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Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF)

What matters in Brussels? Study shows: EU agricultural policy sees nature primarily as a resource

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What is the value of nature? For many people, nature means forests, meadows, biodiversity – but how is it represented in policy? A new study published in *People and Nature* analyzed how different values of nature are reflected in the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The study, conducted by the Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF), found that economic perspectives dominate, while other views such as nature as a habitat or cultural identity are underrepresented. This could undermine the effectiveness of agricultural policy.

The researchers analyzed key policy documents from both the EU and Germany and examined which types of nature values are represented. These include instrumental values (nature as a resource), intrinsic values (nature as valuable in itself) and relational values (nature as part of cultural identity or human–nature relationships). The study categorized these into four narrative pathways: Green Economy, Nature Protection, Earth Stewardship and Degrowth. The EU documents showed a clear preference for the Green Economy approach, which links environmental goals with economic growth. German policy documents, however, reflected stronger elements of Nature Protection and Earth Stewardship.

"Our study shows that the EU focuses primarily on economic arguments, while additional, equally important human–nature connections are often overlooked," says Iven Froese, lead author of the study from ZALF. "This is problematic, because many farmers feel a close bond with nature and see themselves as stewards of the land, helping to preserve the natural basis for their work, such as biodiversity or soil health. Policy should reflect that."

While all four narrative pathways were present in the policy documents, the EU's approach clearly prioritizes economic values. In contrast, German strategy papers more often reflect ethical and relationship-based perspectives. The study concludes that policies will be more legitimate and effective if they recognize the diversity of nature values. Regional policymaking – like in Germany – can offer opportunities to emphasize these alternative values. Such a shift may lead to more equitable and effective environmental action.

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A farmer drives a tractor during a protest in Germany. The sign reads: "This is a job driving by—how much longer? When the farmer dies, the land dies too!" This reflects farmers' growing concerns about economic pressure and lack of recognition in agricultural policy. Picture has been edited by Adobe Firefly. | The picture can be used for editorial purposes by stating the source: © Pixabay | Picture in color and print quality: <http://www.zalf.de/de/aktuelles>

Press contact:

Hendrik Schneider
Head of press and public relations
Phone: + 49 (0) 33432 82-242
Mobile: + 49 (0) 151 405 455 00
Email: public.relations@zalf.de

Scientific contact:

Iven Froese person
Research Area 2 "Land Use and Governance"
Phone: + 49 (0) 33432 82-486
Email: iven.froese@zalf.de

About the Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF) in Muencheberg, member of the Leibniz Association:

Mission of ZALF is to deliver solutions for an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable agriculture –together with society.

As a contribution to overcoming global challenges such as climate change, food security, biodiversity conservation and resource scarcity, we develop and design crop systems, integrated in their landscape contexts that combine food security with sustainability. Therefore we process complex landscape data with a unique set of experimental methods, new technologies and models as well as socio-economic approaches.

ZALF research is integrated systems research: starting from processes in soils and plants to causal relationships on the field and landscape level up to global impacts and complex interactions between landscapes, society and economy. www.zalf.de