

Environmental NGOs' position on farmers' protest demands in Lithuania

2024-01-26

Vilnius

In response to the farmers' protests and their demands in Lithuania, we, Lithuanian environmental NGOs express our position asking you to stand for the values of nature and public interest of healthy and safe environment, when trying to find the compromise for the demands expressed by some of the Lithuanian farmers' communities.

Fully functioning, unpolluted and rich ecosystems, their biodiversity, clean water, air, and soil are a common public good for all of us. **We call for the public interest to take priority in the search for a compromise between farmers' demands and environmental standards.** Compromises should only be made where the solutions envisaged do no harm to nature, provide additional social safeguards, ensure the functioning of ecosystems, and protect against negative impacts.

The state of Lithuania's environment in relation to agricultural practices is poor and deteriorating. Here are some indicators reflecting the situation.

Grasslands are crucial in mitigating climate change, maintaining biodiversity, protecting soil from erosion, and ensuring other ecosystem services important to our society and the ecological stability of the landscape. In Lithuania, the area of grasslands (both perennial and grasslands up to 5 years old) has **decreased by more than 450,000 ha since Lithuania has joined the EU**, resulting in the disappearance of grasslands at a rate of more than 25,000 ha per year. The loss of grasslands is caused by the rapid decline of the livestock sector and to the disappearance of grazing practice and feeding with grassy biomass.

The massive loss of grasslands is leading to a rapid loss of biodiversity in Lithuania's agrarian landscape, where the abundance of common **rural birds has declined by almost 55%** between 2000 and 2022. The shift in the rural bird count not only reflects the rapid decline of typical agrarian landscape birds, but also the loss of all biodiversity in rural landscape, which is covering more than half of the country. This trend is directly linked not only to the disappearance of grasslands, but also to damaging agricultural practices, such as the heavy use of pesticides, removal of individual trees, coppice trees, degradation of small natural water bodies and their banks, drainage of wetlands and peatlands.

Decreasing quality of surface water bodies is mainly caused by the fertilisers widely used in agriculture. **In Lithuania, as many as 64% of surface water bodies do not meet the criteria of favourable status.** In 2021, the situation worsened compared to 2015, and it is partly due to continuing and even increasing agricultural pollution. **The Baltic Sea is one of the most polluted seas in the world, with 600 tonnes of phosphorus and 50,000 tonnes of nitrogen reaching the sea every year,** causing eutrophication - the "blooming" of water. The rapid growth of cyanobacteria causes deficiency of oxygen and the formation of "death zones", the loss of marine ecosystems. Water buffer strips are designed to provide at least minimal protection for water bodies by absorbing nutrients leaching from the surface and the soil. Such buffers were introduced in Lithuania since 1950s and are necessary.

Healthy soils are a natural resource that is vital for human health and economic prosperity. Irresponsible crop production practices are leading to a steady deterioration of arable soils, increasing soil erosion and lowering fertility. The conversion of grasslands, wetlands, and pastures to ploughing, the use of mineral fertilisers cause the depletion of soils, reduces the organic carbon content, increases pollution, and contributes to the greenhouse gas emissions. **Agriculture is the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases in Lithuania** after energy sector, and the implementation of **soil-friendly farming practices is not fast enough:** there is a lack of proper crop rotation, black fallows are still subject to erosion, soil testing is insufficient, and results are not summarised in a unified framework to monitor soil health. It is important to promote sustainable farming practices and to stop farming patterns that deplete the soil. In addition to the existing commitments, a ban on ploughing peatland to change farming practices will come into force from 2025.

Environmental requirements and restrictions apply to all landowners and users. Farmers are no exception. It is the constitutional duty of all citizens to protect nature. The Common Agricultural Policy is implemented not only to ensure a fair income for farmers; to ensure farmers' competitiveness; to improve farmers' position in food supply chains, but also to act on climate change; to care for the environment around us all; to preserve the landscape and biodiversity; to have vibrant rural areas; to support generational change; to protect the quality of our food and our health; and to promote knowledge and innovation. Therefore, public funds and efforts devoted to the **Common Agricultural Policy must ensure that all these objectives are achieved and that the process of achieving them is transparent.**

Today is a time when Lithuanian agriculture must change and take a green, forward-looking direction. We call on all the stakeholders not to abandon the European Green Deal and not to take short-sighted and one-day decisions.

Here are the key points made by environmental NGOs on the demands of the farmers' protests.

On the decline and restoration of permanent grasslands

- ◆ The authorities must ensure adequate long-term support for the livestock sector, by promoting pasture or grass-fed cattle farms. Adequate economic incentives for the maintenance of existing and restored grasslands are also important.
- ◆ We encourage the authorities to review and extend the definition of permanent grassland so that areas with trees and shrubs are eligible for support and would be included in the statistics on permanent grassland.
- ◆ We call for targeted support for small and medium-sized livestock farms, encouraging the development of high added value products supplied through short food chains.
- ◆ The requirements to maintain the reference values for permanent grassland can only be reviewed and amended if it is ensured that the total area of grassland does not decrease, if special attention is paid to the conservation of habitats of European Community importance, and if additional measures are taken to reduce the impact of negative agricultural practices on biodiversity and landscape.
- ◆ Farmers are urged to ensure that natural resources (water, soil, biodiversity, air) are not exploited for short-term gain, and that destroyed and damaged ecosystems (including grasslands) are restored.

On the implementation of the law on the extension of protected areas and special conditions for land use

- ◆ Responsible institutions must ensure that landowners are properly informed about the expansion of protected areas and the application of special land use conditions. The responsible authorities need to produce information that is easily understandable and accessible to the public and farmers.
- ◆ Conditions for promoting extensive farming must be more favourable in nature conservation and restoration areas, habitats for endangered species and areas protected by special land use conditions.
- ◆ Farmers are strongly encouraged to take responsibility for the public assets they use (water, soil, pollinators, other natural resources) and to use them responsibly and without degrading their existing condition and applying principle – do no harm.
- ◆ Areas dedicated for ecosystems conservation and restoration should be maintained without being reduced, except in cases where mistakes have been made in setting the boundaries. Errors should be corrected in accordance with established, publicly available procedures and clear deadlines.

On the amendment of the arrangements for labelled diesel

- ◆ Lithuania is committed to phasing out fossil fuel. A clear date must be set for the final abolition of fossil fuel usage and the public and the farming community must be informed in advance. The responsible authorities must provide clear and affordable alternatives implementing changes on labelled diesel.
- ◆ To ensure a level playing field in the European agricultural sector, politicians must make a clear and active call to all EU countries to phase out on fossil fuel.

Concerning the keeping of logs on plant protection products and fertilisers

- ◆ The additional data collection can become an administrative burden for farmers, and we encourage the responsible authorities to look for technological solutions to make data collection as automated as possible and to integrate different data sources.
- ◆ Farms must be encouraged to use sustainable farming practices, to assess their greenhouse gas footprint and to follow the steps to account for, reduce and offset emissions and their consequences.
- ◆ We urge farmers to start using electronic systems as soon as possible to transparently account for the use of fertilisers and plant protection products. This would help to optimise farms and dispel public doubts about the overuse of these products in Lithuanian agriculture.
- ◆ Responsible authorities must ensure that water buffer strips and other environmental requirements are properly applied and respected.

Signatory environmental non-governmental organizations:

1. Aplinkosaugos koalicija
2. VŠĮ "Baltijos aplinkos forumas"
3. Lietuvos ornitologų draugija
4. Gamtos apsaugos asociacija "Baltijos vilkas"
5. VŠĮ "Pelkių atkūrimo ir apsaugos fondas"
6. VŠĮ "Darnaus vystymosi centras"
7. VŠĮ "Žiedinė ekonomika"
8. VŠĮ "Sengirės fondas"
9. Lietuvos geografų draugija
10. Lietuvos entomologų draugija
11. Studentų Gamtininkų Mokslinė Draugija
12. VŠĮ "Lietuvos arboristikos centras"
13. VŠĮ "Žaliosios politikos institutas"
14. Miško terapijos ir edukacijos centras
15. Asociacija "Lietuvos tamsioji bitė"
16. VŠĮ "Girių inspekcija"
17. Vartotojų aljansas
18. VŠĮ "Menų vektoriai"
19. Asociacija "Anties sodo bendruomenė"
20. Lietuvos fitoterapijos sąjunga
21. VŠĮ "Rūpi"
22. Asociacija "Gyvo Žalio"

