

**E**UROPE'S GREEN REVOLUTION DIDN'T last very long, did it? The latest stumbling block was the hullabaloo caused by furious farmers wreaking havoc across the continent. They have been blocking roads, ports and border crossings with their tractors, dumping manure outside government buildings, and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

Admittedly, small- and medium-sized farmers do have plenty to moan about. For years, they have been squeezed by powerful supermarkets (farmers receive a minuscule share of the profits from the sale of food); browbeaten by agrochemical multinationals (who raise the price of fertilisers, animal drugs and other essentials); and undercut by cheap and often unregulated foreign imports.

Meanwhile, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funnels most subsidies to the largest landowners and most industrialised farms (the bigger your farm, the bigger your subsidy). No less than one-third of the EU's budget is allocated to these monstrously damaging payments that generate huge profits for the privileged few and encourage the most intensive and environmentally damaging farming techniques. (Escaping CAP is one genuine benefit of Brexit – in the UK our plan, albeit as yet imperfect, is to provide subsidies for sustainable farming and nature recovery instead.)

But it's environmental regulations, imposed by the EU's Green Deal, that have been grabbing all the headlines. These are designed to cut carbon emissions and protect nature (and, let's face it, agriculture is one of the main drivers of both climate change and biodiversity loss).

At the first sign of trouble, panicky politicians – who are notoriously frightened of farmers – put contentious, short-term business and political priorities above hard-won environmental goals and targets. Big agriculture is coercing them into using environmental legislation as a scapegoat, deliberately shifting focus away from the real issues. It's a blatant reflection of the farming lobby's political clout (it has promptly won concessions on a scale teachers, junior doctors and nurses could only dream about).

These concessions include abandoning

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Farmers at a protest in Prague earlier this year

“The EU should stop kow-towing to the industrial farming lobby”

# MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

requirements to set small areas aside to increase biodiversity, the removal of a goal to cut greenhouse gas emissions, and forgetting all about efforts to halve the use of pesticides by 2030. (It's worth noting that the pesticide industry has spent 35 million euros on EU lobbying since plans to reduce pesticide use were first announced in 2020 – the harder you lobby, the more you win.)

“Farmers deserve to be listened to”, coed Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President. And that's the crux of the problem. Politicians tend to listen to the industrial farming lobby – which claims to represent all farmers yet, in my view, doesn't at all.

The Green Deal actually benefits farmers as much as nature. Without healthy soils, clean water and pollinators, farming has no future. Indeed, ground-breaking research by the RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and the National

Trust demonstrates how it is possible to run a successful farming business that produces food, makes a healthy profit and is valuable for wildlife as well. As for climate change, the farmers' protests came as floods, extreme heat, droughts and wildfires took a devastating toll on Europe's harvests. Do they not see the irony?

The outgoing president of the UK's National

Farmers' Union, Minette Batters, recently complained that “Farming feels like it's being used just for environmental targets. And we've got to do both.” She's absolutely right. It's not a matter of ‘farmers versus nature’. Farmers and nature are allies.

So what's the answer? Instead of kow-towing to the industrial farming lobby, why doesn't the EU tackle the real issues at stake, by paying the true cost of supporting farmers as they transition to more sustainable practices? It's not rocket science. 🐾

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