

Birds @ Farmland

Conservation Schemes

Background paper

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02 November 2021

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DEVELOPING TOOLS TO SUPPORT FARMLAND BIRD CONSERVATION IN THE EU

Contract: 07.0202/2020/834463/SER/ENV.D.3

umweltbundesamt^U
ENVIRONMENT AGENCY AUSTRIA



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Development of Conservation Schemes for Farmland Birds¹

Context of this document: The new Birds@Farmland initiative of the European Commission aims at supporting Member States in conserving wild birds living in agricultural landscapes. Conservation of farmland birds is a duty under the Birds Directive and is essential to the success of the EU Green Deal, the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, and the Farm to Fork Strategy. The Birds@Farmland initiative will develop twenty farmland bird conservation schemes in ten Member States² based on sound scientific knowledge and agricultural and land management practices proven to work. Member States are invited to consider these conservation schemes in their CAP Strategic Plans as well as other relevant policy tools.

The initiative will focus on the development of twenty conservation schemes that can follow two approaches. The first one is the development of a conservation scheme on a specific agricultural system that is important for farmland birds. The second one is the development of a conservation scheme for a certain farmland bird species. The first approach is likely addressing many birds species. The second too, especially if the selected bird species is an “umbrella species”.

What is meant by Bird@Farmland Conservation Schemes?

Birds@Farmland Conservation Schemes: The Birds@Farmland Initiative (B@F Initiative) aims to develop 20 conservation schemes (CSs) for farmland birds in Europe with the primary aim of integrating these schemes into the National Strategic Plans under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 10 selected Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, and Spain). CSs should be based on the best available science, well designed to allow for high uptake on the side of farmers and Managing Authorities, and well adapted to the local situation of farmers. While the primary aim of the CSs is to become part of the national CAP strategic plans, other options can also be envisioned such as funding under the LIFE+ or Interreg programmes.

Agricultural Systems and Flagship species: The Birds@Farmland CSs will focus on selected agricultural systems or selected specific flagship species (cf. background papers dedicated to agricultural systems and flagship species for details) and will be developed by the project team in collaboration with competent authorities, stakeholders in each of the 10 Member States, and the European Commission. CSs for agricultural systems typically address multiple bird species that inhabit the same system while CSs for a specific bird species can cover multiple agricultural systems if the selected species occurs therein. Member States choose the agricultural systems and/or flagship species targeted by their CSs based on their most urgent needs. Conservation schemes for birds are likely to benefit not only birds but also many other species and enhance ecosystems services for farmers and the wider society such as reduced soil erosion, prevention of nutrient run-off into water courses, and increased aesthetic values. Synergies with the EU pollinators initiative³ are of particular interest.

Types of measures supported by the CAP that can be covered by a conservation scheme

1. **New and existing measures:** Considering the dramatic state of farmland birds, the focus of CSs is on both, conservation measures (e.g. to conserve existing hotspots of farmland bird diversity and abundance) and restoration measures to re-establish a former more beneficial state of an ecosystem (e.g. wetlands in drained areas). Developing new schemes under the CAP is one possibility as well as updating and amending existing schemes based on scientific evidence and experience. The CSs can focus on a single

¹ This is part of Task 3 of the contract 07.0202/2020/834463/SER/ENV.D.3

² Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, and Portugal

³ [EU Pollinators Initiative - Environment - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/pollinators-initiative/)

main measure (e.g. mowing after a certain date) or commitment (e.g. no use of pesticide) as well as on a set of measures or commitments, including also enabling conditions. Both technical and financial aspects might need to be addressed. The (set of) measures or commitments that will be part of a CS will aim at addressing a specific conservation need for farmland birds (e.g. optimising fallow land/set-aside areas or mitigating intensification or land abandonment). Birds@Farmland CSs will not deal with any bird conservation measures outside agricultural land.

2. **Effectiveness and uptake of schemes:** Increasing the effectiveness and uptake of CSs is of key importance for delivering conservation benefits. Thus, the Birds@Farmland CSs can also support authorities in enhancing schemes under the CAP that are scientifically sound but have shown little uptake. This can include improvements in terms of structure, clarity, and practical application of existing schemes (e.g. with the help of targeted consultations of farmers and landowners), as well as increasing the flexibility of schemes for farmers, improving the regionality of schemes, or making the schemes financially more attractive.
3. **Enabling framework:** Improving the enabling framework for bird conservation, including educational measures, training for farmers, technical and scientific support, or demonstration farms, is another key aspect in increasing the uptake of schemes, which can be addressed by CSs. In order to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the advice, CSs can, for example, support Member States in designing the new Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) with a specific focus on enabling Farm advisory services (FAS) to deliver up-to-date technological and scientific information on bird conservation measures. In the context of innovation, the Agricultural European Innovation Partnership, [EIP-AGRI](#) offers a unique set of measures and instruments potentially supported by CSs such as Operational Groups, the cornerstone of the EIP-AGRI under the CAP to support the development of innovations by groups of relevant actors in a bottom-up manner.

National CAP Strategic Plans: The Commission has requested that Member States shall submit their national CAP Strategic Plans by the end of 2021. If a Birds@Farmland CS cannot be integrated into a national plan due to the timing of the process of the CAP Strategic Plans, the Member States will have the choice to include the CSs in the CAP at a later point. Member States might also consider further developing or testing the schemes as pilots in another instrument (e.g. LIFE Strategic Nature Projects - SNaPs, Interreg⁴), or as EIP-AGRI operational groups.

Involving the agricultural sector: The B@F Initiative strives to involve stakeholders such as farmers, landowners and hunters in the development of the CSs as much as possible. In addition to national/regional ministries for agriculture or the environment, Farm Advisory Services, and farmers' and hunters' unions participate in the two EU-wide workshops as well as the national workshops organised in the 10 MS in the framework of the Initiative. CSs are further co-developed through bilateral meetings with stakeholders and - in some cases - surveys among farmers to identify measures suitable to increase the uptake of existing schemes.

Collaboration across 27 EU Member States: The intention is to develop CSs that will also be relevant and useful for all EU Member States including the 17 MS where no CS will be developed in the context of this B@F Initiative. To fully exploit synergies at the EU level, the Birds@Farmland Initiative is supporting exchange of experiences and good practices between Member States, for example in cases where two or more MS share the same agricultural system and/or envision similar amendments of existing schemes. For this purpose a newsletter is issued and a [Birds@Farmland wiki](#) was set up. The two EU-wide workshops in the framework of the Initiative invite relevant actors of all EU countries to participate.

⁴ See for example the North Sea partridge Interreg conservation project:
https://northsearegion.eu/media/14112/vbn_partridge_booklet_english_final_lr.pdf

Available CAP tools: CSs will consider the entire green architecture of the [new CAP and available tools](#). This means the CSs will explore all tools available in the new CAP and build on synergies between the tools. This includes 1) the enhanced conditionality (Chapter 1, Section 2 of [COM\(2018\) 392 final](#)) as well as 2) eco-schemes in Pillar I (Art. 28) and 3) rural development interventions in Pillar II (Chapter IV, Section 1).

1. Under the new, [enhanced conditionality](#), the CSs can make suggestions on how to improve national applications of statutory management requirements (for example, SMR 3 - protection and identification of in field habitats and nests) and build on good agricultural and environmental conditions (for example GAEC 9 - protection of landscape features, ban of cutting hedges during the bird breeding and rearing season, and mandatory biodiversity area).
2. [Eco-schemes](#) under CAP Pillar I going beyond mandatory requirements prescribed by the system of conditionality, can potentially be targeted by CSs, focusing, for example, on the enhanced management of permanent pastures and landscape features or organic farming. These schemes may also include 'entry-level schemes' which may be a condition for taking up more ambitious rural development commitments.
3. Interventions under CAP Pillar II potentially targeted by the CSs include Agri-environment-climate measures in accordance with the Member States' national, regional, or local needs (AEC measures; Art. 65), Natura 2000 payments (Art. 67; to compensate farmers for all or part of additional costs and income foregone in Natura 2000 areas), investments (Art. 68; e.g. to restore landscape features beneficial for farmland birds), co-operation (Art. 71; e.g. to prepare Operational Groups under EIP-AGRI), and knowledge exchange and information (Art. 72 e.g. for advice to farmers).

CSs can combine several CAP tools (e.g. GAEC, eco-scheme, and AEC measure) to provide an integrated approach and address larger areas and issues that emerge at landscape scale such as heterogeneity and connectivity. In addition, the CSs can also support the organisational setup of the new Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) for farm advisors, researchers, farmer organisations, and other relevant stakeholders (Art. 102).

New approaches: CSs may promote and support [result-based payments](#) (RBP) schemes or hybrid schemes to encourage farmers to deliver a significant enhancement of the quality of the environment at a larger scale and in a measurable way. RBP schemes link payments to the delivery of results rather than prescribed agricultural management measures. Hybrid schemes combine elements of result-based payments with some specific actions. Such schemes, can, for example, combine result-based elements at the habitat level (biodiversity, water and soil targets) and a bonus payment if a bird population target is reached. One successful example of a hybrid scheme targeting birds is the [Hen Harrier project](#) in Ireland, an EIP Locally Led Scheme funded as part of Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

CSs may also support [collective schemes](#) to achieve sufficient spatial coverage and impact. Collective schemes are implemented jointly by a group of farmers or farmers' cooperatives, and potentially other relevant actors such as hunters and conservation NGOs. [BoerenNatuur](#) is a successful cooperation in the Netherlands, in which cooperatives develop management plans, prepare collective subsidy applications (i.e., one per cooperative), act as the contract partner for the government, guide and advise farmers, and monitor results.

What are the key likely ingredients of effective and attractive CSs?

Based on consultations with relevant actors in the 10 Member States in the first half of 2021 and the EU workshop in June 2021, a range of key ingredients for effective and attractive CSs were identified:

Evidence-based schemes: A basic requirement is that CSs are based on sound scientific evidence, including a thorough assessment of the needs of targeted species and the validity of potential measures to address these needs.

Context: CSs need to take into account the diverse socio-cultural contexts, especially from farmers. Any measures or packages of measures need to be adapted to the local context, needs (both social and ecological), and the wider social organisation (e.g. advisory support available or capacity to put advisory supports in place, past experience of institutions, etc.).

Advisory services: It is important to invest in quality advisory capacity in the Member States: face-to-face relations between farmers and nature-minded advisors are very important for building trust and passing on advice and support. Many Member States lack farm advisors with sufficient expertise in birds and biodiversity.

Inclusiveness: Discussions in many Member States showed that schemes should be developed in a cooperative way, involving all relevant stakeholders, including farmers and landowners, when they can act on farmed land, rather than just governmental authorities.

Structure and transparency: Quality, clarity, and transparency of the schemes and of the processes for developing, implementing, monitoring and updating/adapting the schemes are also of key importance.

Awareness raising and interest in the CSs: The uptake of schemes by farmers and landowners requires effective communication to all stakeholders as well as targeted training and support measures for farmers, such as Farm advisory services. In this context, result-based approaches have substantial potential to create a sense of ownership and pride on the side of farmers compared to prescription-based approaches but might require more training (e.g. for the monitoring of target species). Also collective schemes are recognized as approaches with great potential.

Compensations/Rewards: It is not sufficient to compensate income loss of farmers when participating in conservation. They should either be able to gain some real financial profit or to gain visibility/credit by the society for what they do. Good communication to promote and celebrate success is important. However, that only works with measures carried out over several years.

Monitoring: Discussions in some Member States also pointed out that implemented schemes are not always sufficiently well monitored, leading to considerable uncertainties concerning the effectiveness of existing measures. A good monitoring and feedback on the achievement of a CS to farmers can also enhance the motivation of farmers: Farmers want to be involved in the monitoring and evaluation of schemes (or at least know the results). Monitoring should measure effects at the level of both umbrella and other target species. Citizen science initiatives could play a useful role for monitoring the impact of schemes.

Certainty, flexibility, and financing for farmers: Further important factors identified include the longevity of subsidies to allow planning certainty on the side of farmers, financially attractive compensations, improved regionality of schemes, and combining horizontal measures with targeted measures for specific species under different CAP instruments.

Scale: Appropriate farming practices implemented at a large spatial scale are key for the recovery of farmland birds in Europe. One promising option to restore or maintain habitats at the landscape level rather than the level of individual farms are collective schemes. Collective schemes have been successful in some countries in engaging a large number of farmers also because they help reduce the administrative burden through collective commitments to schemes under the CAP.

Innovation: Another key factor is promoting innovation such as new markets for products produced by “bird-friendly” farms or farmers’ cooperatives, or agriculture 4.0 to enable autonomous machines or data-driven applications for bird protection. In terms of markets, one option is to combine a landscape-level conservation scheme with a quality label that supports marketing of agricultural products.