



Photo by: Jonathan Petersson

Introduction

Carbon farming is championed as one of the most promising solutions to drop Europe's net emissions and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. It is also seen by many as an opportune framework to support and promote agroforestry considering the carbon-sequestration benefits of growing trees on agricultural land. A focus on agroforestry could return trees to agricultural landscapes, increase the diversity of habitats, diversify the types and numbers of species grown on a single farm, enhance the health of animals and extensively managed livestock, increase mixed crop-livestock systems, decrease inputs and store carbon—all deeply agroecological solutions.

On the other hand, many risks arise from the carbon market including its volatility which offers unclear payment schemes for farmers, does not guarantee long-term sequestration, and risks to dampen mandated efforts and genuine climate action, amongst others.

The Horizon 2020 project AGROMIX took the opportunity to take part in the discussion that is happening at the EU level by inviting a variety of stakeholders including Parliament members, the Commission, local governance, civil society representatives, farmers, scientists and academics to discuss the risks and opportunities of the upcoming legislations on carbon farming. The goal of the [workshop](#) held in Brussels on the 5th of June, was to facilitate an exchange to determine policy options and scenarios that benefit all those involved in the food system. The discussion aimed to determine whether carbon farming can truly deliver on climate objectives and what agroecological carbon farming would look like.

This policy brief summarises and reviews the risks and opportunities of carbon farming discussed in the workshop in order to provide insights to policymakers and Member States to ensure that the policies attached to carbon farming will contribute to a just transition.

What is carbon farming?

Carbon farming refers to agricultural practices that enhance the uptake and storage of carbon in the soil, converting it from carbon dioxide in the air. The European Commission defines this concept as “a green business model that rewards land managers for taking up improved land management practices, resulting in the increase of carbon sequestration in living biomass, dead organic matter and soils by enhancing carbon capture and/or reducing the release of carbon into the atmosphere, in respect of ecological principles favourable to biodiversity and the natural capital overall.” The objective of this system is to encourage the agricultural and forestry sectors to have a positive impact on the climate and contribute to the various aims set out within the European Green Deal¹.

The Commission adopted the Communication on Sustainable Carbon Cycles on December 2021 and published the Proposal for a Regulation establishing a Union certification framework for carbon removals (CRCF) on 30 November 2022. Both of these documents aim to promote carbon farming to increase carbon sinks in carbon-rich habitats and improve biodiversity. Such a regulation hopes to standardise carbon farming by designing clear and reliable monitoring, reporting, and verification frameworks and to improve knowledge, data management, and advisory services.

Opportunities and risks

The policy landscape for agroforestry has been expanding, with ever more policies devoted to supporting the system both at a European and local level. Yet, although support exists, farmers often do not take advantage of it. Agroforestry has yet to expand to the level needed to create truly diverse and biodiverse habitats. Carbon farming policy—if done correctly—can be a great tool for such an expansion.

In the last few decades, it has become clear that commercial monocultural tree plantations have limited environmental benefits. When agroforestry is used to create or supporting existing ecosystems, it multiplies the biodiversity of a landscape and brings people back to the territory. As Patrick Worms, the Vice President of EURAF explained, while agroforestry on its own will not be able to take enough carbon out of the atmosphere to stop climate change, it is one important tool that combined with others will have immense impact.

In order to have a significant positive impact on climate and reach crucial climate goals, such as limiting the warming of the planet to 1.5 °C, there needs to be a drastic reduction in emissions. The climate action we need cannot be reached simply by removals. Further, if the primary goal of removals remains to offset emissions, especially within a voluntary market, the inescapable risk becomes greenwashing, concealment of emissions and illegitimate claims from large corporations acquiring the right to continue to pollute.

Vitor Rodrigues, a Portuguese farmer from the European Coordination Via Campesina, said it best when he began his presentation: “[This is a new business model, but for whom?](#)” This represents one of the biggest risks. Will it be for farmers, especially peasant, agroecological farmers or will it be for industry and corporations?

Small, agroecological and peasant farming are responsible for a majority of global food consumption, in addition to invaluable ecosystem services, social benefits for rural communities, and reversing land and rural abandonment. They are the types of farms that support the major objectives of the EU represented through the European Green Deal, especially in the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies. Yet not enough support lands at such farms to support their future. The increase of carbon in landscapes is a worthy cause but not outside of a systemic approach that focuses on the farm, landscape, regional and food systems level.

The issues that arise from carbon farming are many and the risks great. It is important to learn from the mistakes of the past and not act without foresight. The price volatility of carbon markets presents unstable revenue for farmers, a profession that already faces income uncertainty and needs long-term stability. Carbon farming puts further pressure on access to land, inciting land grabbing and speculation.

¹ “Carbon Farming,” European Commission, n.d. https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/sustainable-carbon-cycles/carbon-farming_en.

The reversibility of sequestration, carbon leakage and the permanence (or lack thereof) of carbon in the soil raises liability questions in case of reversal. Further risks include the difficulty in measurements, monitoring, reporting and verification. Moreover, certification schemes will not be accessible for small-scale farmers because of the costs and the bureaucracy involved.

In order to truly deliver on climate objectives, it is important to create high-quality carbon removal frameworks and long-term net carbon storage. This can only be done through deep, systemwide changes, such as ecosystem restoration that increases land resilience, adaptation and natural fertility, and not superficial solutions with a narrow, siloed focus on carbon.

According to Jurij Krajcic from the European Environmental Bureau, we need to focus on ecosystem restoration and integrity through land-based solutions such as agroforestry, which sequesters carbon, creates resilience, retains water and mitigates local climates in periods of extreme weather; rewetting drained wetlands and peatlands which has outstanding environmental benefits and carbon sequestration potential; close-to-nature forest management which allows trees of different ages and species to cohabitate along with all of the various cycles, including retaining dead wood; and reforestation, including in urban spaces. These solutions are more holistic, sustainable and long term than carbon farming on its own.

What Europe needs is a food system that fosters agroecology in all its facets, including agroforestry. [La Via Campesina](#) manifesto sums it up: we need more farmers, not less, we need access to farmland; generational renewal; rights to seeds; advising services that are trained to support farmers and the environment; the phasing out of industrial farms; a reduction of synthetic fertilisers; and a new market model that is based on territorial; local food systems and sustainable food that is healthy for people and the planet—not big business and corporate interests.

Points of discussion and debate

During the open discussion, two possible strategies shaped up in reaction to the CRCF proposal: either refusing the European Commission's proposal and wait for a better one, or work at making the legislation as ambitious as possible. The political uncertainty of the future would speak for the latter, taking advantage of a window of opportunity in the current political climate. The European Commission sees this document as an opportunity to create a common framework that protects farmers. However, if the legislation remains too vague, it cannot be implemented to have real impact.

One key concern of stakeholders was around the consultation process occurring within the carbon farming expert group, which primarily includes advisors from the industry which are now using this space to lobby for their own interests. There is a pressing need for a solution that allows collaboration among public mandates and public goods, civil society and private entities. As of now, these parties often work in opposition, unable to find a common ground within such diverse interests and aims.

The financialization of nature was another key point of discussion, and whether paying for ecosystem services continues to move Europe further away from the holistic vision needed for a healthy landscape or if compensating farmers for their stewardship is something vitally important, as they should be rewarded with public money for maintaining public goods. Many believed that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) needs to be revisited. Instead of giving money for a hedge, a tree or a flower, money needs to go to people who work the land, preserve its biodiversity and mitigate climate change in a holistically managed system. The current payment model suggested for carbon exacerbates challenges around land access, especially for young and first-time farmers. Large companies can buy huge tracks of land, speculating on EU subsidies that will be devoted to carbon farming. Enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem integrity should be prerequisite to land-based activities.

Lastly, a strong emphasis was put on the role of farming advisory services, auditors and inspectors. Currently, most advising services are run by individuals that were trained within industrial farming, which gives them, for example, only tools to manage pests with chemicals. Independent farm advisory services are not easily accessible to many farmers who would like to foster the goals of the Biodiversity and Farm to Fork Strategies, and manage the land regeneratively.

Further, auditors and inspectors are trained to scrutinise farmers and enforce overly complicated bureaucratic criteria. They often end up taking away promised support and penalising the very practices that would help bring forward stated Green Deal commitments, instead of engaging in the cooperative exchange that farmers need. Farmers should be rewarded for being farmers and supported, not treated with suspicion. Further, when it comes to carbon farming, new advisory services are often financed by industrial corporations that are focused on increasing profit without a holistic view of the environment. This creates a lack of not only professional advice on sustainability, but also independent advice.

Recommendations

1. Develop and increase access to independent, climate and environmentally focused advisory services, including specific to young farmers.
2. Implement protections for access to land and ensure that carbon farming does not negatively impact land tenure, or create land concentration and land grabbing.
3. Channel public money into public goods.
4. Focus all future environmental policies on emission reduction. Carbon removals should only be paired with emission reductions, thus, offsetting must never be an option for private or public entities.
5. Renumerate farmers and land managers for their stewardship, including restoration of climate, biodiversity and land resilience, not just with a narrow focus on carbon¹.
6. Only allow carbon farming practices that have proven long-term removals, as many practices presented as potential carbon farming solutions are susceptible to reversibility.
7. Any carbon legislation should not act in a silo, and should follow other European legislations and their goals, including the European Green Deal.
8. Any certification mechanism needs to be individually governed to ensure transparency in monitoring, evaluation and reporting².
9. Any carbon policy—and farming policy—must leave no one behind, therefore local communities, foresters, small-scale farmers and other relevant stakeholders should be consulted before any project is implemented.

The Way Forward

Storing carbon in our soils is vitally important. However, it is only one segment of an infinitely complex picture. It should not become the single focus of environmental and climate policy initiatives or Europe will miss a key opportunity to address the climate and biodiversity crises: through a systemic understanding and approach. If ecosystems are restored, carbon will also increase.

The policy ambition to create a standard, verifiable accounting framework that stabilises the carbon market and compensates farmers for ecosystem carbon storage is considered as an ecosystem service is welcome, but the social aspects of any farming legislation must leave no one behind. For the moment, the Commission has failed to consider remuneration for farmers, small and medium enterprises and regenerative pioneers who have made great strides already and now struggle to do more. Public funds should support a systemic and just transition towards agroecology, instead of channelling yet more money into big, industrial farms.

Carbon farming, if merely considered through a silo approach, cannot be an efficient policy that provides benefits for farmers or climate neutrality. Rather, the path to climate and biodiversity objectives relies on policy consistency to support farmers devoted to ecosystem restoration, taking into consideration socio-economic aspects for farmers and long-term carbon sequestration.

1. Certification of Carbon Removals. EEB Policy Recommendations.
<https://eeb.org/library/certification-of-carbon-removals-eeb-policy-recommendations/>

2. Certification of Carbon Removals. EEB Policy Recommendations.
<https://eeb.org/library/certification-of-carbon-removals-eeb-policy-recommendations/>

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