COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION

on the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) “Save bees and farmers! Towards a bee-friendly agriculture for a healthy environment”
1. INTRODUCTION: THE CITIZENS’ INITIATIVE

By means of a European citizens’ initiative (ECI) under Article 11(4) of the Treaty on the European Union, a million or more nationals of a significant number of EU Member States can ask the European Commission, within the scope of its powers, to submit an appropriate proposal on a matter on which they consider that an EU legal act is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties. Detailed rules on ECIs are set out in Regulation (EU) 2019/788\(^1\).

‘Save bees and farmers! Towards a bee-friendly agriculture for a healthy environment’\(^2\) is the seventh ECI to have reached the thresholds required by the Treaty and the ECI Regulation. To protect bees and people’s health, the initiative calls on the Commission to propose legal acts 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.**

Following the organisers’ request of 31 July 2019, the Commission registered the initiative\(^3\) on 30 September 2019. As the initiative was collecting statements of support when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, it has benefitted from a one-year extension of the 12-months collection deadline (thus collecting signatures from 30 September 2019 until 30 September 2021)\(^4\). On 7 October 2022, after the verification of the collected statements of support by the competent Member States’ authorities, the organisers submitted their initiative to the Commission. The Commission examined the initiative on the basis of Regulation (EU) 2019/788, which applies as of 1 January 2020.

The organisers explained the objectives of the initiative in detail in a meeting with the Commission on 25 November 2022 and presented it in 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 this ECI\(^5\). The European Parliament held a plenary debate on the initiative on 16 March 2023.

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4. The initiative benefitted from an extension under Regulation (EU) 2020/1042 of 15 July 2020, which was subsequently granted by Commission Implementing Decision C(2020) 9226 and Commission Implementing Decision C(2021) 1121.
This Communication sets out the Commission’s legal and political conclusions on the initiative and the action it intends to take in response to the initiative, if any, in accordance with Article 15(2) of Regulation (EU) 2019/788.

2. CONTEXT

2.1. Farms and farming systems in the EU

There are approximately 9 million farms in the EU. Around 40% cultivate field crops (such as cereals, oilseeds and protein crops) and 21.5% are specialised in permanent crops, of which 4.7% are vineyards. Farms specialised in livestock production account for approximately 21.7% of farms and a small share of farms is specialised in horticultural products (2.3%), while mixed farming (a combination of different crops and/or livestock) counts for 14.3% of holdings. 30% of the agricultural area is permanent grassland.

The relative majority of farms (43.7%) have less than 2 hectares of agricultural area, and 22.5% have between 2 and 5 hectares. Farms may represent very different realities in terms of providing employment; for instance, very small farms often do not provide for a (full) living for their holders.

The share of area under organic farming has increased between 2010 and 2020 by 5.7% per year on average. In 2020, organic farming covered 14.7 million hectares, representing 9.1% of the EU agricultural land. Around 42% of the organic area is permanent grassland, followed by green fodder (17%), cereals (16%), permanent crops, (11%), industrial crops (4%) and dry pulses (34%).

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6 Eurostat (online data table EF_M_FARMLEG)
7 Eurostat (online data table EF_LUS_ALLCROPS)
8 Annual organic crop statistics (based on data collected through the Member States' organic certifying bodies).
9 Eurostat (online data table org_cropar).
2.2. Pesticide use in EU agriculture

Conventional farming often relies on chemical pesticides\(^1\) as a main way to prevent harvest losses 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. Their use is a major driver of biodiversity decline. Other farming systems tackle pests differently; for example, agroecological systems rely more on biodiversity and other non-chemical solutions for controlling pests\(^3\). In organic farming, the use of synthetic pesticides is not allowed.

Annually, around 350 000 tonnes of all types of pesticides are sold in the EU. This volume has remained the same in 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\(^4\).

2.3. Biodiversity in EU agricultural ecosystems

The evaluation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020\(^5\) highlighted that the state of biodiversity in EU agroecosystems has continued to deteriorate since 2010, further aggravating the loss of biodiversity from preceding decades. This is observed in particular for grassland butterflies, farmland birds, as well as protected habitats and species under the Nature Directives that are associated with agroecosystems.

Between 1991 and 2018 the populations of grassland butterflies have decreased by 25%\(^6\). According to the European Red List assessment, the population of around one in three bee, butterfly and hoverfly species is declining, with one in ten bee and butterfly species, and one in three hoverfly species threatened with extinction\(^7\). The Red List assessment indicates that intensive agricultural practices play a major role in this decline. Where this intensification happens it is associated with an increased use of pesticides and it leads to habitat loss, such as the loss of high-diversity landscape features, other uncultivated habitats, or semi-natural grassland.

In contrast to wild pollinator species, the honeybee, as a managed pollinator species, is not experiencing a decline in the EU. The number of honeybee colonies increased by 15.7% between 2018 and 2021.

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 have declined by 36% during that period\(^8\).

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\(^1\) 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 (naturally-occurring or man-made) and non-chemical pesticides such as micro-organisms or plant extracts.

\(^2\) For instance, natural predator 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.

\(^3\) Eurostat (2023).

\(^4\) SWD(2022) 284 final.

\(^5\) EEA (2019).

\(^6\) https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/redlist

\(^7\) Eurostat (2022).
The State of Nature report 2020\textsuperscript{19} showed that more than 45% of protected habitats\textsuperscript{20} 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 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 leads to the disappearance of semi-natural habitats, such as semi-natural grasslands, which are important for nature conservation. The report also showed that protected grasslands with particular relevance for pollinators have a higher proportion of bad conservation status and worse conservation status trends than other protected grasslands.

As mentioned in the Communication “A New Deal for pollinators”\textsuperscript{21} and shown by evidence, other factors drive biodiversity and pollinator loss, such as land-use change including urbanisation, climate change, and invasive alien species.

2.4. EU policy context

Three and a half years have passed since the ECI started collecting signatures, a period that was extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period the EU policy framework has evolved to a very significant extent. In December 2019, the Commission adopted the European Green Deal\textsuperscript{22}, a new strategy to boost the economy, improve people's health and quality of life, and care for nature. Transition to sustainable food systems is at the heart of the European Green Deal. Moreover, the reformed EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)\textsuperscript{23}, which the Commission proposed in June 2018, was adopted by the co-legislators in December 2021, and the Member States’ CAP Strategic Plans entered into force on 1 January 2023. They will be key in supporting the implementation of the Green Deal’s objectives.

The EU Farm to Fork Strategy\textsuperscript{24} and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030\textsuperscript{25}, adopted in May 2020, and the EU Zero Pollution Action Plan\textsuperscript{26}, 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\textsuperscript{27} and one for a Regulation on the Sustainable Use of Plant Protection Products\textsuperscript{28}. All of these measures are directly relevant to the ECI requests.

Against the backdrop of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and the issue of food affordability linked to the high inflation in food prices, the Commission has published a number of policy documents\textsuperscript{29} on food security and availability of fertilisers. These emphasize that the transition to sustainable food production is the best approach to ensure the resilience of EU

\textsuperscript{20} Habitats listed in Annex I of the Council Directive 92/43/EEC.
\textsuperscript{21} COM(2023) 35 final.
\textsuperscript{22} COM(2019) 640 final.
\textsuperscript{23} https://ec.europa.eu/commission-work/2030-
\textsuperscript{24} COM(2020) 381 final.
\textsuperscript{25} COM(2020) 380 final.
\textsuperscript{26} COM(2021) 400 final.
\textsuperscript{27} COM(2022) 304 final.
\textsuperscript{28} COM(2022) 305 final.
\textsuperscript{29} COM(2022) 133 final, COM(2022) 590 final, SWD(2023) 4 final.
agriculture. This ECI contributes to the societal debate on how to effectively achieve this transition.

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)\textsuperscript{30}, 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 ‘Ban glyphosate and protect people and the environment from toxic pesticides’\textsuperscript{31} submitted in 2017, the Commission undertook to focus on implementing the SUD and to establish harmonised risk indicators to enable the monitoring of trends at EU level. The Commission committed to use the resulting data as a basis for determining future policy options and to re-evaluate the situation at a later stage, initially in an implementation report\textsuperscript{32}. The Commission also adopted a proposal for a Regulation on the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain, which was subsequently adopted by the co-legislators\textsuperscript{33}.

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 chemical pesticides decreased by 26%\textsuperscript{34}. 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, weaknesses in the implementation and enforcement of the SUD remained\textsuperscript{35}.

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 proposal for a Regulation on the Sustainable Use of Plant Protection Products (SUR), proposed by the Commission in June 2022, sets 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 proposes measures to enhance IPM implementation. It also restricts pesticide use in sensitive areas, including areas which sustain pollinator species threatened with extinction.

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\textsuperscript{30} Directive 2009/128/EC.  
\textsuperscript{32} EU: Trends (europa.eu)  
The SUR proposal acknowledges the ECI ‘Save bees and farmers’ and the necessity to reduce the use of chemical pesticides. It is currently under discussion in the European Parliament and the Council.

As part of the impact assessment underpinning the SUR proposal, the Commission explored alternative pesticide reduction targets of varying levels of ambition (e.g. 20-40%, 40-60%, 60-80%). While a 70-80% reduction target would have the greatest positive impacts on human health and the environment, as it would require rapid and drastic changes to farming practices before alternatives are available, it was considered likely to have a greater effect on crop yield, and subsequently the greatest economic cost both for farmers and for the whole economy. It was, therefore, considered politically difficult to accept for Member States. Given the trade-offs between each of the scenarios, the 40-60% target range was considered the most appropriate option to increase environmental and human health protection while addressing the political and economic challenges likely to occur within the given timescale. 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 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 alternatives to chemical pesticides are always considered first. For crops covering 90% of the agricultural area in Member States, farmers would be oblige to follow detailed crop-specific rules that apply IPM principles to their local conditions. The Commission intends to actively support and monitor the development of such rules by Member States. To this aim, the Commission intends to launch a project under the LIFE Programme, which would support the Member States in developing these rules and the Commission in assessing them. It would build on the Pilot Project 'IPM Toolbox for farmers' [39], which analysed the drivers and barriers to the IPM uptake and compiled IPM practices.

Availability of alternatives is key to reducing the use of chemical pesticides and the Commission has already taken significant steps to improve it. The Commission has adopted four implementing Regulations revising data requirements, approval criteria and assessment methodologies for the authorisation of biological pesticides containing micro-organisms to accelerate their access to the market. As part of the Better Training for Safer Food initiative [41], training opportunities are available to reinforce expertise on the risk assessments of micro-organisms used as pesticides and biocides, on IPM implementation and control at farm level, and on the testing of pesticide application equipment. The Commission has also launched a call for proposals for call for proposals for financial grants to Member States (EUR 10 million over 5 years) to increase their capacities to evaluate application dossiers, in particular for micro-organisms in particular for micro-organisms. Several on-going research projects under the Horizon Europe and the Horizon 2020 programmes are dedicated to alternatives to chemical pesticides and combinations of tools and technologies for IPM.

[38] Please add reference
[39] https://agrilpm.eu
[40] https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/micro-organisms_en
[41] https://better-training-for-safer-food.ec.europa.eu/training/?redirect=1
The development of new **pest-resistant plant varieties** also helps to lower dependency on pesticides. All types of breeding approaches including **new Genomic Techniques** offer the potential to accelerate this process and the Commission will bring forward a legal proposal on their use during 2023. As well in this area, Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe support several projects concerning breeding for pest-resistant and climate change resilient 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 comes in addition to the significant support available under the new CAP, for example, through eco-schemes or rural development initiatives, to support the sustainable use of pesticides. In this way, the CAP will 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. The EU has one of the world’s most stringent regulatory systems, ensuring high safety standards for human and animal health and the environment, including bees. The Commission has **restricted or prohibited the use of pesticides dangerous to bees** (e.g. neonicotinoids and sulfoxaflor) and has taken steps to reinforce the assessment of pesticides risk with regard to bees. In particular, the Commission asked in 2019 the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to update the **Bee Guidance Document** to fully take into account new scientific knowledge. EFSA is currently finalising this review. Once EFSA has adopted the revised Bee Guidance Document, the Commission will take the necessary steps to amend the relevant Implementing Regulations and seek endorsement of the Guidance Document by Member States. The Commission has also initiated the setting up of a workplan for the development of all necessary but still missing **protocols to test pesticides on bees**, focusing on wild species.

Pollinator decline is a global phenomenon. The Commission has therefore recently adopted a Regulation 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, independently of whether the product is produced in the EU or imported from non-EU countries. Similar action is planned for other neonicotinoids (e.g. imidacloprid) and for persistent bioaccumulative and toxic substances (such as quinoxyfen).

Furthermore, the Commission has prepared a draft Regulation to set up a work programme for the review and possible approval at EU level of **safeners and synergists** used in pesticides. An Implementing Regulation setting out detailed rules for the identification of unacceptable **coformulants** in pesticides will be adopted in the first quarter of 2023. Under both Regulations, impacts on bees and pollinators will be considered.

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42 https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides_en
43 https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/approval-active-substances/renewal-approval/neonicotinoids_en
44 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_impl/2022/686/oj
45 https://food.ec.europa.eu/plants/pesticides/protection-bees_en
In October 2022, the Commission adopted, as part of the Zero Pollution Package, a legislative proposal\(^47\) 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 actions and shape legislation beyond 2030. Pesticide use data will become available under the **Regulation on statistics** on agricultural input and output\(^48\) adopted in December 2022. An Implementing Regulation harmonising the **records that professional pesticide users must keep** will be adopted in early 2023.

Finally, the Commission will propose in 2023 legally binding targets to reduce **food waste**\(^49\). Discarded food results in the unnecessary use of agricultural inputs, including pesticides. Moreover, the Commission will propose in 2023 a legislative framework for **Sustainable Food Systems**\(^50\) to establish 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 ECI’s second aim – to restore natural ecosystems in agricultural areas so that farming becomes a vector of biodiversity recovery – is in line with the objective of the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** to bring back nature 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 acknowledges farmers as guardians of our land who should be supported and incentivised in the transition towards a sustainable land management.

In order 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 aid biodiversity recovery in agricultural ecosystems, it is also critical to reduce pressures from chemical pollutants and other substances. This in particular concerns pesticides, as presented in the previous section, but also **nutrient losses from fertilisers**. The Biodiversity Strategy has set out an objective of reducing 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 various measures including the **Action Plan on Integrated Nutrient Management**.

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\(^{49}\) [EU actions against food waste](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/data/press/2021_SP1131EN.pdf).

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 in June 2022. It entails an overarching restoration objective coupled with a set of binding targets for specific ecosystems. The restoration efforts in agricultural land include restoration of ecosystem functions and services, of which animal pollination is one of the most essential. Proposed obligations on agricultural ecosystems include ensuring the recovery of grassland butterflies and farmland bird populations, rewetting peatlands and increasing the share of agricultural land with high-diversity landscape features. The Nature Restoration Law proposal includes a specific legally binding target for Member States to reverse the decline of pollinator populations by 2030 and achieve thereafter an increasing trend, with a methodology for regular monitoring of pollinators. According to the Commission proposal, Member States are expected to submit National Restoration Plans to the Commission, showing how they will deliver on the targets. They would also be required to monitor and report on their progress.

Restoration of nature needs to take place also below ground. In November 2021, the Commission adopted the EU Soil Strategy for 2030\(^{51}\). The strategy stresses the importance of soil biodiversity for ecosystem health and sets concrete actions to better understand and protect soil biodiversity, including through the Horizon Europe Mission “A Soil Deal for Europe”\(^{52}\). Halting and reversing the loss of soil biodiversity is an essential element of the strategy’s vision to ensure 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 CAP for 2023-2027 has significantly increased its environmental ambition compared to the past. In particular, it contains a set of environmental conditions to be respected by all farmers benefiting from CAP support\(^{53}\), covering around 90% of the agricultural area in the EU. These conditions include the so-called ‘standards for good agricultural and environmental condition of land’ (GAEC), several of which aim at conserving and restoring biodiversity. For example, farmers must devote 4% of their arable land to non-productive features and areas such as hedges, ponds, fields margins, flower-strips and fallow land – and this applies to all farmers benefiting from any area-based or animal-based CAP payment. Another GAEC requires farmers to establish pesticides- and fertilisers-free buffer strips along watercourses.

Beyond these conditions, the 2023-2027 CAP will support farmers who voluntarily engage in more sustainable practices, with close to EUR 100 billion – a third of the CAP budget – 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, dedicating at least 35% of the budget to environmental practices (see section 3.3).

Last but not least, on 24 January 2023, the European Commission adopted the communication ‘A New Deal for Pollinators’\(^{54}\) revising the 2018 EU Pollinators Initiative. This comes in

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\(^{51}\) [COM(2021) 699 final](https://doi.org/10.2790/699).


\(^{53}\) Any area or animal based support.

\(^{54}\) [COM(2023) 35 final](https://doi.org/10.2790/35).
response to increasing calls, including from the European Court of Auditors\(^55\) 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 progress in implementing the Pollinators Initiative\(^56\) from May 2021, which 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 - with 42 actions to tackle the causes of pollinator decline, improve knowledge and mobilise all actors across society. In particular, it aims to i) establish a robust system for monitoring pollinator species and threats they face; ii) map key pollinator areas and establish a network of ecological corridors – ‘Buzz Lines’ – to connect those areas; iii) promote pollinator-friendly agricultural practices under the CAP; iv) mitigate the impacts of pesticide use on pollinators; v) mobilise citizens and businesses; and vi) foster action for pollinators at national, regional and local level. It 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 for 2030.

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, with key instruments like cross-compliance and agri-environmental measures. As mentioned above, the new policy for 2023-2027 is taking 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 ECI. Based on an assessment of the local conditions and needs, Member States prepared national Strategic Plans for the period 2023-2027, hereinafter referred to as ‘Plans\(^57\)’, explaining how they will channel support to achieve the economic, environmental and social objectives of the CAP.

3.3.1. Support for small scale and diverse farming

The CAP takes further steps towards a fairer distribution of income support and a greater targeting to those farms who need it most, notably the small-and medium-sized farms. Close to EUR 29 billion annually will address the persistent gap between agricultural income and the average wage in the whole economy, as well as the disparities in income between agricultural sectors and farms. Smaller farmers may receive increased income support, through the complementary payments that redistribute income support payments from larger farms.

\(^{55}\) ECA Special Report 15 (2020): Protection of wild pollinators in the EU — Commission initiatives have not borne fruit.

\(^{56}\) COM/2021/261 final.

\(^{57}\) There are 28 CAP Strategic Plans: one per each of the 27 EU Member States, with the exception of Belgium which has two plans.
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 actions, 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**, supporting the income of farmers through the CAP contributes to the EU territorial balance by maintaining agriculture in marginal areas. It helps to limit overspecialisation and to avoid concentration of production in the most productive areas, thus keeping a higher diversity of production and farming systems across the rural territories.

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

Member States’ Plans include measures that aim to support farmers in the transition to resilient and sustainable farming:

- Overall, more than 26% of EU agricultural land will be offered support to voluntarily reduce the use and risk of **pesticides**. Farmers can apply to eco-schemes on Integrated Pest Management or pesticide management, including the prohibition of chemical pest control (15 Plans) and the ban of pesticides or limitations in their use (17 Plans). Several Plans include support under rural development which restricts the use of pesticides or ban it in certain geographical areas such as Natura 2000 areas or drinking water protection zones. In addition, 13 Plans include payments for **Natura 2000**.

- Support to **conserve or restore biodiversity** will cover close to 31% of the EU’s agricultural area. The Plans include support for flower strips in fields or on field margins and the retention of traditional agricultural production systems and landscapes, such as traditional variety vine yards, orchards, or natural species-rich grasslands, managed with very limited use (or ban) of chemical pesticides.

- Moreover, around 2.86 million hectares will be offered support for the maintenance or establishment of **landscape features**, either through eco-schemes or rural development. This concerns in particular the planting of trees and hedges (16 Plans), land lying fallow (17 Plans), and the creation of buffer strips covered with grass, flowers, and melliferous crops (16 Plans). Such landscape features include habitats that support the lifecycle of pollinators.

- Support for whole farm systems like **agro-forestry and agro-ecology** is also available. The EU target value for support to new afforested land, including agro-forestry and wooden landscape features, is estimated at close to 623 000 hectares.

Under **Organic Farming**, the use of pesticides is strictly limited to a list of products excluding synthetic pesticides. Organic farming is heavily promoted and supported under the CAP in a way to help reach the Farm to Fork Strategy EU-level target of achieving a coverage of at least 25% of the EU’s agricultural land by 2030. All Member States support both conversion and maintenance of organic farming under eco-schemes and/or rural development. Six Member States have included in their Plans national target values for organic coverage 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, of which 9 Member States aim to at least double it. To achieve the EU target and help the organics sector reach its full potential, the Commission has also put in place an Action Plan for organic production in the EU covering the period 2021-2027\textsuperscript{58}.

Finally, a change to competition rules was recently adopted\textsuperscript{59} allowing agreements between producers of agricultural products that aim to apply a sustainability standard higher than what is mandatory under EU or national law. This provision, which can apply to the reduction of pesticide use, reinforces cooperation between primary producers with other actors of the supply chain, ensuring that farmers get fair economic returns for their efforts to enhance sustainability of their production beyond what is legally required.

3.3.3. Enable independent farmer-based training and research into pesticide- 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 support advisory services through CAP funding. Member States have to ensure that the advice given is impartial and that advisors are suitably qualified and appropriately trained and have no conflict of interest. The Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System 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\textsuperscript{60}. These actions will involve advisers who can in turn better guide farmers on the ground.

On research, Horizon Europe will launch in 2024 a partnership\textsuperscript{61} with Member States to enhance the knowledge base and deliver 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 more than 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 agroecology, organic farming and restoring pollination services.

4. CONCLUSION

The European citizens' initiative 'Save bees and farmers' reflects societal concerns about the environmental and socio-economic sustainability of European agriculture. The Commission

\textsuperscript{58} COM/2021/141 final/2

\textsuperscript{59} Article 210a of Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 establishing a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products, introduced by Regulation (EU) 2021/2117.

\textsuperscript{60} https://eu.cap-network.ec.europa.eu

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 through which citizens called for a transition to sustainable agriculture, biodiversity restoration and protection of pollinating insects.

Since 2019 when the initiative started its collection, the Commission has undertaken ambitious actions under the European Green Deal to ensure the sustainability of food systems through the EU Farm to Fork Strategy, the Biodiversity Strategy and the Zero Pollution Action Plan, together with the new EU Common Agricultural Policy. Taken together, these measures respond, in the Commission’s view, to the requests of the ECI.

The proposal for a Regulation on the Sustainable Use of Plant Protection Products sets an ambitious path to reduce the risk and use of chemical pesticides in EU agriculture. The proposal reinforces in a proportionate and realistic way the ongoing actions to reduce the use and risk of chemical pesticides in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems through the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive 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, strengthening the ambition of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to reverse the decline of pollinator populations by 2030 and to bring back nature to agricultural land.

Member States’ Strategic Plans under the Common Agricultural Policy for 2023-2027 will support farmers, including small-scale farmers, in the transition towards a sustainable and resilient farming system.

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 subsequently fully implemented on the ground, together with the CAP. The Commission will make every effort to reach that goal, and it encourages all concerned actors to contribute to it. More than a million of statements supporting 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 the transition depends on the active role of all society, including citizens, farmers, businesses, scientists, public authorities and European institutions.

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63 https://futureu.europa.eu/en