEA. Beulin was also the president of the European Oilseeds Alliance, and sat on the board of many other high level public and private institutions. This multiplication of roles gave the man [a lot of power in French politics](#), as well as the possibility, according to former MEP Corinne Lepage, to use COPA to [defend its own personal economic interests in EU biofuels policy debates](#).

14 For the past four years, Avril has been among the [biggest clients](#) of Brussels' lobby shop Hill & Knowlton.

Under the current FNSEA President, Christiane Lambert, the confusion of interests is not as visible. But, be it at the [local](#) or [national](#) level of the union, the interests of agricooperatives, and all the agribusinesses they control, have a huge influence on the union's positions. The largest French agri-cooperatives are multi-billion euros businesses that control hundreds of private agribusiness and food companies.¹⁵

FNSEA's inner contradiction is that the interest of such agribusinesses is to source their supplies at the cheapest possible price to be competitive on international markets, a strategy supported by the French state and the EU's trade policy, which goes directly against the interests of farmers who need to earn a decent income. The strategic goal of the union to industrialise French agriculture has created a very powerful industry, but also led to the destruction of family farms and rural communities. Today, more than half of French farmers' revenue would be [negative](#) without CAP subsidies, which act as an [indirect subsidy](#) to support EU agribusiness industries' international competitiveness. [The overall trend is towards a worsening of the situation](#). FNSEA strongly [defends](#) the need to keep CAP subsidies flowing to keep the poorest farmers out of bankruptcy (the CAP budget until 2027 has already been agreed in July 2020 and France is expected to receive €62.4 billion), but this position also serves the interests of its agribusiness members.

Another key ingredient to FNSEA's power in France is that, whether they belong to it or not, farmers [have to pay fees](#) to structures that are controlled by the FNSEA. Called "[voluntary mandatory fees](#)" for "Contribution volontaire obligatoire" (CVO), these quasi-private taxes feed the budget of inter-professional associations – "interprofessions" in French – that have been dominated for decades by the FNSEA.¹⁶

For example, all French cereal growers have to pay a CVO on their harvests' sale (currently 0,63€/ton) to the inter-professional association [Intercéréales](#), but the only farmers' associations [represented](#) in Intercéréales until 2018 were FNSEA members AGPB and AGPM (the latter representing corn growers). It took a [direct action](#) by Coordination Rurale to get a membership seat (through their own specialised association France Grandes Cultures). The Confédération paysanne eventually refused to join because the farmers' college had been composed in such a way that they would not have had any power. They had managed to obtain seats in the milk interprofession – CNIEL – in 2011, after a brutal conflict that even included a [hunger strike](#).

Inter-professional associations include other players than just producers, and act as umbrella organisations representing the whole commodity chain to defend an industry-driven vision. Intercéréales, for example, also has grain traders and millers in its membership. It spends most of its budget on research & development, but also 21.5 per cent of it on communication and lobbying. Other inter-professional associations are structured in a similar fashion, using millions of euros collected from farmers and other players in the industry to lobby decision-makers in Paris and Brussels.¹⁷

15 Even though these remain comparatively [smaller](#) than the largest, more concentrated cooperatives of Northern Europe, like BayWa or Sudzucker (Germany), Friesland Campina (Netherlands), Arla foods (Sweden) for dairy products or, for the meat, Danish Crown.

16 A new law was [introduced](#) in France in 2014 forcing the inter-professional associations to include farmers' trade unions representing "at least 70% of the votes expressed in agricultural chambers elections".

17 Various inter-professional associations are for instance registered on the French and EU lobbying transparency registers, such as the seeds professional association [GNIS](#) (Groupement national interprofessionnel des semences et plants), the milk professional association [CNIEL](#) (Centre national Interprofessionnel de l'Economie Laitière) or [Intercéréales](#). But also the [CIVB](#), representing the Bordeaux wines industry, or [Interbev](#), representing the livestock and meat sector.

Published by Corporate Europe Observatory
October 2020

