AgriCEE PROJECT OUTPUT · RESEARCH SUMMARY FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE

What Are Farmers Paid For?

How the European Commission quietly re-wrote the story of the Common Agricultural Policy after the 2023–2024 farmer protests

EUKI AgriCEE – Mitigation-Smart Farming
Activity A II.1 – Public Discourse and Policy Narrative Mapping

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the European Commission's post-protest reframing of the Common Agricultural Policy

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Key findings at a glance

- **The goals stayed, the order changed.** The Commission keeps saying the CAP's objectives are the same – yet it has quietly re-ranked them. Farmer income and competitiveness now lead; the Green Deal has disappeared as the policy's organising purpose.
- **"From conditions to incentives" is the red thread.** Step by step, environmental rules that farmers *had to* follow were turned into schemes farmers *can choose* and get paid for.
- **It did not fade after the protests – it grew.** The shift started as a crisis fix in 2024, became official strategy in 2025, entered binding EU law in December 2025, and is built into the proposal for the CAP after 2027.
- **The farmer's image changed.** From "guardian of our land" to an entrepreneur under pressure. The word "stewardship" survives – but as the new *name* for the rulebook, not as the core of the farmer's role.
- **"Cutting red tape" did more than cut red tape.** The burden argument fits paperwork and inspections, but it was also used to justify loosening the environmental standards themselves.
- **Brussels steps back.** For the next period, the Commission proposes that Member States – not the EU – define the basic environmental rules farms must meet.
- **The deepest change: why farmers are paid at all.** Support is shifting from a reward for public goods (clean water, biodiversity, climate) towards income support for farms' economic survival. This is exactly what is now being negotiated for the post-2027 CAP.

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1 Why we looked at this

In the winter of 2023–2024, tractors blocked motorways and city centres across Europe – from Germany, France, Poland and the Netherlands to the Czech Republic. The anger had many sources, but it converged into open resistance against the environmental ambitions of the European Green Deal and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) that was supposed to deliver them.

The European Commission reacted fast. Within weeks it exempted farmers from some greening rules and announced a **"simplification" agenda**. During 2024–2025 this grew into a new strategic *Vision for Agriculture and Food*, a second simplification package that became law, and a proposal for how the CAP should look after 2027.

Officially, all of this was presented as a technical exercise: less paperwork for hard-pressed farmers. But simplification is rarely just technical. How a policy describes its problem, who it presents as its hero and how it explains why public money is spent – these are choices of **framing**, and framing can change even when the official goals stay the same.

> **The research question**
>
> Is the Commission's post-protest story about the CAP (a) **continuity** – the same story as before, (b) **adjustment** – small changes within the same story, or (c) **rearticulation** – the same building blocks, but put together in a new order with a new meaning?

The short answer: **rearticulation** – but a carefully managed one. The rest of this summary explains what that means and why it matters.

2 How the study was done

The study uses **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** – a well-established qualitative method that reads official texts not as neutral descriptions, but as acts that define problems, cast actors in roles and justify particular solutions (Fairclough, 2002; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The focus is not a legal evaluation of the CAP, but *how the Commission explains it*.

What we read

A purposively selected set of European Commission documents covering the post-protest period from February 2024 to December 2025, including the July 2025 proposal for the CAP 2028–2034. Crucially, the set mixes press releases and strategy papers with **legislative texts**, including one regulation that was actually adopted. This allowed us to check whether any shift stays in the realm of words or makes it into binding law.

ID	Document	Date	Role in the story
EU-01	Press release: European farmers exempted from rules on land lying fallow	13 Feb 2024	The rupture
EU-02	Press release: Options for simplification to reduce the burden for EU farmers	22 Feb 2024	Setting the agenda
EU-03a	COM(2024) 139 – first simplification proposal	15 Mar 2024	First legal step

ID	Document	Date	Role in the story
EU-04	A Vision for Agriculture and Food – COM(2025) 75	19 Feb 2025	New strategy
EU-06	COM(2025) 236 – second simplification proposal	14 May 2025	Second legal step
EU-07	Regulation (EU) 2025/2649 – second wave adopted ("Omnibus III")	19 Dec 2025	Binding law
EU-08	COM(2025) 560 – proposal for the CAP 2028–2034	16 Jul 2025	Blueprint for next period
EU-09	Questions and answers on the CAP post-2027 proposal	23 Jul 2025	Public framing

Table 1. Core documents analysed. Supporting documents (Regulation (EU) 2024/1468, the 2025 Study on simplification and SWD(2025) 236) were used to check legal outcomes and the evidence the Commission relied on.

What we compared it with

To see whether anything changed, we first reconstructed the **pre-protest "baseline" story** of the CAP from the Farm to Fork Strategy (2020), the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (2020), the CAP Strategic Plans Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 and related Commission materials (see Section 3).

What we looked for

Each document was examined along seven dimensions: **(1)** what the CAP is for, **(2)** what the problem is, **(3)** who the farmer is, **(4)** how ambitious the environmental goals are, **(5)** which policy tools are used, **(6)** how the change is justified and **(7)** who decides – the EU or the Member States. These were translated into eleven coding labels (e.g. PROBLEM_DEFINITION, FARMER_IDENTITY, CONDITIONALITY, INCENTIVES_REWARDS).

> **Transparent use of AI**
>
> A large language model was used as a first-pass assistant: it received precise definitions and boundary rules for each coding label and proposed candidate passages. **Every suggestion was reviewed, corrected and interpreted by the researcher**, and for each core document a structured analytic memo was written based on close reading of the original text (following Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). AI served efficiency and consistency – not interpretation.

Full details of the corpus, coding framework and validation procedure are given in the conference paper (Mareš, 2026) and summarised in the methodological note at the end of this document.

3 The starting point: the CAP story before the protests

Before 2024, the Commission told a remarkably harmonious story. Green ambition, farm income, food security and competitiveness were presented as goals that go hand in hand. Five narratives carried it:

Pre-protest narrative	What it said
CAP as Green Deal delivery tool	The CAP is *the* main instrument for turning the Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity targets into practice on farms.
Farmer as environmental steward	Farmers are "guardians of our land" who "play a vital role in preserving biodiversity" – caring for nature is part of the job, not an outside imposition.
Public money for public goods	Payments are justified because farmers deliver benefits the market does not pay for: biodiversity, climate, clean water, healthy soil, landscape.
Conditionality + eco-schemes	Mandatory rules (conditionality, GAEC standards) set a common floor; voluntary paid eco-schemes pull farmers higher.
Everything is compatible	Sustainability, food security, income and competitiveness can all be pursued at once – with no hierarchy among them.

Table 2. The pre-protest baseline narrative (author's synthesis of Commission documents 2018–2022).

4 What we found

The overall pattern we call a **managed rearticulation**. At every step, the Commission reaffirms that the CAP's goals remain unchanged. At the same time, the tools that actually deliver environmental results are moved – from binding EU rules towards voluntary, paid and nationally designed instruments. And rather than fading once the protests calmed down, this shift **grew stronger in four successive steps**:

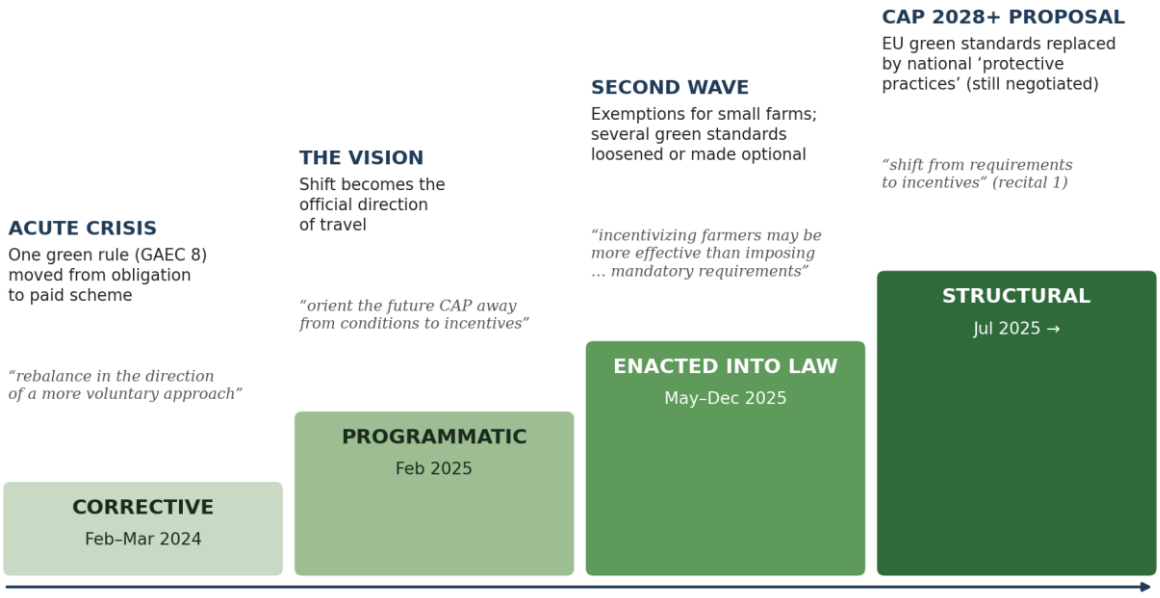


Figure 1. Four steps of the same move – each bigger than the last. Quotations are the Commission's own words from the respective documents.

The eight findings below unpack this pattern. Findings 1–7 follow the seven analytical dimensions; Finding 8 draws them together.

Finding 1 The Green Deal quietly leaves the stage

In short: The CAP's official goals are all still there, but the Green Deal is no longer the policy's organising purpose – farmer viability and competitiveness have taken its place.

In March 2024, the first legislative proposal still said, almost word for word, that the CAP contributes to the Green Deal. From the 2025 *Vision* onwards this frame fades. The Vision talks about an "attractive, competitive, sustainable and fair" sector and food sovereignty; the second simplification package anchors itself in the **Competitiveness Compass** and the "Simpler and faster Europe" agenda; and the post-2027 proposal opens with a "simpler and more targeted" policy and a "shift from requirements to incentives."

Why was this re-ordering so easy? The study points to an **asymmetry of legitimacy**. A fair income for farmers is written into the EU Treaty itself (Article 39 TFEU) and has been a CAP aim since 1957. Environmental ambition was added later through policy and secondary law. Putting income first can therefore be presented as simply returning to the CAP's constitutional mission – while the environmental objective, lacking the same legal anchor, is the easier one to push down the list.

> **Why it matters**
>
> Declared continuity can hide a real change of priorities. When reading policy documents, it is not enough to ask whether a goal is still mentioned – one must ask where it stands in the order of things.

Finding 2 The problem moves: from what farming does to nature, to what weighs on farmers

In short: Before the protests, the problem was farming's impact on the environment. After them, the problem is the pressure on the farmer – paperwork, low income, crises, dependence.

The first post-protest texts talk about **administrative burden** and **crisis** (weather, war, input prices). The Vision widens this to structural viability, naming low farm income "the number one factor in the mobilisation of farmers", along with generational renewal and strategic dependency. The post-2027 proposal speaks of attractiveness, rigid rules and geopolitical vulnerability.

Nature does not disappear, but its role flips: from something **harmed by farming** to a **production base farmers depend on** ("farmers depend on nature").

> **Why it matters**
>
> This shift is not cosmetic – it is what makes everything else possible. Once the problem is the burden on the farmer rather than the harm to nature, mandatory environmental rules start to look like part of the problem instead of its solution.

Finding 3 From guardian of the land to entrepreneur

In short: The farmer as environmental steward has not vanished, but has been pushed into second place behind the farmer as an economic actor fighting for viability.

The pre-protest Biodiversity Strategy called farmers "guardians of our land." The 2024 press releases foreground a vulnerable economic actor; the first legal proposal balances both – farmers "as managers of natural resources and as economic actors." The Vision still speaks of "custodians of nature", but places them below the entrepreneur and adds new themes: farmers' mental health, young farmers, women in farming. The second-wave texts quote the Vision: farmers are "entrepreneurs and providers," not bearers of "bureaucratic burdens."

The post-2027 proposal makes the most interesting move: the mandatory rulebook (so far called "conditionality") is renamed **"farm stewardship."** The steward returns – but as the *label on the rules*, not as the heart of the farmer's identity.

> **Why it matters**
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> The renaming can be read two ways, and the study holds both open: a genuine return of the steward, or familiar obligations re-packaged in positive language while their EU-level substance is loosened and handed over to national governments.

Finding 4 Environmental ambition: kept in words, moved in practice

In short: The Commission insists at every step that environmental ambition is preserved. What changes is the vehicle carrying it – from binding EU rules, to paid voluntary schemes, to national choices.

- **2024:** ambition is "maintained" – while the fallow-land requirement (GAEC 8) is moved from obligation into a paid eco-scheme.
- **Vision 2025:** ambition becomes a "license to produce", compatible with competitiveness, and is no longer tied to the quantified Farm to Fork targets.
- **Second wave (adopted law, Dec 2025):** the green architecture is declared "kept intact" – yet GAEC 1 is loosened, GAEC 2 and (in the final law) GAEC 9 may be taken out of the mandatory baseline and paid for instead, and organic farms are deemed to meet several standards automatically.
- **Post-2027 proposal:** EU-wide GAEC standards are replaced by **"protective practices" defined by each Member State**. Targets remain on paper (six priority areas, climate neutrality by 2050, "do no significant harm", a 35%/43% spending ambition), but these secure *budget and topics*, not a required level of environmental results.

> **Why it matters**
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> "Ambition preserved" and "ambition delivered" are not the same claim. Tracking which instrument carries a goal is often more revealing than tracking the goal itself.

Finding 5 "From conditions to incentives" – the backbone of the whole shift

In short: The same move repeats at growing scale: a mandatory rule is relaxed and a voluntary, paid incentive is offered in its place. The Commission names this move itself, every time.

This is the clearest and most consistent evidence in the whole corpus. It grows from **one standard** (GAEC 8 in 2024), to **a stated principle** ("away from conditions to incentives", 2025), to **binding law across the system** (exemptions for small farms, organic deeming, GAEC 1/2/9, December 2025), to **the basic architecture** of the next CAP (renamed "farm stewardship", national "protective practices", eco-schemes and agri-environment measures merged into one paid instrument).

Each time, the justification is the same: reducing the administrative and regulatory burden on farmers.

> **Why it matters**
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> Under the pre-protest model, the mandatory floor guaranteed a minimum for everyone; voluntary schemes added more on top. Moving obligations into the paid layer means what was once required of all is now optional – and the common floor drops.

Finding 6 How the change is justified: from emergency to consensus

In short: At first the shift was justified by urgency. Later it was justified by dialogue and expertise – making it look like a pre-agreed settlement rather than a crisis reaction.

In 2024 the Commission argued that the pressing situation justified proceeding **without a full impact assessment**, and that it was simply responding to farmers. The Vision drew authority from the multi-stakeholder **Strategic Dialogue**, from high-profile reports (Draghi, Letta, Niinistö) and Eurobarometer data. The second wave combined both: urgency (again no full impact assessment) plus a large evidence base – a survey with about 27,000 farmer responses and hundreds of stakeholder suggestions. The post-2027 proposal rests on continuity with the Vision and an extensive consultation record.

Running through it all is one standing argument: **administrative burden**. The study shows this argument is applied to two different things at once – the burden of *proving* compliance (reporting, controls, penalties) and the *content* of the rules themselves. The evidence mainly supports the first.

> **Why it matters**
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> "Listening to farmers" turned from an emergency justification into a permanent dialogue structure. That lends the new direction strong legitimacy – and makes it harder to question.

Finding 7 Brussels steps back

In short: Member States gain more and more say – in the post-2027 proposal, up to authoring the basic environmental rules farms must meet.

In 2024–2025, flexibility for Member States widened *within* a common EU framework (national choices on GAEC, on the design of controls, simpler plan amendments). The Vision framed more national discretion as greater "responsibility and accountability." The post-2027 proposal goes furthest: the CAP is folded into a single **National and Regional Partnership Fund**, delivered through national plans steered by Commission "recommendations," and EU GAEC standards are replaced by nationally defined protective practices.

> **Why it matters**
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> The Commission moves from rule-setter towards adviser and approver. The binding environmental floor of the next CAP would be set in 27 national plans, not in one EU regulation.

Finding 8 The deepest change: what farmers are actually paid for

In short: Beneath the talk of simplification lies a shift in the very reason for paying farmers – from rewarding public goods towards supporting income and viability.

Two rival logics have long run through the CAP:

- **Public money for public goods** – farmers are paid for *what they provide*: biodiversity, climate protection, clean water, healthy soil – things the market does not pay for.
- **Income support for viability** – farmers are paid *because they are farmers under economic pressure*, to keep farming viable.

Before the protests, the first logic was the explicit organising frame. Across the corpus the centre of gravity moves to the second: the problem is redefined around viability (Finding 2), the purpose re-ordered around income (Finding 1), the tools moved from earned-by-compliance to voluntary incentives (Finding 5). The post-2027 framing adds a **ring-fenced income-support envelope** and targeting of payments to "those who need it most" – small, young and family farms. That means distribution by *need*, not by *goods delivered*.

The public-goods logic survives – but as a voluntary, paid add-on next to an income-support core, rather than as the logic that binds the whole payment.

> **Why it matters**
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> The famous move "from conditions to incentives" is, at root, a change in the grounds of entitlement. The CAP is not only asking less of farmers environmentally – it is changing its answer to why farmers are paid at all.

5 Not just words: the shift made it into law

A common objection to discourse analysis is that strategies and press releases are cheap talk. This study was designed to test that. The same shift appears – and grows – in successive **legislative** texts: the 2024 proposal, the 2025 proposal, the **adopted Regulation (EU) 2025/2649** and the post-2027 proposal. In the second wave, the final law even went *further* than the Commission's proposal on some points (e.g. GAEC 9). So the change cannot be dismissed as aspirational language.

The documents do differ in tone, though: press releases lean hardest on burden relief and the struggling farmer; legislative proposals work hardest to stress continuity of purpose; the Vision and the Q&A state the change most openly. This layered, hybrid style matches what earlier research on CAP discourse has found (Erjavec & Erjavec, 2015; Rac, Erjavec & Erjavec, 2024).

Question	Crisis 2024	Vision 2025	2nd wave 2025 (law)	CAP 2028+ (proposal)
Is the CAP still a Green Deal tool?	Yes, restated in the proposal	Frame dropped as organising purpose	Replaced by Competitiveness Compass	Absent; "shift to incentives"
Farmer: steward or economic actor?	Balanced dual role	Steward below entrepreneur	"Entrepreneurs and providers"	Steward becomes the *name* of the rules
Mandatory rules or incentives?	One rule moved to paid scheme	Official direction of travel	Enacted and deepened	Built into the structure
Are goals equal or ranked?	Partly re-ordered	Viability & competitiveness first	Re-ordering in law	Re-ordering structural

Table 3. Direction of travel on the four baseline questions. Each row moves steadily away from the pre-protest story – no return to the baseline after the crisis.

6 Simplification: cutting red tape, or something more?

If the problem is paperwork, does solving it require weakening the rules themselves? Much of the burden lies in **proving** compliance – reports, overlapping inspections, penalty risk. That could be tackled directly: fewer controls, satellite and automated checks, merged reporting – without touching what is required on the field. The second-wave package does include such procedural steps. But it also goes into substance: exempting small farms from conditionality, loosening GAEC 1, moving GAEC 2 and 9 out of the mandatory baseline.

When a procedural problem is used to justify a substantive change, "simplification" works not only as efficiency but as a **legitimating frame**: it presents a lower environmental floor in terms ("cutting red tape") that are much harder to argue against than the reduction itself would be if stated directly.

> **A fair caveat**
>
> Procedure and substance cannot always be neatly separated – a rule that cannot be checked is not really a rule, and the relocation of GAEC 2 was justified by disproportionate compliance costs. And moving a standard into the paid layer is not the same as abolishing it. The point is narrower: the second wave treats procedural and substantive easing as the same thing under one "simplification" label – and the result is that the mandatory baseline goes down.

7 What this means for the post-2027 CAP debate

The post-2027 proposal is the Commission's **opening position**, not settled law. The European Parliament and the Council will contest it. The analysis shows where the real stakes lie:

1. **Where will the environmental floor be set?** Under the proposal, in national plans rather than in the EU regulation. The decisive question is how much freedom Member States get and how firmly the Commission can steer them.
2. **What does "farm stewardship" actually require?** A positive label is not a guarantee of content. Watch the concrete obligations behind the name.
3. **Is "simplification" procedural or substantive?** Less paperwork and fewer inspections are one thing; lower standards are another. They deserve to be debated separately.
4. **What are farmers paid for?** The debate is not, at root, about red tape. It is about whether CAP payments stay tied to public goods or are re-grounded as income support. That is what the post-2027 negotiation will, in effect, decide.

Glossary

Term	Meaning
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy – the EU's farm support policy and one of the largest items in the EU budget.
Conditionality	Basic rules every farmer receiving area- or animal-based CAP payments must respect (statutory management requirements + GAEC standards). Renamed "farm stewardship" in the post-2027 proposal.
GAEC	Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition standards – EU-defined minimum environmental practices (e.g. GAEC 8 on non-productive land, GAEC 1 on permanent grassland, GAEC 2 on wetlands and peatlands, GAEC 9 on environmentally sensitive grassland).
Eco-schemes	Voluntary, paid schemes rewarding farmers for environmental practices that go beyond the mandatory baseline.
Critical Discourse Analysis	Qualitative method studying how texts define problems, construct actors and legitimise decisions – i.e. how language does political work.
Framing	Selecting and emphasising some aspects of an issue (problem, cause, moral judgment, remedy) over others (Entman, 1993).
Rearticulation	Keeping the same elements (goals, concepts) but connecting them in a new order that changes their meaning.

Methodological note

Approach. Qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis following Fairclough's three-dimensional model (text – discursive practice – social practice), with a discourse-historical sensitivity (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Framing theory (Entman, 1993; Bacchi, 2009) informed the analytical dimensions. Previous CDA studies of the CAP (Erjavec & Erjavec, 2015; Minotti & Zagata, 2020; Omar & Thorsøe, 2024; Rac, Erjavec & Erjavec, 2024) served as a sensitising framework, not as fixed codes.

Corpus. Purposive selection: 4 baseline reference texts (not coded), 8 core coded documents (EU-01 to EU-09) and 3 supporting documents (EU-03b, EU-05a, EU-05b). The analysis is limited to the EU level.

Coding. Deductive first-pass coding along 7 dimensions and 11 labels (CAP_PURPOSE, PROBLEM_DEFINITION, FARMER_IDENTITY, ENVIRONMENTAL_AMBITION, ADMINISTRATIVE_BURDEN, SIMPLIFICATION, FLEXIBILITY, CONDITIONALITY, INCENTIVES_REWARDS, LEGITIMATION_EVIDENCE, GOVERNANCE_MEMBER_STATE_FLEXIBILITY), open to emergent meanings (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). In legal texts, coding focused on explanatory memoranda, recitals and provisions on conditionality, flexibility, incentives, controls and penalties.

AI assistance and validation. An LLM proposed candidate passages based on operationalised label definitions and boundary rules; all suggestions were reviewed and interpreted by the researcher. Validation rested on structured analytic memos for each core document (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014).

Genre control. Comparing communicative texts with legislative proposals and adopted law tests whether shifts are merely rhetorical or carry into binding rules.

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