



JRC SCIENCE FOR POLICY REPORT

# Farmers' views on EU agri-environmental policies

*Contributing to the  
Common Agricultural Policy  
Impact Assessment with  
evidence from focus groups*

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2019

EUR 29703 EN

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The present report was published as an annex to the Impact Assessment accompanying the Proposals for a Regulation establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the Common agricultural policy (EUR-Lex - 52018SC0301 – EN).

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JRC116022

EUR 29703 EN

PDF ISBN 978-92-76-01439-3 ISSN 1831-9424 doi:10.2760/049327

Seville: European Commission, 2019

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How to cite this report: Dessart, F. J. (2019). *Farmers' views on EU agri-environmental policies. Contributing to the Common Agricultural Policy Impact Assessment with evidence from focus groups*. EUR 29703 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019, ISBN 978-92-76-01439-3, doi:10.2760/049327, JRC116022.

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# 1 Context and objectives

Behavioural sciences are increasingly informing policy-making<sup>1</sup>, including agricultural policies<sup>2</sup>. Their unique contribution to policy lies in the first-hand evidence they provide regarding how people think and behave.

For the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to be a success, it is necessary to **understand farmers' decision-making and viewpoints** beyond the assumptions made by neoclassical economics, because farmers' motivations are not only driven by profit maximisation<sup>3</sup>. The background documents on the economic<sup>4</sup> and environmental<sup>5</sup> challenges facing agriculture and rural areas – which accompany the Communication on the Future of Food and Farming – include reviews of the behavioural sciences literature.

In this context, a qualitative study was conducted to better understand farmers' experience with the three CAP instruments designed to motivate them to adopt more environmentally-friendly practices: cross compliance, green direct payments (i.e., "greening") and voluntary agri-environmental and climate measures. A particular focus was farmers' views and understanding of the logic behind these mandatory, conditional and voluntary schemes. Given the qualitative nature of data collection, the objective was to present **narratives**, discourses and perceptions expressed by farmers who participated in the exercise<sup>6</sup>.

The present report was published as an **annex to the Impact Assessment** accompanying the Proposals for a Regulation establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the Common agricultural policy<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Oullier, O. (2013). Behavioural insights are vital to policy-making. *Nature*, 501(7468), 463–463.

<sup>2</sup> Wreford, A., Ignaciuk, A., & Gruère, G. (2017). Overcoming barriers to the adoption of climate-friendly practices in agriculture. *OECD Food, Agriculture and Fisheries Papers*, 101.

<sup>3</sup> Maybery, D., Crase, L., & Gullifer, C. (2005). Categorising farming values as economic, conservation and lifestyle. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 26(1), 59–72.

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/consultations/cap-modernising/eco\\_background\\_final\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/consultations/cap-modernising/eco_background_final_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/consultations/cap-modernising/env\\_background\\_final\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/consultations/cap-modernising/env_background_final_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> van Bavel, R., Dessart, F. J., *The case for qualitative methods in behavioural studies for EU policy-making*, EUR 29061 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2018, ISBN 978-92-79-77715-8, doi:10.2760/861402, JRC109920

<sup>7</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0301&rid=2>

## 2 Methodology

Six focus groups were carried out in January 2018 in Seville (Spain), Tours (France), and Lublin (Poland). These locations were selected due to the diversity of farming activities, crops and cultural contexts. Each focus group was attended by 6 to 8 farmers who were recruited over the phone. During recruitment, a screening questionnaire was administered to ensure that participants were all subject **to at least one obligation of greening** and to allow some variety in participants' types of crops, membership in a cooperative, farm size, and age. As with any focus group, the objective was not to constitute a sample representative of the whole population of farmers in the EU, but rather to get a **diverse mix** of participants<sup>8</sup>.

In each location, two focus groups were conducted, each one being rather homogeneous with regard to the adoption of environmentally-friendly practices<sup>9</sup> in order to encourage participation:

- one focus group with farmers relatively highly committed toward the environment (i.e. 'green' farmers)
- one focus group with farmers with a low to average environmental commitment (i.e. 'conventional' farmers)

A semi-structured discussion guide was designed to cover progressively various topics in a funnelling approach: identification of environmentally-(un)friendly practices, motivations and barriers to the adoption of more environmentally-friendly practices, current environment-related incentive schemes, recommendation for future incentive schemes. The present document only presents the results from the sections on incentives. Examples of 'verbatim' are provided throughout the document in footnotes.

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (2014). *Focus groups: Theory and practice* (Vol. 20). Sage publications.

<sup>9</sup> Environmental commitment was assessed combining the objective adoption of certain practices (i.e. organic farming, adoption of voluntary agri-environmental and climate measures) and subjective positioning (i.e. degree of environmental commitment compared to fellow farmers and future intentions).

## 3 Results

### 3.1 General discussion on incentives

When asked to spontaneously mention both positive and negative incentives that can motivate farmers to adopt more environmentally-friendly practices, participants first and foremost referred to **legal and economic tools**. The discourse of 'conventional' farmers revolved mainly around obligations, economic sanctions, economic incentives, and **mandatory schemes**<sup>10</sup>. In contrast, 'green' farmers (especially in Seville and in Tours) tended to more spontaneously discussed **voluntary schemes**, not only from the CAP<sup>11</sup>. The higher market price for crops grown in a more environmentally-friendly way was also an economic incentive for some<sup>12</sup>, but only provided consumers are sufficiently conscious about these issues<sup>13</sup>.

Besides economic tools, participants also mentioned trainings<sup>14</sup> (e.g. to understand the appropriate time for spraying pesticides, to become more conscious of the environmental impacts of certain farming practices) and advice from consultants (with some doubts as to their impartiality) as other incentives to motivate them to adopt more environmentally-friendly practices. Collective incentives never spontaneously emerged.

Prior to specifically tackling CAP related tools, participants freely discussed the overall logic of mandatory, conditional and voluntary schemes. **Mandatory schemes** leveraging sanctions to enforce certain regulations on environmentally-friendly practices were deemed **relevant** to prevent farmers from causing severe damages to the environment<sup>15</sup>. However, generally speaking, participants considered the philosophy of **voluntary schemes**, based on reward, as a more **appropriate** tool given its encouraging and constructive approach, compatible with farmers' value of **freedom**<sup>16</sup>. Participants often used the 'stick and carrot' analogy to refer to the different types of schemes and the concept of '**conditional**' schemes did not often come out spontaneously.

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- <sup>10</sup>- "Our wallet... Sanctions... If you don't to comply with the requirements, you don't get the money" (ES-conventional)  
- "If we don't do something on time, there are consequences. There's a deadline and for every day of delay they pay you less. This is a punishment. If you exceed the deadline, you bear the consequences" (PL-conventional)  
- "We don't have the choice with all these laws coming out all the time. We are urged by force" (FR-conventional)
- <sup>11</sup>- "At the level of the CAP, I took part in a voluntary measure for reducing inputs" (FR-green)  
- "The subventions for modernising machinery... A machine that spouts... that's not the same as a new one. (ES-green)  
- "I think they also gave some subsidies for investing in machinery, like anti-drifting ducts, things like that". (FR-green)
- <sup>12</sup>- "Our cooperative has a woman responsible for certification, who brings us rigorous instruction guides so that we get more money for these products that we sell with that certification. It incentivises us to keep producing in the field." (ES-green)
- <sup>13</sup>- "Imagine this – in the store, the consumer can choose between a fat, juicy, non-organic turkey, or a smaller, skinnier and more expensive organic one... Obviously we'll all buy the fat and good-looking one." (PL-conventional)
- <sup>14</sup>- "They should organize training events or meetings in the villages. But I'd like more training seminars." (PL-green)  
- "Making you more conscious through trainings... To sensitize you. You think you're doing something good but you're doing it wrong. We don't hold the ultimate truth..." (ES-conventional)
- <sup>15</sup>- "It's normal that violating the law leads to fines." (PL-green)  
- "It's not the same to make a light mistake toward the environment, which isn't very serious... What's serious needs to be punished. What's light can't be punished... You can just end up not receiving a subsidy" (ES-green)  
- "Because some farmers say "No, because no!". Some will never change their minds and you need to fine them" (PL-green)
- <sup>16</sup>- "Yes, it's the stick and carrot method. But the stick shouldn't be too big." (PL-green)  
- "Rewards are better, they're more encouraging" "We need something more constructive where we evolve, we need to move forward" (FR-conventional)  
- "Nobody likes to be imposed things on them and penalized." (PL-green)

### Key insights

- 'Green' farmers seem to think more spontaneously of voluntary schemes when reflecting on incentives, compared to 'conventional' farmers whose discourse revolves more around mandatory schemes.
- Voluntary schemes are more encouraging and compatible with freedom values.
- Mandatory schemes and sanctions are relevant and important drivers for conventional farmers.

## 3.2 Cross compliance

The principle of minimum requirements imposed by the Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions was generally well perceived by participants. A metaphor that was often mentioned was that of **Highway Code**<sup>17</sup>: just as it is forbidden to drive too fast on roads, it's forbidden, for instance, to spray pesticides very close to rivers. And just as people are not rewarded for driving at the right speed, farmers do not get specific money to meet these requirements<sup>18</sup>. Participants justified the existence of cross compliance by the need to ensure that every farmer complies with the regulation<sup>19</sup> and that serious infringements are penalised<sup>20</sup>.

The uneven implementation of cross compliance regulations across the EU was a recurrent topic of discussion among French farmers, this problem being due, according to them, to each country protecting their farmers' interests and to the unequal controls between different countries<sup>21</sup>. In Poland, participants spontaneously expressed the fear of denunciation by neighbouring farmers as a driving force for compliance<sup>22</sup>.

### Key insights

- Cross compliance is generally well accepted by participating farmers.
- Perceived uneven implementation and controls across the EU causes concern for lack of level-playing field.

## 3.3 Greening

Participants were all **well aware** of the greening requirements including the recent changes to some specifications – probably because they were recruited based on the fact that they had to comply with at least one obligation of greening. In contrast, within each group there was no clear consensus regarding the **voluntary, conditional or mandatory** nature of the practices

<sup>17</sup> - "It's a fine, just like for any person that gets controlled driving too fast" (ES-conventional)

<sup>18</sup> - "You don't get a bonus because you drive at 90 km/h all year long" (FR-green)

<sup>19</sup> - "It's a way to make sure that people just don't do what they fancy" (ES-green)

- "It's a good thing... If everyone did whatever they liked, if there were no rules, ... things wouldn't work" (FR-conventional)

<sup>20</sup> - "For instance, the one that makes some really foolish things, like 'I spray, I don't care about the river nearby'. OK, that's directly harming, he needs to be directly punished" (FR-green)

<sup>21</sup> - "It's still a 'common' agricultural policy so, it's quite funny... Either we close borders [...] or we put the same rule for everyone" (FR-green)

- "People accept eating sprayed Spanish products... [...] But at the same time they keep controlling us" (FR-green)

- "Each country tries to protect its farmers as much as possible... Not ours..." (FR-conventional)

<sup>22</sup> - "I think these regulations do work. For example, I'm not going to be burning out my fallows anymore. That's because I'm afraid the neighbour will report me. Then I will lose my direct payments." (PL-green)

included in greening<sup>23</sup>: although participants did understand the possibility to voluntarily opt-out, some described the scheme as mandatory because they needed this payment. Participants indeed comply with the greening requirements, mainly because they fear losing part of their basic payments<sup>24</sup>. Likewise, the **complement/bonus or due/right**<sup>25</sup> nature of greening was a disputed concept and the concept of 'conditionality' was virtually not used in participants' own words to describe greening.

**Greening** tends to be viewed **positively** as it provides some tangible **benefits**, mainly for wildlife (ecological focus areas)<sup>26</sup>, for soils (crop diversification and catch crops mean less need for chemicals)<sup>27</sup> and ultimately for business<sup>28</sup>, without too much constraints<sup>29</sup>. The three main points of concern spontaneously discussed were the **lack of coherence** of some requirements with the stated environmental goals<sup>30</sup>, **scepticism** regarding the true goal of greening<sup>31</sup> and the lack of **additivity**<sup>32</sup>. There is a perception, also, that greening demands could increase in the future<sup>33</sup>.

### Key insights

- Greening is part of participating farmers' understanding of the Common Agricultural Policy.
- The voluntary, conditional or mandatory nature of greening is debated.
- Participating farmers view greening overall as positive even though they express some concerns.

<sup>23</sup>- "You can choose to do it or not" - "They make it sound like it's voluntary, but they oblige you, in a way" (ES-conventional)

- "Greening is for all farmers who comply with the requirements... These requirements... they're voluntary" (ES-green)

- "No, greening isn't voluntary. Within your CAP payments, you're obliged to have a certain surface" (FR-green)

- "If I do not satisfy the greening criterion, they pay me less... I don't want to, but I have to. So I am forced anyway" (PL-green)

<sup>24</sup>- "In both cases, it's a sword of Damocles" (FR-green)

- "The lightest sanction is death penalty" (ES-conventional)

- "Also, there is this whip over me - if I don't do these things, I'll get less money" (PL-green)

<sup>25</sup>- "It's the carrot" - "It's a due" (FR-conventional)

- "Greening is complementing that basic payment" "If you comply with that thing which is more ecological, then we'll reward you... Politically, that's how it's conceived." (ES-green)

- "Greening, that's a premium" (FR-green)

- "In order to receive compensation... I mean this payment is no payment, it's actually a compensation" (PL-green)

<sup>26</sup>- "I like to keep this oasis, with woodpeckers, squirrels, weasels, foxes... if you keep a piece of land not farmed you see all these animals. Hedgehogs! It's incredible to see a hedgehog in a natural habitat" (PL-green)

- "When you keep these grasslands, there are birds' nests there, in places they enjoy. Like lapwings" (PL-conventional)

<sup>27</sup>- "The catch crops just improve the soil. It's done for crop rotation, to avoid just growing one cereal in a place" - "If you have mustard or some legumes growing once in a while, the fungus doesn't develop that quickly." (PL-conventional)

- "Greening is beneficial for everyone... For the soils, for us, for France's health" (FR-green)

<sup>28</sup>- "Eventually, we did see that greening was beneficial. So any entrepreneur, if it's beneficial for his business, he does it" (FR-green)

<sup>29</sup>- "Greening doesn't require a big effort. It's an intellectual constraint" (FR-conventional)

<sup>30</sup>- "Now you can't spray anything on those protected areas. But if you're going to sow broad beans to harvest it later, without phytosanitary products, that's unfeasible... You don't grow it. What do I do?" (ES-green)

- "They consider empty sowing as another crop, that's an absurd thing... That's [...] the contradictions that we see" (ES-convent.)

<sup>31</sup>- "I think they did it in order to sell the idea, it sounds better to say 'green payment, we're changing agriculture, focusing it in such a way that we're more ecological. [...] The only thing they changed is the name" (ES-conventional)

- "Now the CAP payments are diluted with everything, with the environment, in fact with everything. Everything is decreased and they use it to say 'well there, there's a part that used for the environment" (FR-conventional)

<sup>32</sup>- "Myself, if tomorrow there's no more payment, I keep on doing it" (FR-green)

- "We do that normally... even if you have 15 Ha arable land, then you don't just keep wheat, but also other cereals" (PL-convent.)

<sup>33</sup>- "The basic payment, they're going to decrease it little by little, and the green payment they'll raise it for good farming practices." (ES-green)

- "Every year, they add a layer. For the ecological focus area, before we could put some alfalfa but now we can't anymore" "I think we'll have to do more fallows to get into the rails of greening" (FR-conventional)

### 3.4 Agri-environmental and climate measures

Overall, participants viewed agri-environmental and climate measures as a voluntary scheme<sup>34</sup> and they were aware of their existence, except most Polish participants in the 'conventional' group<sup>35</sup>. The **motivations** to participate in these voluntary schemes are mainly **economic**<sup>36</sup>: there is indeed a feeling that these schemes provide a much-needed financial extra necessary for the economic survival of some farmers. The administrative **constraints** as well as the **controls** are seen as stringent<sup>37</sup> and therefore put off many participants<sup>38</sup>.

In focus groups in France and Poland, participants expressed some scepticism regarding agri-environmental and climate measures: French participants saw them as **too selective** in their criteria<sup>39</sup> and sometimes not additive<sup>40</sup>, and mentioned that these voluntary schemes are mainly signed by smaller farmers due to their high need for additional income<sup>41</sup>. Among the main points of concern, Polish participants repeatedly mentioned **information asymmetry** (i.e. there is a perception that some farmers have access to privileged, early information on some calls for voluntary schemes)<sup>42</sup>, difficulty in applying<sup>43</sup> and **biased granting** of the schemes<sup>44</sup>. Virtually all groups digressed on the issue of changing rules during the completion of the voluntary scheme<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> - "It's a personal choice" (FR, convent.) - "There's a carrot at the end" (FR-green) - "That one is optional" (ES-convent.)

<sup>35</sup> - "I never heard of many of these." "Neither have I." "These are not that commonplace". "I never really got into that... but I read there are going to be new modernization programs soon, from the Agency, for organic farms. I never heard of that before, I don't think they had such support mechanisms" "Farmers don't know enough about pro-environment programs? I know from my own example and when I talk to farmers, they don't talk about it." (PL-conventional)

<sup>36</sup> - "The agro-environmental measures... it's like with the solar panels... It's first and foremost more for money than for the environment. It's more about profit than about the environment" "You need to judge the pros and the cons... see what it can return economically" (FR-conventional)

- "What we're doing is basically, we're begging" (ES-conventional)

<sup>37</sup> - "It's not like a car where we choose the options... It's not the case. The contract, it's as it is. You take it, you don't take it, that's it" (FR-conventional)

- "They give you from one hand, and you get so many constraints that they take it back from the other hand" (FR-green)

<sup>38</sup> - "As far as I'm concerned, there are certain subsidies that I don't apply to because I'd rather not have them. It becomes a personal approach to do these things. But eventually you find yourself shivering on your chair, thinking to yourself "oh my God, she [the controller] is putting so much things in red everyone. You're two days long close to a heart attack" (FR-green)

<sup>39</sup> - "When they put the AES in place, it was a huge thing, and at the end, nothing. I remember that in training we were 70 farmers [who were interested] and eventually we were just 10 to do it." (FR-conventional)

- "They [the local administration] took a lot of people but they realised that it didn't make up a lot for each farm, so they put more criteria, once, twice, three times to make sure that just a small proportion of people could get it" (FR-green)

<sup>40</sup> - "Those who participate in AES are those who can do it without bothering too much" (FR-conventional)

<sup>41</sup> - "The one that has 1000 hectares, why would he bother doing these things when he has enough to live with?" (FR-green)

<sup>42</sup> - "What about the tomato plantations from last year? This was a certain program about growing organic tomatoes, it was a fact known only to the "Marszalkowska farmers". The deadline for submitting applications to that program was June the 15th. And the media informed about it on June 14th! It was information that was not circulated right" - "If you go to the website of the Ministry or the Restructuration Agency, before you find the right appendix, you could be looking for hours for it. Or weeks!" (PL-green)

- "I remember these subsidies for forestry - it was a direct payment for walnut trees. I remember that all the unused lands were suddenly turned into walnut plantations. Who owned them? Some [...] political party. They knew in advance. They were buying that land 2 years or 3 years in advance or they were leasing it from the state." (PL-green)

<sup>43</sup> - "Nobody submits these applications on their own. It's too much paperwork" (PL-conventional)

<sup>44</sup> - "The application... Also it won't go through. It definitely will not go through." "Yes and also, there are phone calls, it's all about connections..." "Yes, I know these people who got into a project, took out loans, but then a committee appeared and told them that they can't be enrolled in the program because there is some criterion they did not meet." (PL-conventional)

<sup>45</sup> - "I get into a 5-year commitment, but nobody promises that the rules of the game won't change. The rules of the game impose many requirements on me, but if I think of my rights - this year I get less. I can't plan my production right. I can't say that next year, or for the 5 years I'll get the same payment." "Yes, the changes of these rules, or the vagueness of these rules, it pushes people away from being more pro-environment." (PL-green)

- "It's 5 years, you don't have the right to change, to move away. If they change, they warn you telling you 'you can go on following the new rules, or you can stop the contract, but as far as we're concerned, we can't do it the other way around'. (FR-conventional)

### Key insights

- The existence and nature of agri-environmental and climate measures is well understood, with the notable exception of Polish participants in the conventional group.
- Environmental motives generally play little role in sign-up.
- Participants in Poland view agri-environmental and climate measures as difficult to obtain because of information asymmetry and biased granting.

## 3.5 Recommendations for future incentive schemes

Throughout the focus groups, farmers' narratives abundantly revolved around how incentive schemes *should* be designed. The following box summarises the main recommendations.

### Key insights

- Incentive schemes should still come from the EU<sup>46</sup>.
- A better knowledge of farming in general and rural, local conditions in particular is needed to design coherent and meaningful incentives<sup>47</sup>.
- Better educating consumers about the value of environmentally-friendly products<sup>48</sup> would allow farmers to sell their products at a better price.
- There is a need to target incentive schemes to 'real' farmers<sup>49</sup> and, more specifically, to small farmers<sup>50</sup>.
- Participating farmers want more level-playing field between farmers as to voluntary schemes, between EU Member States and between the EU and the rest of the world as to environmental constraints and control<sup>51</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> - "National? No, it should come from Europe!" (ES-green)

- "In the EU! Everything is simpler in the EU. Maybe, but it's all made much more complicated in Poland. It's all due to our Polish bureaucracy. From what I hear, it's easier in the West. They encourage people to use programs, whereas in Poland, all these rules try to stop you. If you misstep, you get a fine" (PL-conventional)

<sup>47</sup> - "Those who create that, they should be more down-to-earth, on the ground" (FR-conventional)

- "I hate it when on one day, some decision-maker chooses that a given substance cannot be used anymore and they give you no replacement. That is over the top." (PL-green)

- "Those who decide these measures, they don't know the environment, they don't know the countryside" (ES-convent.)

<sup>48</sup> - "They should instead educate people in schools. If we educate everybody, then, perhaps, I could say that the whole environment we're talking about will learn more about how we can protect it." (PL-green)

- "That the fruit of our labours bring something in... then if our products are better valued, that means we work our soil better, so we can work even better, that's the whole correlation." (FR-conventional)

- "The majority of farmers, we would prefer not to receive any single euro of subsidies, if the product was valued for what it's worth" (ES-green)

<sup>49</sup> - "Some landowners, some doctors, some chemist... they bought farms to be able to hunt, to have some grassland, fallows... And they get the CAP payments, that should have never been the case" (FR-green)

- "Payments should be given to people who really is and lives from the countryside, and not now as it's done... The 3 million euros for the Duchess of Alba or the power producers who have some fields and don't produce anything" (ES-green)

<sup>50</sup> - "A farmer that uses sprays at the wrong time and he earns 1000 PLN per Hectare, That fine can kill a medium farmer and won't hurt a big one. [...] The big farmer pollutes thousands of Hectares anyway!" (PL-green)

- "That farmers that has 100 hectares, please don't tell me he does it correctly!" (FR-green)

- "Most of the time, small human scale farms are family farms, so there is transmission" (FR-conventional)

- "Right now a small farmer can't keep livestock. In the past, they kept them in small quantities. If you have more livestock, there's more manure and less artificial fertilizers." (PL-conventional)

<sup>51</sup> - "Imports on foreign products should be controlled just as ours" (FR-conventional)

- "If we import hormones-fed meat, then... well French people also feed them with hormones" - "Without closing borders... If we want to forbid glyphosate in France, if you want to be logical then we forbid foreign products that used it" (FR-green)

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doi:10.2760/049327

ISBN 978-92-76-01439-3