The Commission presented on 20th July a proposal (so-called Effort Sharing Decision) on how to allocate among Member States efforts to reduce emissions in the transport, building, waste and agriculture sectors, in order to reach the overall 40% EU target for 2030. These sectors, which are responsible for 60% of EU emissions, will have to collectively achieve a 30% GHG reduction, but member states’ individual targets will range from 0% to 40%, depending on their GDP, with some consideration given to the cost-effectiveness of emissions reductions for richer member states. Emissions from agriculture accounted for in the ESD come from livestock (methane, CH4) or fertiliser use (nitrous oxide, N2O).

The Commission will also for the first time propose how to integrate LULUCF emissions (land use, land use change and forestry, meaning CO2 emissions from cropland, grassland, forest management, afforestation, etc.) in the accounting for the targets. In the EU, mainly due to forest management, LULUCF is a carbon sink, meaning it absorbs more carbon than it releases.

Faced with a high share of their total GHG emissions in agriculture, Ireland (over 30%) and Denmark (close to 20%, when EU average is 10%) have called for flexibility mechanisms, i.e. the possibility to use part of the LULUCF sink to offset some of their ESD emissions, through afforestation. In practice that could mean that agriculture emissions could be offset with planting new trees, and Energy Commissioner Cañete hinted that such flexibility for agriculture would be provided.

This move prompted 10 countries with an existing large forest cover and therefore limited potential for afforestation (including Austria, Poland, Slovenia and Finland) to write to the Commission to complain about potential discrimination, and to also ask for offsetting possibilities, this time through forest management.

The problem is that, according to a study from Oeko-Institut commissioned by IFOAM EU and Fern, a NGO dedicated to forest protection, if forests were included in the EU emissions reduction effort, it could mean that in practice the EU would only have to cut its emissions by 34 to 37% by 2030 (instead of 40%). A cross-party group of MEPs also wrote to the Commission to request that the ESD “includes elements to ensure real world delivery and make it consistent with the outcomes of the Paris Agreement”, warning that “the current accounting rules, the quality of monitoring and compliance mechanisms, in particular for forest management, are inadequate”, making “forest management credits particularly unsuitable for use as credits in the ESD”. The use of forests to offset agriculture emissions is also opposed by forest owners, who fear they might have to purchase emissions permits in order to cut down trees.

Another problem is that afforestation promotes an industrial forestry model, since it is often done through plantations of fast-growing alien species, leading to a loss of marginal farmland that is vital for biodiversity. According to BirdLife, many red-listed species – i.e. species in danger of extinction, are dependent on farmland...
There has been a large extension of the organic sector here in Ireland over the past couple of years and with it the demand for protein crops has naturally increased, however they are a difficult crop to grow in large quantities organically.

A lot of this expansion has been in the livestock sectors. These animals are going to need to be fed and finished. This has increased the need for Irish produced organic protein sources which are in very short supply at the moment, and therefore is going to exasperate a problem that already exists. This is not a situation that is likely to change any time soon.

The organic dairy sector also has a requirement for a steady supply of locally sourced protein. The organic poultry sector would also benefit from an increase in protein crop acreage. I have always believed this is a very good starting point when producing a product you plan to sell, to start with something that is in demand and will therefore be easy to sell. This is one of the reasons I got into the organic sector in the first place, the fact

PROTEIN
ORGANIC

by Trevor Harris

Barley peas combicrop

habitats. These are habitats that are most likely to be targeted for afforestation if it is further incentivised, which is likely to harm biodiversity. In Ireland, since 1990, around 300,000ha of plantations have been established, mainly on marginal and elevated sites. 60% of this is made up by four non-native species. This has had a particularly bad impact on hen harriers, which rely on open moorland. 52% of the Hen Harrier Special Protection Area Network is now covered in forestry, leading to a population collapse, with levels down by 28% since 2005.

Flexibility between LULUCF emissions and sinks and the ESD is also firmly opposed by environmental NGO’s, as it would create a big loophole and undermine the overall environmental integrity of the EU climate and energy package for 2030. NGOs believe that the agriculture sector should do its share of the European effort to prevent dangerous climate change, and not be exempted from significant action, at the expense of other economic sectors. The Commission predicts that the EU agriculture emissions (non CO2) will represent a third of total EU emissions by 2050. Moreover, carbon sequestration in forests or soils is difficult to measure, non-permanent and always reversible.

Like the IFOAM EU SOLMACC project demonstrates, there are many practices that can reduce emissions in the agriculture sector, many of which also deliver other environmental benefits and positive economic outcomes for farmers.

IFOAM EU also insists that the GHG mitigation potential of agricultural practices and farming systems should not be considered in isolation of their potential for climate change adaptation and of their impact on biodiversity, soil health, water pollution or animal welfare. Organic farming practices, in particular organically managed grasslands, are proven to have a positive impact on biodiversity.

Instead of supporting intensive meat production, the EU should ensure that meat is produced sustainably and that quality is prioritised over quantity, which is also more profitable for farmers.

Farmers should not expect that the sector will be given a free ride on climate policy. We should not forget that the farming sector will suffer more than any other from the impacts of climate change.

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