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## **COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION**

**on the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "Save bees and farmers!  
Towards a bee-friendly agriculture for a healthy environment"**

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION: THE CITIZENS' INITIATIVE

EU citizens can ask the European Commission to submit a proposal for legislation on a matter they consider requires legal action to uphold the EU treaties. To do so, they must submit a European citizens' initiative under Article 11(4) of the Treaty on the European Union, which requires collecting the signatures of a million or more nationals of a significant number of EU Member States. Detailed rules on the European citizens' initiative are set out in Regulation (EU) 2019/788<sup>1</sup> (the 'ECI Regulation').

The initiative entitled '*Save bees and farmers! Towards a bee-friendly agriculture for a healthy environment*'<sup>2</sup> is the seventh European citizen initiative (ECI) to reach the threshold required by the Treaty and the ECI Regulation<sup>3</sup>. To protect bees and people's health, the initiative calls on the Commission to propose legislation to phase out synthetic pesticides by 2035, to restore biodiversity, and to support farmers in the transition, as follows:

- *Phase out synthetic pesticides in EU agriculture by 80% by 2030, starting with the most hazardous, to become free of synthetic pesticides by 2035;*
- *Restore natural ecosystems in agricultural areas so that farming becomes a vector of biodiversity recovery;*
- *Reform agriculture by prioritising small scale, diverse and sustainable farming, supporting a rapid increase in agro-ecological and organic practice, and enabling independent farmer-based training and research into pesticide- and GMO-free farming.*

At the request of the organisers of this ECI on 31 July 2019, the Commission registered the initiative<sup>4</sup> on 30 September 2019. As the initiative involved collecting statements of support during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was eligible for a one-year extension of the 12-month deadline (for collecting signatures from 30 September 2019 until 30 September 2021)<sup>5</sup>. On 7 October 2022, after verifying the statements of support collected by the Member State authorities, the organisers submitted the initiative to the Commission. The Commission has examined the initiative on the basis of the ECI Regulation, which applies as of 1 January 2020.

<sup>1</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2019/788](#).

<sup>2</sup> <https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/select-language?destination=/initiatives/details/2019/000016>

<sup>3</sup> Since this ECI was submitted to the Commission, two more valid initiatives followed bringing the total number of successful ECIs to nine.

<sup>4</sup> [Commission Decision \(EU\) 2019/1566](#).

<sup>5</sup> The initiative benefitted from extensions to the collection period under [Regulation \(EU\) 2020/1042 of 15 July 2020](#), [Commission Implementing Decision \(EU\) 2020/2200](#) and [Commission Implementing Decision \(EU\) 2021/360](#).

The organisers explained the objectives of the initiative in detail at a meeting with the Commission on 25 November 2022. They presented it at a public hearing organised by the European Parliament on 24 January 2023. On 14 December 2022, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted an opinion on the ECI<sup>6</sup>. The European Parliament held a plenary debate on the initiative on 16 March 2023.

This Communication sets out the Commission's legal and political conclusions on the initiative and any action it intends to take in response under Article 15(2) of ECI Regulation.

## 2. CONTEXT

### 2.1. Farms and farming systems in the EU

There are approximately 9 million farms in the EU. Around 39.5% of farms are specialised in field crops (such as cereals, oilseeds and protein crops) and 21.5% are specialised in permanent crops, of which 4.7% are vineyards. Approximately 21.7% of farms are specialised in livestock production and a small share of farms is specialised in horticultural products (2.3%). Some 14.2% of farms are mixed farms (producing a combination of different crops and/or livestock)<sup>7</sup>. 30% of the agricultural area is permanent grassland.

The relative majority of farms (42.6%) have less than 2 hectares of agricultural area, and 21.2% have between 2 and 5 hectares<sup>7</sup>. The employment situation in farms can differ greatly. For instance, very small farms often do not provide a sufficient living wage for the farm holders.

The share of land under organic farming increased between 2012 and 2020 by an average of 5.7% per year. In 2020, organic farming covered 14.7 million hectares, or 9.1% of the EU agricultural land<sup>8</sup>. Around 42% of land under organic farming is permanent grassland, followed by green fodder (17%), cereals (16%), permanent crops (11%), industrial crops (4%) and dry pulses (3%)<sup>9</sup>.

### 2.2. Pesticide use in EU agriculture

Conventional farming often uses chemical pesticides<sup>10</sup> as the main method to prevent loss of harvest caused by pests. While their use is targeted at specific pests, these chemicals also have harmful impacts on non-targeted organisms, including in aquatic ecosystems. Pesticide use is a major driver of biodiversity decline. Other farming systems tackle pests differently; for example,

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<sup>6</sup> [NAT/868-EESC-2022](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Eurostat: Farm indicators by legal status of the holding, utilised agricultural area, type and economic size of the farm and NUTS2 region \(2023\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> Annual organic crop statistics (based on data collected through the Member States' organic certifying bodies).

<sup>9</sup> [Eurostat: Organic crop area by agricultural production methods and crops \(2023\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> Chemical pesticides either occur naturally or are man-made (synthetic pesticides). The term 'pesticides' in this communication refers to plant protection products as defined in [Regulation \(EC\) No 1107/2009](#), which include chemical pesticides (man-made or naturally occurring such as plant extracts) and non-chemical pesticides such as micro-organisms.

agro-ecological systems use more biodiversity-based methods and other non-chemical solutions to control pests<sup>11</sup>. In organic farming, the use of synthetic pesticides is not allowed.

Every year, some 350 000 tonnes of all types of pesticides are sold in the EU. This volume has remained constant over the period 2012-2019. Sales of non-chemical and low-risk chemical pesticides have increased, although they still account for a low proportion of the total sales of pesticides<sup>12</sup>.

### 2.3. Biodiversity in EU agricultural ecosystems

The evaluation of the EU biodiversity strategy to 2020<sup>13</sup> highlighted that the state of biodiversity in EU agroecosystems has continued to deteriorate since 2010, exacerbating the biodiversity loss seen in previous decades. This is particularly acute for grassland butterflies, farmland birds and for protected habitats and species under the Nature Directives that are associated with agroecosystems.

Between 1991 and 2018, the populations of grassland butterflies decreased by 25%<sup>14</sup>. According to the **European Red List** assessment, the population of around one in three species of bees, butterflies and hoverflies is declining, with one in ten bee and butterfly species, and one in three hoverfly species at risk of extinction<sup>15</sup>. The assessment indicates that intensive agricultural practices play a major role in this decline. Areas of intensive farming are associated with an increased use of pesticides and habitat loss, such as the loss of high-diversity landscape features, other uncultivated habitats, or semi-natural grassland.

Unlike wild pollinator species, populations of honeybees as a managed pollinator species are not declining at the EU level. The number of honeybee colonies increased by 15.7% between 2018 and 2021<sup>16</sup>.

While the populations of all common birds in the EU declined by 12% and the populations of common forest birds declined by 5% between 1990 and 2021, the populations of common farmland birds declined by 36% over the same period<sup>17</sup>.

The 2020 **State of Nature** report<sup>18</sup> showed that over 45% of protected habitats<sup>19</sup> that depend on or are affected by agriculture are in bad conservation status. The reason is two-fold: on the one hand, certain agricultural practices have intensified, involving high levels of pesticide use and intensive tillage, intensive grazing or mowing, and over-fertilisation of some grasslands. On the other hand, agricultural abandonment or conversion to other land uses have led to the disappearance of semi-natural habitats, such as semi-natural grasslands, which are important for

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, natural predators of pests, crop rotation or mechanical weeding. See other examples listed under the principles of integrated pest management in Annex III to [Directive 2009/128/EC](#).

<sup>12</sup> [Eurostat: Pesticide sales by categorisation of active substances \(2023\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> [SWD\(2022\) 284 final](#).

<sup>14</sup> [European Environmental Agency: European grassland butterfly indicator \(2019\)](#).

<sup>15</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/redlist>

<sup>16</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/market-presentation-honey\\_autumn2022\\_en.pdf](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/market-presentation-honey_autumn2022_en.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [Eurostat: Common bird indices \(2022\)](#).

<sup>18</sup> [European Environmental Agency: State of nature in the EU. Results from reporting under the nature directives 2013-2018 \(2020\)](#).

<sup>19</sup> Habitats listed in Annex I to [Council Directive 92/43/EEC](#).

nature conservation. The report also showed that protected grasslands with particular relevance for pollinators have a higher proportion of species in a bad conservation status and worse conservation status trends than other protected grasslands.

As mentioned in the communication '*A new deal for pollinators*'<sup>20</sup> and shown by evidence, factors other than intensive agriculture and pesticide use are also causing biodiversity and pollinator loss. These factors include land-use change and urbanisation, climate change and invasive alien species.

## 2.4. EU policy context

More than three and a half years have passed since the organisers presented this European citizens' initiative in July 2019, as the period for the collection of signatures was extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, the EU policy framework has evolved very significantly. In December 2019, the Commission adopted the **European Green Deal**<sup>21</sup>, a new growth strategy to boost the economy, improve people's health and quality of life, and care for nature. Sustainable food systems are at the very heart of the European Green Deal. Moreover, the reformed **EU common agricultural policy (CAP)**<sup>22</sup>, which the Commission proposed in June 2018, was adopted by the co-legislators in December 2021, and the Member States' strategic plans entered into force on 1 January 2023. They will be key to support the implementation of the Green Deal's objectives specific to the agriculture sector.

The EU's **farm to fork strategy**<sup>23</sup> and the **biodiversity strategy for 2030**<sup>24</sup>, adopted in May 2020 and the EU's **zero pollution action plan**<sup>25</sup> adopted in May 2021 are flagship initiatives under the European Green Deal. Under the farm to fork and biodiversity strategies, the Commission adopted in June 2022 two pioneering proposals, one for a **regulation on nature restoration**<sup>26</sup> and one for a **regulation on the sustainable use of plant protection products (SUR)**<sup>27</sup>. All these initiatives are directly relevant to the citizens' initiative. So is the **Global Biodiversity Framework**<sup>28</sup> agreed at 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2022.

Against the backdrop of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the issue of food affordability linked to high inflation and food prices, the Commission has published a number of policy documents<sup>29</sup> on food security and the availability of fertilisers and the efficiency of their use. These emphasise that the transition to sustainable food production is the best approach to achieve resilience in the agricultural sector in the EU and globally. As a follow up to the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, the Commission engaged as a major partner in eight food systems coalitions, most notably in the coalition on agro-ecology aiming at scaling up agro-ecological

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<sup>20</sup> [COM\(2023\) 35 final](#).

<sup>21</sup> [COM\(2019\) 640 final](#).

<sup>22</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-glance\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-glance_en)

<sup>23</sup> [COM\(2020\) 381 final](#).

<sup>24</sup> [COM\(2020\) 380 final](#).

<sup>25</sup> [COM\(2021\) 400 final](#).

<sup>26</sup> [COM\(2022\) 304 final](#).

<sup>27</sup> [COM\(2022\) 305 final](#).

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222>

<sup>29</sup> [COM\(2022\) 133 final](#); [COM\(2022\) 590 final](#); [SWD\(2023\) 4 final](#).

practices and value chains. These coalitions demonstrate the EU's concrete engagement to advance sustainable food systems transformation on multilateral fora. This citizens' initiative contributes to the public debate, which is also led at international level, on how to effectively achieve this transformation.

### 3. RESPONSE TO THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE

#### 3.1. Citizens' request: Phasing out synthetic pesticides in EU agriculture by 80% by 2030, starting with the most hazardous, to become free of synthetic pesticides by 2035

The **Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive (SUD)**<sup>30</sup>, adopted in 2009, aims to reduce the risks and impacts of the use of pesticides on human health and the environment. One of its key elements is integrated pest management (IPM), which promotes the cultivation of healthy crops and natural pest control, and uses chemical control only as a last resort.

Responding to the earlier ECI entitled '*Ban glyphosate and protect people and the environment from toxic pesticides*'<sup>31</sup> submitted in 2017, the Commission focused on fostering the implementation of the SUD and on establishing harmonised risk indicators to enable the monitoring of trends at EU level. The Commission committed to using the resulting data as a basis for determining future policy options and to re-evaluating the situation at a later stage, initially in an implementation report. Furthermore, the **Regulation on the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain** was adopted in 2019<sup>32</sup>.

The indicators show that between the 2015-2017 period and 2020, the use and risk of chemical pesticides decreased by 14% and the use of more hazardous pesticides decreased by 26%<sup>33</sup>. The increase in the use of lower-risk pesticides, which are used in greater quantities per hectare, explains why the overall sales have remained constant. However, the evaluation of the SUD revealed that weaknesses in implementing and enforcing the directive remained and that its objectives were not sufficiently met<sup>34</sup>.

The **European Green Deal** announced the ambition of reducing significantly the use and risk of chemical pesticides. In the **farm to fork strategy**, the Commission committed to take action to reduce by 50% the overall use of and risk from chemical pesticides by 2030 and reduce by 50% the use of more hazardous pesticides by 2030.

The SUR proposal, adopted by the Commission in June 2022, proposed legally binding targets at EU level to reduce by 50% the use and the risk of chemical pesticides and the use of the more hazardous pesticides by 2030, and proposed measures to improve IPM. The proposal obliges Member States to adopt legally binding national targets corresponding to the EU-level targets. It

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<sup>30</sup> [Directive 2009/128/EC](#).

<sup>31</sup> <https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/select-language?destination=/initiatives/details/2017/000002>

<sup>32</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2019/1381](#).

<sup>33</sup> [https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/sustainable-use-pesticides/farm-fork-targets-progress/eu-trends\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/sustainable-use-pesticides/farm-fork-targets-progress/eu-trends_en)

<sup>34</sup> See the evaluation of the SUD available in Annex 8 to [SWD\(2022\) 170, Part 2/2](#); [European Parliament resolution on the implementation of Directive 2009/128/EC on the sustainable use of pesticides](#); [European Court of Auditors' Special Report 05/2020: Sustainable use of plant protection products: limited progress in measuring and reducing risks](#).

also restricts pesticide use in sensitive areas, including in areas that sustain pollinator species that are at risk of extinction.

The SUR proposal acknowledges the ‘*Save bees and farmers*’ initiative and the need to reduce the use of chemical pesticides. It is currently under discussion in the European Parliament and the Council.

The targets included in the SUR proposal support the EU’s commitment under the **Global Biodiversity Framework** adopted in December 2022 to reduce the overall risk of pesticides by at least half by 2030<sup>35</sup>.

As part of the impact assessment underpinning the SUR proposal, the Commission explored whether the setting of targets of a higher ambition than 50% would be appropriate. The setting of any EU level targets in the field of the environment involves the trade-off between three interconnected factors: environmental and human health protection, political feasibility, and economic viability. The impact assessment showed that a 70-80% reduction target would have the greatest positive impacts on human health and the environment. Nevertheless, as it would require rapid and drastic changes to farming practices before alternatives are available, it was likely to have a greater effect on crop yield, and subsequently the greatest economic cost not just for farmers but for the whole economy and consumers. The Commission considered a level of ambition of 50% the most appropriate and balanced option to protect the environment and human health and to avoid severe consequences on food affordability<sup>36</sup>.

Under the SUR proposal, the Commission shall carry out an evaluation four years after the date of application of the Regulation, which will assess the progress made in reducing the risk and use of pesticides. Important factors to be considered when assessing progress in meeting the Regulation’s objectives will be developments in the uptake of IPM, organic farming and precision agriculture.

The SUR proposal sets out obligations for farmers to follow an IPM decision-making tree, so that they always look first at alternatives to chemical pesticides. For crops covering 90% of agricultural area in Member States, farmers would be obliged to follow detailed national crop-specific rules that apply the principles of IPM to their local conditions. The Commission intends to actively support and monitor the development of such rules by Member States. To this end, the Commission intends launching a project under the **LIFE Programme**, which would support the Member States in developing these rules. It would build on the pilot project ‘*IPM Toolbox for farmers*’<sup>37</sup>, which analysed the drivers and barriers to the uptake of IPM and compiled practices.

To reduce the use of chemical pesticides, it is essential to have alternatives available. The Commission has already taken significant steps to improve this situation. It has adopted four implementing regulations<sup>38</sup> under the **Plant Protection Products Regulation**<sup>39</sup> revising data requirements, approval criteria and assessment methodologies for the authorisation of **biological**

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222>; see Target 7.

<sup>36</sup> SWD(2022) 170 final.

<sup>37</sup> <https://agrilpm.eu>

<sup>38</sup> [https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/micro-organisms\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/micro-organisms_en)

<sup>39</sup> [Regulation \(EC\) No 1107/2009](#).

**pesticides containing micro-organisms** to accelerate their access to the market. As part of the ‘*Better Training for Safer Food*’ initiative<sup>40</sup>, training opportunities are available to build expertise in conducting risk assessments of micro-organisms used as pesticides, on IPM implementation and control at farm level, and on testing pesticide application equipment. The Commission has also launched a call for proposals under the Single Market Programme for **financial grants** to Member States (EUR 10 million over 5 years) to increase their capacities to evaluate application files, in particular for micro-organisms. Several ongoing research projects under the **Horizon Europe** and the **Horizon 2020** programmes focus on seeking alternatives to chemical pesticides and on combining the use of tools and technologies for IPM.

The development of new pest-resistant plant varieties also helps lower dependency on pesticides. All types of breeding approaches including **new genomic techniques** have scope to accelerate this process and the Commission will bring forward a legal proposal on their use during 2023. On this aspect too, Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe support several projects on breeding pest-resistant and climate change-resilient plant varieties.

The SUR proposal provides that **farmers can be compensated** under the CAP, during a transition period of 5 years, for any costs related to complying with new requirements. This would come in addition to the numerous interventions already programmed under the new CAP, for example, under eco-schemes or rural development initiatives, to support the sustainable use of pesticides (see section 3.3.2). This will enable the CAP to play a crucial role in helping farmers in their transition towards a more sustainable use of pesticides.

Before a pesticide can be used, it needs to be authorised by Member States on the basis of the Plant Protection Products Regulation. The EU has one of the world’s most stringent regulatory systems<sup>41</sup>, ensuring high safety standards for human and animal health and the environment, including bees. The Commission has **restricted or prohibited the use of pesticides that are dangerous to bees** (e.g. neonicotinoids<sup>42</sup> and sulfoxaflor)<sup>43</sup> and has taken steps to tighten up the assessment of pesticide risk with regard to bees<sup>44</sup>. In particular, in 2019 the Commission asked the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to update the **bee guidance document** to take full account of new scientific knowledge. The EFSA is currently finalising this review. Once EFSA has adopted the revised bee guidance document, the Commission will amend the related implementing regulations and seek endorsement of the bee guidance document by the Member States. The Commission has also initiated a work plan to develop all necessary and pending **protocols to test pesticides on pollinators**, focusing on wild species.

Pollinator decline is a global phenomenon. The Commission has therefore recently adopted a Regulation<sup>45</sup> to lower the **maximum residue levels** for two of the neonicotinoids no longer approved in the EU (clothianidin and thiamethoxam) on all food commodities to the lowest level that can be measured with the latest technologies, regardless of whether the product is produced in the EU or imported from non-EU countries. The Commission has also prepared a draft

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<sup>40</sup> <https://better-training-for-safer-food.ec.europa.eu/training/?redirect=0>

<sup>41</sup> [https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides_en)

<sup>42</sup> [https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/approval-active-substances/renewal-approval/neonicotinoids\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/approval-active-substances/renewal-approval/neonicotinoids_en)

<sup>43</sup> [Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2022/686.](#)

<sup>44</sup> [https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/protection-bees\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/protection-bees_en)

<sup>45</sup> [Commission Regulation \(EU\) 2023/334.](#)

regulation to set up a work programme for the review and possible approval at EU level of **safeners and synergists** used in pesticides. It recently adopted an Implementing Regulation setting out detailed rules for the identification of unacceptable **co-formulants** in pesticides<sup>46</sup>. Both regulations cover the impacts on bees and other pollinators.

In October 2022, the Commission adopted, as part of the zero pollution package, a legislative proposal<sup>47</sup> to revise the lists of **surface and groundwater pollutants** including pesticides, which is currently discussed in the European Parliament and the Council. Member States would be required to reduce the emissions of all these pollutants to meet the new quality standards.

**Better data** on pesticide use and presence in the environment is required to support ongoing policy action and shape legislation beyond 2030. Pesticide use data will become available under the Regulation on statistics on agricultural input and output<sup>48</sup> adopted in December 2022. The Commission recently adopted an Implementing Regulation<sup>49</sup> under the Plant Protection Products Regulation to set common rules on the records that professional pesticide users must keep.

Lastly, the Commission plans to propose in 2023 legally binding targets to reduce **food waste**<sup>50</sup>. Discarded food is a waste of agricultural inputs, including pesticides. The Commission plans to propose in 2023 a legislative framework for **sustainable food systems**<sup>51</sup> to lay down common definitions, general principles, and objectives to mainstream sustainability in food-related policies.

### 3.2. Citizens' request: Restoring natural ecosystems in agricultural areas so that farming becomes a vector of biodiversity recovery

The second aim of the European citizens' initiative – to restore natural ecosystems in agricultural areas so that farming becomes a vector of biodiversity recovery – is in line with the EU's objective set in the **biodiversity strategy for 2030** to bring nature back to agricultural land, as part of a wider EU nature restoration plan. The strategy highlights the vital role of the agricultural sector in preserving biodiversity, and it acknowledges farmers as guardians of our land who should be supported and incentivised to make the transition to sustainable land management.

To provide more space for nature, the biodiversity strategy stipulates that at least 10% of agricultural area should be under **high-diversity landscape features**. These features provide essential resources for numerous species, such as forage, nesting, and breeding sites. Furthermore, the strategy provides that the uptake of agro-ecological practices should be significantly increased, and the farm to fork strategy sets the objective that at least 25% of agricultural land should be under **organic farming**. This will open space for biodiversity in productive parts of agricultural landscapes and support the transition to a sustainable food production system. To achieve the EU target and to help the organic farming sector reach its full

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<sup>46</sup> [Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2023/574](#).

<sup>47</sup> [COM\(2022\) 540 final](#) (changing the Water Framework Directive, the Environmental Quality Standards Directive and the Groundwater Directive).

<sup>48</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2022/2379](#).

<sup>49</sup> [Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2023/564](#).

<sup>50</sup> [https://food.ec.europa.eu/safety/food-waste/eu-actions-against-food-waste/food-waste-reduction-targets\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/safety/food-waste/eu-actions-against-food-waste/food-waste-reduction-targets_en)

<sup>51</sup> [https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy/legislative-framework\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy/legislative-framework_en)

potential, the Commission has put in place an **action plan for organic production** in the EU covering the period 2021-2027<sup>52</sup>.

To aid biodiversity recovery in agricultural ecosystems, it is also critical to reduce pressure from chemical pollutants and other substances. In particular this concerns pesticides, as presented in the previous section, but also nutrient losses from fertilisers. The biodiversity strategy sets the objective to reduce nutrient losses from agriculture by at least 50% by 2030, while ensuring that there is no deterioration in soil fertility. This will be achieved through action on a range of measures, including the **action plan on integrated nutrient management**<sup>53</sup>.

To restore damaged ecosystems across Europe and enable the long-term sustained recovery of biodiverse and resilient nature, the Commission adopted a first EU-wide proposal for a **regulation on nature restoration**<sup>54</sup> in June 2022. It entails an overarching restoration objective coupled with binding targets for specific ecosystems. Action on restoration in agricultural land include restoring ecosystem functions and services, of which animal pollination is one of the most essential. Proposed obligations on agricultural ecosystems include enabling the recovery of grassland butterflies and farmland bird populations, rewetting peatlands, and increasing the share of agricultural land with high-diversity landscape features.

The proposed nature restoration law includes a specific legally binding target for Member States to reverse the decline of **pollinator populations** by 2030 and achieve an increase thereafter, and it includes a method for regular monitoring of pollinators. Under the Commission proposal, Member States are expected to submit national restoration plans to the Commission showing how they will meet the targets. They would also be required to monitor and report on progress.

Action to restore nature is also needed below ground. In November 2021, the Commission adopted the **EU soil strategy for 2030**<sup>55</sup>. The strategy stresses the importance of soil biodiversity for ecosystem health and sets out specific actions to better understand and protect soil biodiversity, including through the Horizon Europe Mission, *A Soil Deal for Europe*<sup>56</sup>. Halting and reversing the loss of soil biodiversity is an essential aspect of the strategy's vision to achieve healthy soils by 2050. To make this vision a reality, the Commission plans to adopt a proposal for a soil health law in 2023.

The new **common agricultural policy** (CAP) for 2023-2027 has significantly increased its environmental ambition compared to the past policy. In particular, it contains a set of environmental conditions that all farmers receiving CAP support must meet<sup>57</sup>, covering around 90% of agricultural area in the EU. These conditions include the 'standards for good agricultural and environmental condition of land' (GAEC), several of which aim to protect and restore biodiversity. For example, farmers must devote 4% of their arable land to non-productive

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<sup>52</sup> [COM\(2021\) 141 final/2](#).

<sup>53</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12899-Nutrients-action-plan-for-better-management\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12899-Nutrients-action-plan-for-better-management_en)

<sup>54</sup> [COM\(2022\) 304 final](#).

<sup>55</sup> [COM\(2021\) 699 final](#).

<sup>56</sup> [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/soil-health-and-food\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe/soil-health-and-food_en)

<sup>57</sup> Any support received on the basis of land area or number of animals.

features and areas, such as hedges, ponds, fields margins, flower strips and fallow land – and this applies to *all* farmers receiving any area-based or animal-based CAP payment. Another GAEC requires farmers to create pesticide-free and fertiliser-free buffer strips along watercourses.

In addition to these conditions, the 2023-2027 CAP will support farmers who voluntarily carry out more sustainable practices. It allocates almost EUR 100 billion – a third of the CAP budget – to support this environmental and climate transition until 2027. In order to achieve this, Member States are proposing new eco-schemes concentrating at least 25% of the budget for direct payments, as well as a set of rural development instruments, that allocate at least 35% of the budget to environmental practices (see section 3.3).

Finally, on 24 January 2023, the European Commission adopted the communication ‘*A new deal for pollinators*’<sup>58</sup> revising the **2018 EU Pollinators Initiative**. This responds to increasing calls for action, including from the European Court of Auditors<sup>59</sup> and the ECI ‘*Save bees and farmers*’, to improve pollinator conservation and tackle the causes of their decline and its consequences on food security, human health, quality of life and ecosystems. It builds on a comprehensive consultation process and follows up on the review of the Pollinators Initiative<sup>60</sup> conducted in May 2021. The review showed that, while the initiative remains a valid policy tool, significant challenges still need to be overcome to halt and reverse pollinator decline.

**The new deal for pollinators sets an ambitious framework.** It comprises 42 actions to tackle the causes of pollinator decline, improve knowledge and mobilise all actors across society. In particular, it aims to:

- i) create a robust system to monitor pollinator species and the risks they face;
- ii) map key pollinator areas and create a network of ecological corridors – ‘Buzz Lines’ – to properly connect those areas;
- iii) promote pollinator-friendly agricultural practices under the CAP;
- iv) mitigate the impacts of pesticide use on pollinators;
- v) mobilise businesses and citizens, notably by supporting youth engagement and participatory governance; and
- vi) promote action to aid pollinators at national, regional and local level.

The new deal for pollinators complements the Commission’s proposal for a nature restoration law and implements the commitment to reverse the decline of wild pollinators by 2030 set by the biodiversity strategy.

### **3.3. Citizens’ request: Reforming agriculture by prioritising small-scale, diverse and sustainable farming, supporting a rapid increase in agro-ecological and organic practice, and enabling independent farmer-based training and research into pesticide- and GMO-free farming.**

Over the years, the CAP has increasingly integrated environmental concerns through the use of key instruments such as cross-compliance and agri-environmental measures. As mentioned

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<sup>58</sup> [COM\(2023\) 35 final](#).

<sup>59</sup> [European Court of Auditors’ Special Report 15/2020: Protection of wild pollinators in the EU – Commission initiatives have not borne fruit](#).

<sup>60</sup> [COM\(2021\) 261 final](#).

above, the new policy for 2023-2027 takes major steps to support the transition towards sustainable farming and is expected to make a significant contribution to the ambitions of the farm to fork and biodiversity strategies, thus also contributing to meeting the requests of the European citizens' initiative. Based on an assessment of the local conditions and needs, Member States prepared **national CAP strategic plans** for the period 2023-2027 (hereafter the 'plans'<sup>61</sup>), explaining how they will channel support to achieve the economic, environmental and social objectives set under the CAP.

### *3.3.1. Support for small-scale and diverse farming*

The CAP takes further steps to achieve a fairer distribution of income support and target support to the farms that need it most, notably **small- and medium-sized farms**. It allocates close to EUR 29 billion a year to tackle the persistent gap between agricultural income and the average wage in the whole economy, as well as disparities in income between different agricultural sectors and types of farms. Smaller farmers may receive higher income support through complementary payments that redistribute income support from larger farms.

The CAP will continue to support the **apiculture sector**, with an EU annual contribution amounting to EUR 60 million in the current plans. Support can be granted for technical assistance, training and advisory services, research, laboratory analysis on apiculture products and bee losses, promotion, and marketing. The CAP also supports investments to improve production, combat pests and diseases and prevent damage caused by adverse climatic conditions.

As regards diverse farming, the CAP supports farmers' income and contributes to geographical balance in the EU by maintaining agriculture in marginal areas. It helps to limit over-specialisation and to avoid concentration of production in the most productive areas. This helps keep a higher degree of diversity of production and farming systems across rural areas.

### *3.3.2. Support for sustainable, agro-ecological and organic practices*

Member States' plans include the following measures that aim to support farmers in the transition to resilient and sustainable farming.

- Overall, the EU target value<sup>62</sup> for the share of the agricultural land to be offered support for the **reduction in the use and risk of pesticides** is more than 26%. Farmers can apply for eco-schemes on integrated pest management or other types of pesticide management. This includes for instance, banning chemical pest control (included in 15 plans) or banning or limiting the use of pesticides in quantity or timing (included in 17 plans). 16 plans include support under rural development, which restricts the use of pesticides or bans it in certain geographical areas such as Natura 2000 areas or drinking water protection zones. Other rural development commitments concern the use of precision technologies and IPM practices, such as the use of traditional or tolerant crop varieties

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<sup>61</sup> There are 28 CAP strategic plans: one for each of the 27 EU Member States and two for Belgium.

<sup>62</sup> Sum of the targets included by all Member States in their CAP strategic plans to be achieved at the end of the CAP strategic plan period.

that need less pesticides, or extensive crop rotations, which reduce the likelihood of pest infestations.

- The EU target value for support to the **conservation or restoration of biodiversity** is estimated at 31% of the EU's agricultural area (almost 49.5 million hectares). In particular, support will be allocated to around 2.86 million hectares for maintaining or preserving **landscape features**, either through eco-schemes or rural development. Such landscape features include habitats that support the lifecycle of pollinators. For eco-schemes, this concerns for example the planting of trees and hedges (included in 16 plans), to keep land lying fallow (included in 17 plans) and to create buffer strips covered with grass, flowers, and melliferous crops (included in 16 plans). Some plans include rural development support for landscape features, including flower strips in fields or in field margins. Member States also offer support for **investments** to create landscape features. Moreover, some plans support the **retention of traditional agricultural production systems and landscapes**, such as traditional variety vine yards, orchards, or natural species-rich grasslands that are managed with very limited use (or ban) of chemical pesticides. In addition, 13 plans include payments for **Natura 2000** sites.
- Support for whole-farm systems like **agro-forestry and agro-ecology** is also available. The EU target value for supporting new afforested land, including agro-forestry and wooden landscape features, is close to 623 000 hectares.
- Under **organic farming**, the use of pesticides is strictly limited to a list of products excluding synthetic pesticides<sup>63</sup>. The CAP heavily promotes and supports organic farming as a means to help reach the farm to fork strategy target to achieve EU-level coverage of at least 25% of the EU's agricultural area by 2030. All Member States support both the conversion and maintenance of organic farming under eco-schemes and/or rural development. In their plans, 6 Member States included national targets for organic farming by 2027 and 14 Member States by 2030. 19 Member States aim to increase their coverage by at least 25% in comparison to 2020 in proportional terms, and 9 of these Member States aim to at least double the share.

Lastly, the EU recently adopted a **new exclusion from EU competition rules**<sup>64</sup> allowing agreements between producers of agricultural products acting on their own or in cooperation with other operators from the agri-food supply chain that aim to apply sustainability standards higher than mandated under EU or national law. Such agreements can be in the realm of reduction in the use of pesticides, protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems as well as other environmental objectives, animal health and animal welfare. Under this provision, restrictions of competition are allowed provided they are indispensable for the achievement of the envisaged sustainability standard. This entails that producers of agricultural products may benefit from e.g. higher remuneration, certainty of a given quantity of supply or promotion of

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<sup>63</sup> [Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1165](#).

<sup>64</sup> Article 210a of Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 establishing a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products, introduced by [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/2117](#).

their products by other actors in the chain in exchange for sustainability-related improvements they make.

### 3.3.3. *Enable independent farmer-based training and research into pesticide-free and GMO-free farming*

Advice to farmers in this ecological transition is key, as it often supports them to implement new techniques, possibly with the use of new material, or manage resources and inputs efficiently. The majority of Member States have planned to use CAP funding to support **advisory services**. Member States must also ensure that the advice given is impartial and that advisers are suitably qualified and trained and have no conflict of interest. The **Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System**<sup>65</sup> aims to ensure that advisers are connected to research and informed on the latest techniques and innovative practices.

The Commission will continue to provide support and promote, through the organisation of workshops and seminars, the exchange of best practices among Member States and other stakeholders, through the **CAP Network**<sup>66</sup>. These actions will involve advisers who can in turn better guide farmers on the ground.

On **research**, the EU's Horizon Europe programme will launch in 2024 a partnership<sup>67</sup> with Member States to enhance the knowledge base and provide solutions and tools that will underpin the **agro-ecology transition** in Europe. The partnership will explore how agro-ecology can become the key instrument to reduce and phase out the use of pesticides in agriculture, and to maximise the contribution of farming to biodiversity protection and nature restoration. In addition, Horizon Europe is funding over 30 research projects, with a budget of at least EUR 200 million, on the reduced use of pesticides in agriculture and sustainable and pollinator-friendly farming practices such as agro-ecology, organic farming and restoring pollination services.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The European citizens' initiative '*Save bees and farmers*' reflects public concerns about the environmental and socio-economic sustainability of European agriculture. The Commission welcomes this initiative and acknowledges its importance, in particular as climate change and biodiversity loss constitute growing challenges for Europe's agriculture. It echoes calls made at the Conference on the Future of Europe<sup>68</sup> through which citizens insisted on the need for a safe, sustainable, just, climate responsible, and affordable production of food, respecting sustainability principles, the environment, safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems, while ensuring food security.

Since 2019, when the initiative was submitted and started its collection of support, the Commission has undertaken ambitious actions under the European Green Deal to ensure the sustainability of food systems, including the EU farm to fork strategy, the biodiversity strategy

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<sup>65</sup> Article 15 of [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/2115](#).

<sup>66</sup> <https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu>

<sup>67</sup> [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/research-area/agriculture-forestry-and-rural-areas/ecological-approaches-and-organic-farming/partnership-agroecology\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/research-area/agriculture-forestry-and-rural-areas/ecological-approaches-and-organic-farming/partnership-agroecology_en)

<sup>68</sup> <https://futureu.europa.eu/en>

and the zero pollution action plan, together with the CAP. Taken together, these measures form a comprehensive response to the requests made in this initiative.

The proposal for a regulation on the sustainable use of plant protection products sets out an ambitious path to reduce the risk and use of chemical pesticides in EU agriculture. It reinforces in a proportionate and balanced way the ongoing action to reduce the use and risk of chemical pesticides in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and the EU pesticide authorisation system. Under the Commission proposal, the regulation would be evaluated after four years.

Together, the proposal for a nature restoration law and the new deal for pollinators have the potential to be a game changer for pollinator conservation at EU level. They raise the level of ambition set under the EU biodiversity strategy to reverse the decline of pollinator populations by 2030 and to bring nature back to agricultural land.

Member States' plans under the CAP will support farmers, including small-scale farmers, in the transition towards increasing the sustainability and resilience of farming systems over 2023-2027.

For these reasons, rather than proposing new legislative acts, the priority is to ensure that the proposals currently being negotiated by the co-legislators are swiftly adopted and then implemented, together with the CAP. The Commission will make every effort to reach that goal, and it encourages all concerned actors to contribute to it. Over one million statements in support of this citizens' initiative are a clear signal and encouragement that the high level of ambition of the Commission proposals should be maintained. The success of the European Green Deal in driving this transition depends on all society – including citizens, farmers, businesses, scientists, public authorities, and European institutions.