

Under pressure

Few challenges to mandatory measures, Substantial challenges to voluntary measures

European citizens are increasingly concerned about climate, environmental and health issues, but feel unable to affect change. This leads to numerous protests being organized across Europe to mitigate climate change and produce food more sustainably. With the agricultural sector feeling underappreciated and pushing back with counterdemonstrations, governments are pressured to play a leading role in finding solutions and take action.

After a period of social unrest, it is agreed that food standards can only be met by ensuring more sustainable production. The European Commission is backed by Member States to put forward a set of rules and regulations to ensure the sustainable production of high-quality food, along with a package of support for farmers to comply with them.

However, society has limited capacity to pay for these environmental benefits, and profit margins on food products are under pressure. As a result, many small farmers struggle to meet the regulations while maintaining or increasing their profitability, losing out to large-scale intensive farms that become increasingly dominant. This leads to less diversity in the market and a loss of traditions, but also enables new forms of large-scale sustainable production that can finance and comply with the new more stringent environmental and health standards.

Technological innovation makes it easier and cheaper to monitor the sustainability of farming practices, enabling the expansion of cross-compliance schemes to a wider range of minimum environmental standards that are required for farmers to receive payment. Larger and more financially healthy farms invest in R&D to meet the new standards, and find innovative ways to produce sustainably at scale. However, the limited willingness of society to pay for more sustainable products means that the ambition of the agricultural sector rarely goes beyond meeting environmental targets. Still, the demand for European food increases as the new quality standards also apply to imported foods, and overseas producers are increasingly unable to supply products to the specified standards.

Small farms are increasingly being bought out by larger enterprises and are abandoning marginal land, leading to a migration from the countryside to cities and less cultural diversity in rural areas. Those remaining in the countryside who are unable to continue their own farming practice experience the social and mental health implications of this, as they have lost their purpose and livelihood. New technologies enable an increased intensification with an overall lower need for labour in agriculture, impacting on rural communities as less jobs will be available.

With Europe leading the way in setting the standards for sustainable production, a new generation of young, entrepreneurial and highly educated farmers takes over. Through their modern practices focusing on sustainable and profitable production, over time soil quality together with the other environmental functions increase across Europe while providing a livelihood for those able to keep up.

Under pressure

