

82% of EU farm subsidies bolster high emissions foods: Study

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More than 80 percent of EU agriculture subsidies support polluting livestock and animal product farming, undermining the bloc's climate targets, a study published Monday found.

With global food systems accounting for about a third of greenhouse gas emissions, the European Union's Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) currently "presents an economic disincentive for transitions" to more [sustainable practices](#), the study in the journal *Nature Food* said.

"We found that the CAP disproportionately supports animal-based products over plant-based alternatives," said lead author Anniek Kortleve from Leiden University in The Netherlands.

"It came as a little bit of a surprise. It was a little bit higher than other studies reported before, and this is because of the proper inclusion of feed subsidies," she explained.

Direct payments to [livestock farmers](#) accounted for half of the subsidies—of which 57 billion euros (\$62 billion) was budgeted in 2013—funding high-emissions agriculture, researchers found.

The rest was largely made up by subsidies supporting livestock, particularly for animal feed production, it said.

For beef, the study reported that subsidies of about 0.71 euros per kilogram swelled to 1.42 euros once feed was factored in.

While focused on 2013 figures, "not much has changed" in the distribution of the subsidies up until 2020, the latest data the researchers reviewed, co-author Paul Behrens said.

'Damaging' incentive

Researchers said the subsidies challenge the bloc's goals to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Globally, "emissions from the [food system](#) are enough to drive us

beyond 1.5 (degrees Celsius)", Behrens said, referring to threshold set by the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit the increase in average global temperatures.

"It's very difficult to meet those targets if you're setting up the economics such that you're incentivizing the most damaging products," said Behrens, an associate professor at Leiden University.

Dedicating land to livestock and their feed prevents reforestation and other practices to promote the return of more diverse plants and animals that can absorb climate-heating carbon, he said.

"You can't be using the land for so many different applications at the same time," he said.

With farmers increasingly experiences losses related to climate change through floods, droughts and wildfires, investment into how land is adapted and distributed could provide them longer term protection, Behrens said.

The subsidized products are not limited to consumption within Europe.

The study found that 12 percent of CAP subsidies—particularly to "high value" products like cheese, pig meat and wine—were exported to non-EU countries including China, Russia and the United States.

Acknowledging the importance of subsidies for farmers, Behrens said the CAP system needs "reimagining" to encourage "environmental benefits" while adapting to "far more precarious" conditions with [climate change](#).

More information: Anniek J. Kortleve et al, Over 80% of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy supports emissions-

intensive animal products, *Nature Food* (2024). DOI: [10.1038/s43016-024-00949-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-024-00949-4)

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