

# The importance of set-aside for biodiversity

Facts and recommendations  
for the establishment of Environmental Priority Areas (EPA)  
within the Common Agricultural Policy



## History of set-aside in Germany

Set-aside was introduced in the EU in 1988/89 as a tool to curb overproduction in agriculture. In 1993/94 it became compulsory. Since then farmers are also allowed to produce energy crops on set-aside land. In autumn 2007 the percentage for set-aside land was set at 0%, i.e. with immediate effect no more arable land needs to be set aside. The history of set-aside land in Germany is shown in figure 1.

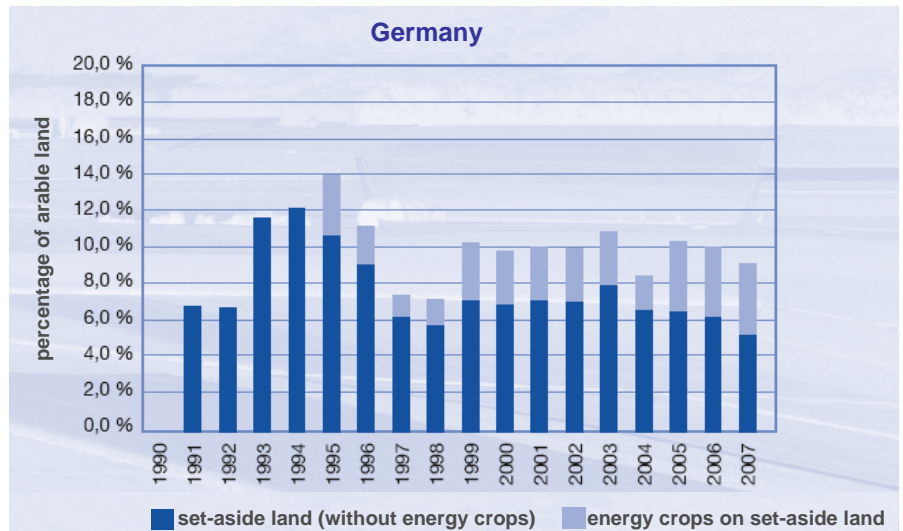


Fig. 1: Set-aside land and energy crop land in Germany (source: Federal Statistical Office 2007 and BLE 2007).



## Impact on plants and animals

Set-aside land that is covered by spontaneous vegetation or is sown by cultivated or wild plants, represents ideal habitats for several animals and plants, in particular weeds, insects and birds. As these areas are not cultivated between the 1<sup>st</sup> of April and the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, many species can complete their development here (plants can bloom and seed, animals can raise their offspring). Thereby set-aside land has become an important and in many places vital refuge for faunistic and floristic diversity in many regions of Germany, where often agricultural landscape has been dramatically impoverished through decades of intensification. To some extent set-aside land is also used to set up specific ecological improvement, e.g. by installing wildflower strips and wildflower areas (realised by hunting and nature conservation associations or through agri-environment schemes).

## The EU's 2010 target and biodiversity

The preservation of biodiversity is a target which numerous countries are committed to (Rio Conference in 1992). Furthermore the European Union decided at its summit on the EU Sustainability Strategy in Gothenburg in 2001 to halt biodiversity loss by 2010. However, reaching the target is highly unlikely, particularly agricultural landscapes, as management is still intensified while biodiversity is decreasing.

## Agricultural policy and the "Health Check" of the European Commission

The European Commission is currently examining whether the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is still up to date and targeted. Part of this "Health Check" is also the question to which extent EU agricultural policy is contributing to the conservation of biodiversity and thereby to the 2010 target.



## Abolition of set-aside – effects on biodiversity

For the year 2008 the set-aside rate was set at 0 % and it is likely to be abandoned completely with the Health Check. What will be the consequences of this decision for biodiversity? A good example is the population of farmland birds. Through regular bird population surveys throughout Germany it can be shown that the populations of farmland bird species are directly dependant on the percentage of set-aside land. Since cultivation of energy crops on set-aside land is strongly increasing, populations of farmland birds such as the Corn Bunting show significant decreases or even collapses (fig. 2). However farmland birds act only as an indicator for the total farmland biodiversity. The habitats created by set-aside are on their part only compensatory habitats for the disappeared faunistic and floristic diversity in intensive areas. Thus, set-aside land contributes to a significant extent to the preservation of biodiversity, in particular in intensively managed, arable landscapes. This means, on the other hand, that the abolition of set-aside land will cause a further decline of biodiversity and thus runs diametrical against the EU's 2010 target.

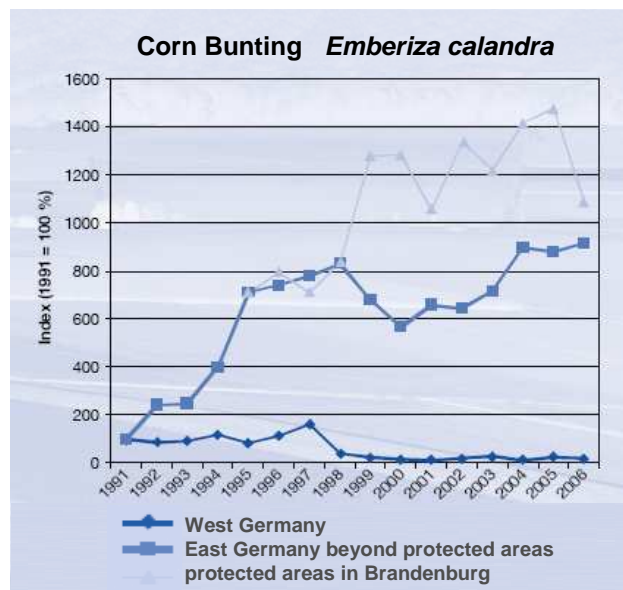


Fig. 2: Population development of Corn Bunting (*Emberiza calandra*) in East and West Germany: The steep population increase in East Germany between 1991 and 1996 is explained by high percentage of set-aside land (15-20 % of arable land). After the descent of set-aside land to 10 % of arable land, population increases are only found in protected areas. In comparison, the populations in West Germany, where a lot of set-aside land is meanwhile cultivated with energy crops (e.g. oilseed rape), have been falling strongly again (source: Flade 2007).

## Instead of set-aside: Environmental Priority Areas on every farm

Set-aside is no longer necessary for supply control purposes. However, it is of enormous importance to maintain its ecological benefits. These benefits can be ensured even more efficiently, if an obligation is established to set up Environmental Priority Areas on 10% of the farmland, replacing the present set-aside regulation. The amount of 10% is verified by a number of studies which show significant positive effects on the entire biodiversity at this percentage. The study, which this policy paper is based on, considers nearly 100 studies and sources. They all show that significant ecological effects can be expected with percentages of about 10% Environmental Priority Areas and that these areas need to be well managed. The full version of the study is available in German on: [www.nabu.de/imperia/md/content/nabude/landwirtschaft/23.pdf](http://www.nabu.de/imperia/md/content/nabude/landwirtschaft/23.pdf) – (35 pages). Besides, it is important to integrate all utilized agricultural land – apart from arable land and landscape features also grassland, as major biodiversity shortfalls can also be found on this type of land. On arable land wildflower fallows and wildflower strips, large drilling interspaces or “light strips”, as well as naturally vegetated fallows can be considered as EPAs; on grassland this function can be taken over by species-rich grassland sites as well as buffer elements along watercourses, biotopes and woodland. The benefit of such priority areas has been successfully demonstrated in several pilot schemes. EPAs represent a key instrument for the achievement of ecological effects with the simultaneous opportunity for agricultural cultivation.

### Reaching the goal with Environmental Priority Areas

By establishing Environmental Priority Areas a number of EU targets can be achieved at the same time:

- ❖ The economically no longer necessary set-aside can be abandoned.
- ❖ The serious decline of farmland biodiversity can be slowed down or even halted. This would be an important contribution to the achievement of the EU's 2010 target.
- ❖ Environmental Priority Areas can be cultivated by farmers and the management of these areas can be integrated into the farming operations.
- ❖ Environmental Priority Areas ensure and support the diversity and the connectivity of habitats, contribute to the cultural identity of European landscapes and are of special interest for recreation and tourism purposes.



## Conclusion

By introducing an obligation to turn 10% of a farm's land into an Environmental Priority Area, the alarming decline of farmland species can be limited. At the same time, an ecologically compatible cultivation of these areas is possible. The guideline could easily be integrated into the CAP's system of obligations for receiving direct payments under Pillar I. The design and specific management of EPAs could be additionally supported by agri-environment schemes (payments under Pillar II).



## Set-aside and Environmental Priority Areas – Summary of facts and recommendations

- ❖ The compulsory and economic set-aside has created important habitats for faunistic and floristic diversity in agricultural landscapes as a side effect.
- ❖ Set aside land areas preserve populations of endangered species like Corn Bunting and Grey Partridge, if they are of high ecological quality and if they are sufficiently distributed in farming landscapes (10 to 20% of the agricultural land).
- ❖ In order to maintain the ecological benefits of set-aside an obligation to set up appropriately managed (or naturally vegetated) areas should be introduced.
- ❖ These EPAs should cover 10% of the utilized agricultural area, referring to the farm's arable land, grassland and landscape features. An ecologically compatible use of the vegetation is possible and desirable. EPAs should be applied at farm level as a non-tradable obligation.
- ❖ Naturally vegetated fallows, sown wildflower fallows and wildflower strips, large drilling interspaces and "light strips" are suggested as Environmental Priority Areas on arable land. For grassland, EPA types could be species rich grasslands and/or buffer elements (e.g. along watercourses, boundaries of woods and as connecting elements within large uniform grassland sites). They should cover 10% of the farmland with a possibility of cultivation after the 1st of July.

By introducing Environmental Priority Areas it should be possible to limit and to stop the loss of farmland biodiversity, which would make an important contribution to achieving the 2010 biodiversity target.

### Further information:

A detailed study on this subject is available in German from NABU and can be downloaded on [www.nabu.de](http://www.nabu.de).



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