

Viewpoint: European politicians seem hell-bent on undermining sustainable farming

As Members of the European Parliament meet... to discuss how violently to continue Brussels' attack on European farmers and consumers, several studies have been circulating among the PowerPoint clicks and Zoom hand-raising of the chattering classes. The studies all agree that the EU Farm2Fork strategy will result in a serious decline in farm yields, adding even more hardship on EU consumers (all in the name of Commissioner Frans Timmermans' Green Deal showboatism in the run-up to Glasgow's COP 26).

For those living under a rock for the last two years (or more concerned about a coronavirus pandemic) the EU has introduced a [Farm2Fork strategy](#) to, they claim, reduce the impact of agriculture on the environment and climate. Officially it is to make "food systems fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly". The omission of the word "more" implies that EU Commissioner Frans Timmermans believes that European farmers are not fair, not providing healthy food and not trying to protect the environment.

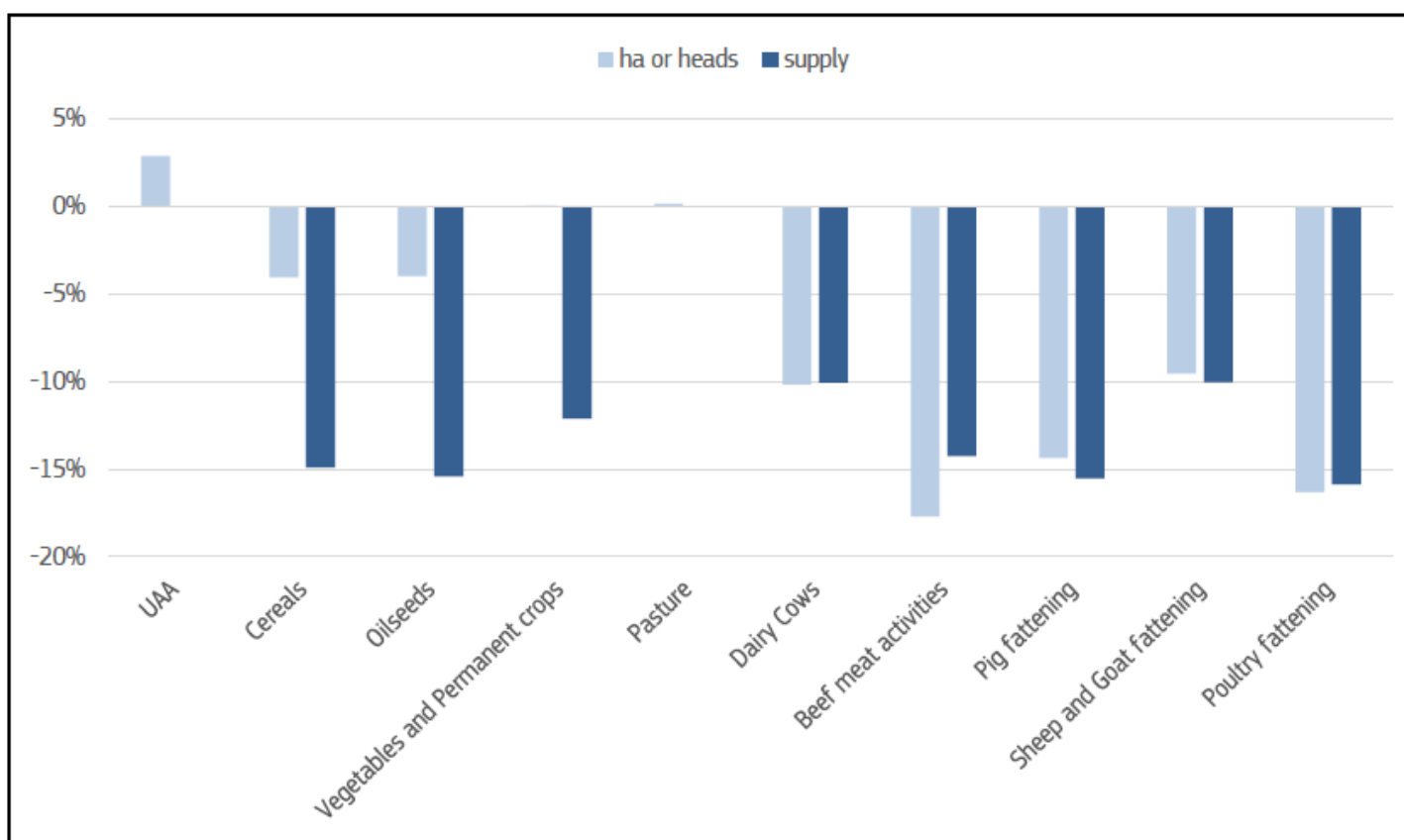
In reality, Farm2Fork is adopting many environmental activist campaign objectives which will likely do the opposite. It sets a series of radical goals to meet by 2030 including reducing synthetic pesticide use and livestock antibiotics by 50%, increasing land for organic food production to 25% and cut fertiliser use by 20%. The greenhouse gas reduction targets for the agricultural sector will be increased by 50% over the next eight years.

These radical targets lead to one simple question: Is Frans Timmermans trying to destroy EU farming?

Experts???

Every study or impact assessment that has looked at Farm2Fork has concluded that the consequences for farmers, consumers and EU trade and economic development will be dire. The European Commission's own Joint Research Centre (JRC) produced a [study](#) that essentially declared the Farm2Fork strategy a threat to farmers and European consumers. It recognised serious yield declines across all agricultural sectors, predicted increased consumer prices and assumed that Europeans would have to change their dietary habits. The European Commission not only ignored the strong advice from their internal scientists, they even [tried to bury](#) the JRC's findings, releasing it six months later during the quiet days of summer.

Figure 5. EU-27 area (ha) or animal number and supply changes in 2030 for the F2F and BDS targets and CA 2014-2020 scenario relative to the baseline



The only increase in 2030, according to the JRC, will be in utilised farmland (at a time when we should rewild poorer land).

An [impact assessment](#) produced by one of the most respected European agricultural universities, Wageningen in the Netherlands, recently concluded that post-Farm2Fork agricultural production declines will average 10-20% and in some cases up to 30% lower yields. As prices increase, the study concludes that European exports of food products like wine and tomato, apple and olive-based products will suffer immensely. Perennial crops (on trees and vines), according to the Wageningen research, will be hardest hit as growers cannot shift to other crops when markets collapse or nature rears its ugly head. The EU is dependent on these food exports though so they will not be able to impose import trade restrictions to protect their farmers.

Farmers are not making 20% margins they can afford to freely surrender and as technologies are taken away, they will face a choice of working harder for less or abandoning their fields. I interact with many EU farmers and I fear they are losing their will to fight. It was evident with the EU neonicotinoid ban that a large number of farmers simply removed oilseed rape from their crop rotations (and almost abandoned sugar beets until most countries got a derogation). Agronomists advise farmers on certain crop rotation schedules over six harvests and cover crops to protect and develop their soil. The systematic removal of

crops from rotations will increase soil degradation, demanding more inputs and not less.

The European Commission is not engaging with experts or scientists and has been able to ignore such information, research and advice. Sorry but that is a fact. Since the Farm2Fork process was announced several years back, there has been no evolution in the strategy, no change in their repressive targets and no serious open dialogue. Consultations are announced, managed by external consultants and then ignored. It must be very frustrating to be a scientist in this present European Commission (no wonder a JRC letter was leaked to the press). The vocabulary and naive assumptions in the Commission's recent consultations on a "[Toxic-Free Europe](#)" and the [Pesticides/Farm2Fork survey](#) have been scientific embarrassments. Farm2Fork and the entire Green Deal exercise demonstrates a complete demise of evidence-based policy, stakeholder engagement and good governance.

Brussels is brain dead.

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Farm2Fork is Fit4Failure

I have argued [elsewhere](#) that organic food production does not improve the environment or public health (the opposite is often the case) and that most agriculture is [carbon negative](#) (until we consume it). I keep trying to get my head around the Farm2Fork objectives but I can only assume that a) Timmermans is poorly advised by ecological zealots in his office or b) the European Commission vice-president is quite happy to eliminate farming as a viable profession in the EU (probably both). Here are some back-of-the-envelope reality doses that make the Farm2Fork strategy fit for failure:

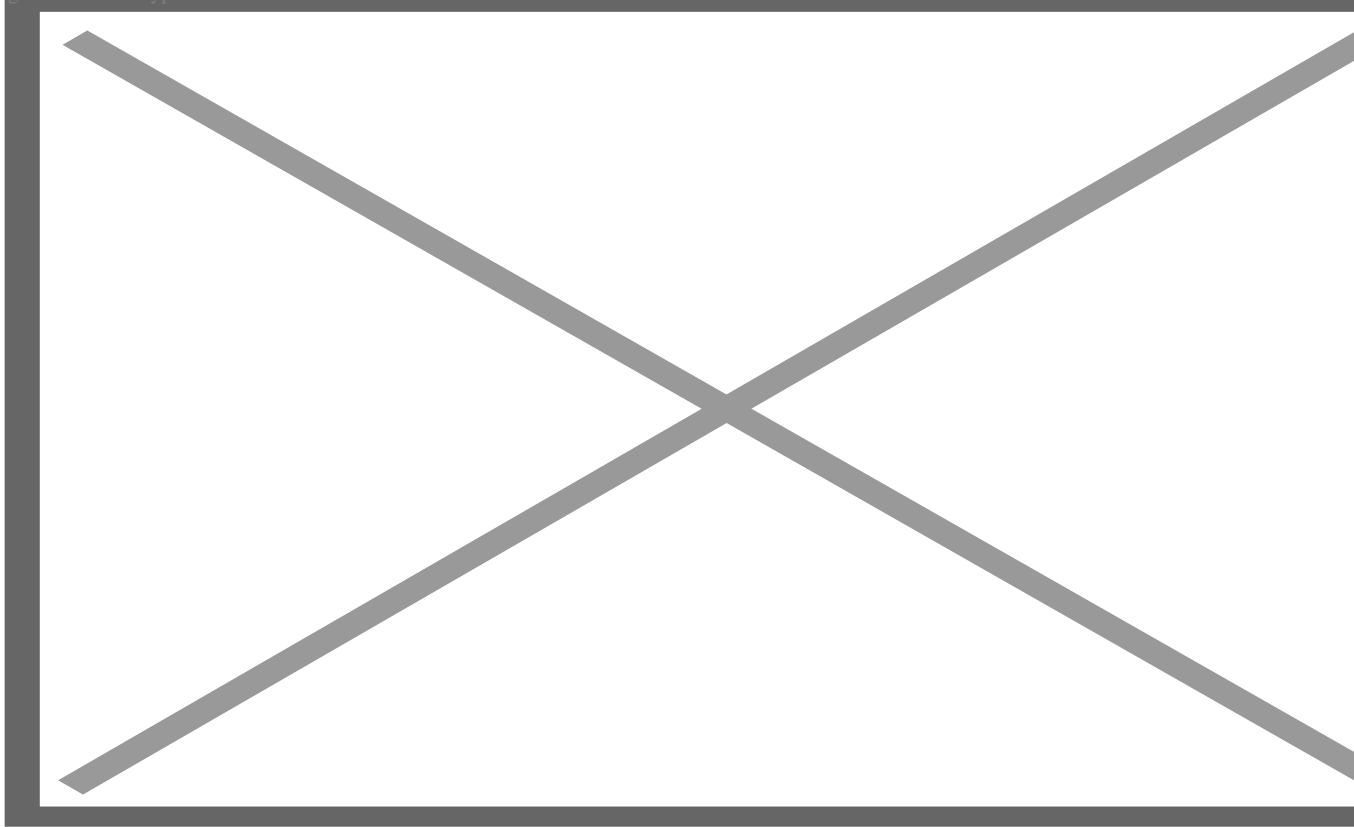
- "Organic" is a marketing concept built on fear and assuming on a natural/good v synthetic/evil dichotomy that makes no sense from any scientific basis. Leaving crops more vulnerable to insects, weeds, blights and fungal attacks has led to an on-average organic yield reduction of 35-40%. At a time when we need to focus on sustainable intensification, increasing yields on more productive farmland while rewilding poorer pastures, Farm2Fork is demanding an arbitrary increase of land for farming with a less productive farming process. More meadows and forests will inevitably be ploughed under for this shift to organic agriculture. How is this sustainable?
- Conventional farmers have developed regenerative soil practises using a complex mix of cover crop seeds and no-till farming (often referred to as conservation agriculture or regenerative farming). These developments have greatly improved soil health, reduced erosion and water runoff while cutting the use of fertilisers. But results are much more effective if farmers can terminate their cover crops with herbicides like glyphosate. The threat of blanket Farm2Fork herbicide bans has stopped farmers from investing in no-till drills, thus many are still farming less sustainably and using more fertilisers. Farm2Fork will kill no-till at a time when it is desperately needed for a more sustainable agriculture.
- Food waste is a curiously naive part of Farm2Fork. How will organic produce (with more deformities, infestations and fungal issues) last longer on the shelf or in transport than clean conventional

produce? Also, farmers return their waste to the soil to reduce fertiliser demand ... but this would not be promoted under Farm2Fork targets.

- Farm2Fork assumes that food price increases will feed back down to farmers to make up for lost yields and crop failures. This does not consider cheaper imports from countries where farmers are still able to enjoy beneficial technologies. When the EU banned growing GMO soy for feed, European farmers could not compete with high yielding, lower cost soybean imports so they rotated into other crops. Farm2Fork will essentially do that to all farm crops all at once. Europe's farmers will not have a chance unless the EU blocks free trade. So much for Parma ham.

Think of Farm2Fork as Sri Lanka in slow motion.

Image not found or type unknown



According to the Commission's own scientists in the JRC, Farm2Fork will cause significant food price inflation. But who cares?

Aspiration or regulation?

The EU's Farm2Fork policy is a watershed in the confusion of two European Commission environmental-health approaches. Health policy has long been the responsibility of Member States with Brussels serving mainly in an advisory role, setting aspirational targets with rounded years and little capacity to implement

policy. In the early 2000s it was a pretty good game. Brussels officials could set lofty goals to show off their green, virtuous credentials without ever having to worry about implementation or political consequences. Their Health 2030 strategy goals from more than a decade ago included aspirations like reducing smoking rates and eating more vegetables. They set targets and urged Member States to step forward ... and if they didn't, by that time these EU officials would have moved onto the next strategy ("*2050 sounds like a nice number ... I'll be retired by then!*").

But with REACH on regulating chemicals and the Sustainable Use Directive on pesticides, Brussels found some teeth and have now begun to do more than merely harmonise and coordinate on health and the environment matters. Recent agricultural dossiers (glyphosate, neonicotinoids, new plant breeding techniques...) have been handled by DG Santé (the health regulatory body) rather than DG Agriculture (since farmers really should not have any say in such important policies as how our food should be grown).

A positive regulatory approach would create incentives, tax breaks and investment in more sustainable technologies but this won't work in a place such as Brussels. Since regions would benefit differently from agricultural innovations, the European Commission could not regulate to improve technologies and yields without being seen to favour one sector, region or approach over another. This shift from aspirational dreams to regulatory reality on environmental health issues could only actually work in the negative – via the increased application of the precautionary principle (systematically removing agricultural technologies based on declared ideological aspirations rather than practical reality).

So Farm2Fork expresses lofty principles and aspirational nice-to-haves which the Commission has somehow confused with their regulatory ambition. Their aspirations (reduce pesticides, fertilisers, livestock antibiotics...) are precautionary as that is the only way, within their mandate, that Brussels can exert pressure upon the Member States. But their jurisdiction is still more aspirational than regulatory. When the reality of price increases and crop failures come home to roost, and when most Member States won't meet the Commission's Farm2Fork aspirations (and the Commission then applies more precautionary bans), the European courts will be busy. Timmermans is hoping the market adapts to his dystopian reality before the courts respond (and this cunning political artist will probably be right ... although morally bankrupt).

Sacrifice is a virtue

No one is denying that EU agricultural yields will decline if Farm2Fork's aspirations are actually implemented. Many well-fed elitists with nice gardens are talking about the lifestyle changes we will all need to make. Even conservative studies by internal EU scientists at the JRC are forecasting 20% drops in food production and considerable price increases for consumers. They expect to give more money to farmers to grow less, charge consumers more to eat less and forsake growth and development until Europeans learn to live on less. Europe's Green Deal objective is to impose sacrifice on its population: energy providers will charge more and consumers will get more frequent blackouts; European manufacturers will have fewer innovative chemicals at their disposal to compete on a global market; and EU consumers will have lower quality consumer goods and benefits.

But I don't want to give up my beneficial products. I don't want Brussels to take away the things I love. I'm not privileged and I want a better life – take these things away from others

more fortunate. I don't want to pay so much more for energy and endure power cuts. I would like to be able to afford a car. What Timmermans wants is for me to feed my family alfalfa soup with insect protein. (What I'll want then is for my country to leave the EU!)

And that is the point. Brussels is demanding sacrifice with a smile so some smarmy Commissioners can prance around Glasgow with the hubris of leaders who will never have to face an electorate. But what about when the COP26 party is over? Europeans will only give up their lifestyle choices when something better is on offer (and elected officials know that trying to involuntarily remove social goods will end badly for them). Our leaders need to be encouraging better innovative products with improved sustainability profiles rather than going on a series of endless precautionary bans to 'peasantise' the European population.

- Before restricting fossil fuel energy production, we need to ensure we can provide renewables to meet all of our needs.
- Before banning petrol cars, we need to ensure EVs are manufactured in a sustainable manner and are affordable.
- Before restricting livestock production means, we need to develop effective lower-carbon solutions.

But this takes time and our present low class of EU leadership is impatient for greatness. By disrupting the innovation process with restrictions and bans, we are seeing severe environmental consequences. So today we see more coal being burnt when the wind stops blowing; manufacturers have stopped innovating internal combustion power trains; farmers are taking valuable crops out of their rotations (harming soil development). But this doesn't seem to matter. I have come to the conclusion that European leaders are only interested in the grand, aspirational gestures and are OK with the consequences they are imposing on European citizens and the environment. They are thinking about making history while most Europeans are thinking about making it to the end of the month.

Worst of all, is it a good idea to enter into a policy strategy that will knowingly cause such hardship and loss in food systems not only within the European farming community, but also adding further stress on global food security (and particularly smallholders in developing countries)? Europeans can afford to grow less and import more, but they are transposing their myopic, agroecological religion on smallholders in developing countries at a time when they need better agricultural technologies to increase yields to allow their (fast-growing) populations to develop. The rapid collapse of yields and revenue in Sri Lanka should be a warning to any developing country about the madness of imposing agroecological solutions. Maybe African countries should take care of feeding their people first using the best available technologies. If European leaders can't be bothered to take care of feeding their populations, should they dare impose their elitist food demands on struggling smallholders? Like gas pipelines from Russia to China taking priority over European markets, the EU may find they matter much less on the world stage when they start asking others to feed them after wilfully destroying their agricultural sector.

Farm2Fork is a watershed moment in history, marking a serious decline in European influence: decline as an economic power, as a responsible trading partner, as a leader in governance and development, in innovation and technology, in agriculture and prosperity.

If this is the best the European Commission can do, then we are truly fucked.

David Zaruk has been an EU risk and science communications specialist since 2000, active in EU policy events from REACH and SCALE to the Pesticides Directive, from Science in Society questions to the use of the Precautionary Principle. Follow him on Twitter [@zaruk](#)

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