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Opinion Piece

Nature Restoration, Deforestation, and Industrial Emission: the three-unknown equations for Swedish farmers

The Swedish Presidency of the EU has just begun. This gives me the opportunity to reflect on how current and upcoming EU legislation, particularly from the Green Deal, is affecting my region. I am a dairy farmer, running a family farm with my brother, 40km from Gothenburg on the West coast of Sweden. We are a traditional Swedish farm with around 170 dairy cows, 350ha of agricultural land, and as is common in our region, we own and manage around 200 hectares of forest as part of our enterprise. A mixed farm such as mine will be impacted by multiple EU policies and by objectives set in the two key Green Deal communications, namely Farm to Fork and the Biodiversity Strategy.

For the past three years, I have followed the developments of these initiatives in Brussels with Copa and Cogeca, and from within my home organisation, the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF). Even if we agree with the general objectives sought by the European Commission, as it is necessary in the face of climate change and biodiversity loss, we are constantly alarmed by the very general and ambiguous nature of these policies and the lack of concrete support for farmers, forest-owners, and their cooperatives. We are now getting closer to the moment of truth as we start to discuss how these different policies will be implemented at farm level.

In the case of Sweden, an unrealistic equation is emerging, with three unknowns forming; that of how the Nature Restoration Law, the Deforestation Regulation, and the Industrial Emissions Directive will all adversely, recklessly, and blunderingly impact us. Let me explain this equation further by taking the very concrete example of my farm.

On one hand, we have the proposed future implementation of the **Nature Restoration Law (NRL)**. In our national context, we will be required to restore pasturelands across the country, especially those which have been utilised as forestry areas. Sweden has, since the early 1900s, large afforested former livestock and pasture areas. While reforestation is now seen as the way forward in some countries, maintaining existing semi-natural grasslands in production will be the key measure for biodiversity in Sweden. At the same time cattle numbers have declined over time. It is estimated that under the NRL, we must restore up to one million hectares of forested area to grassland. As most of this area will be under private ownership and management, we will be expected to transform our farms and forests to comply with the restoration measures. To keep meadows and permanent pastures, to avoid abandonment, overgrowth or reforestation of those lands, a significant increase in grazing livestock for management, especially ruminants, will be needed.

Now add this to the limits set by the **EU Deforestation Regulation**. This recently adopted regulation would prevent the sale of wood provided by clearing these forests for restoration of these permanent pastures, while concurrently preventing the profitable reintroduction of livestock to pastoral agro-ecosystem grasslands. This is due to the limits placed by this strategy on making a profit off of deforested lands, especially from livestock farming. Concretely, on my farm, this would mean weeks of heavy work clearing my land for no profit, and as well as this, losing this land as a productive agricultural land which cannot benefit from pasture restoration. Also, clearing these forests would result in a release of sequestered carbon in the short term, depending on the use of the wood.

Finally, we have the European Commission's proposal on **Industrial Emissions (IED)**. The European Commission's proposal in its current state provides a series of constraints for farmers who have more than 150 “livestock units” in total. My farm is just above that threshold today. As more cattle will be needed to graze the pastureland that I need in order to restore the NRL, this would automatically bring me under the IED scope, meaning additional financial and administrative constraints, thus creating a clear obstacle to further invest in our farm. Perhaps I would rather lower my numbers to get out of the IED rules. In any case, this will not make farm succession and generational renewal in my farm and others like it attractive or viable in the coming months and years.

If I wanted to make the picture even more complex, I could add to the equation the communications from the European Commission dating since the beginning of the war in Ukraine titled **RepowerEU** and the communication on **Fertilisers** both of which encourage the development of agricultural biogas and organic fertilisers which would tend to support European livestock farming... But this conflicts with other initiatives to reduce European livestock herds!

In agriculture and forestry, we work with nature. Likewise, we work in 5-, 10-, and 20-year terms, so we need predictability, we need stability, and we need support when making choices which will affect the food and resource security of our country, and of the EU as a whole. Regarding Nature Restoration, the Commission makes it clear that how the targets are fulfilled is up to the Member States and their National Restoration Plans, but it does not make clear how to paper over the cracks that they have made between the different legislative proposals they have brought forward.

Likewise, the Commission regularly insists that the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term costs, but in the short-term those costs cannot be covered by the CAP ecosystem service payments and will put the viability of many farms at stake.The Commission also refers to the benefits for all, but in the short-term farmers will be the only ones to bear the brunt of these changes. In this context, the long-term becomes an unattainable horizon for many of us…

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Download Palle Borgström picture [HERE](https://we.tl/t-z9YmDzjOyB).

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