

TRADING AWAY THE FUTURE?

How the EU's agri-trade policy is at odds with sustainability goals



FEEDBACK EU

Executive Summary

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We live in a time of polycrisis deeply intertwined with how we produce and consume food. As one of the largest global markets and one of the world’s most outward-oriented economies, the European Union (EU) plays a pivotal role in influencing global food trade through its consumption and production patterns. In 2021, a review of the EU’s trade policy by the European Commission asserted that it “should use all the tools at its disposal to support social fairness and environmental sustainability”¹. The 2024 Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture has also highlighted the need to align agri-trade policy with sustainability.

However, current EU agri-trade policies do not reflect the urgent imperative of transforming our food system. This report presents case studies of three internationally traded protein commodities (soy, rapeseed, and beef) to demonstrate how EU agri-trade policies are at odds with EU policy objectives in five key areas:

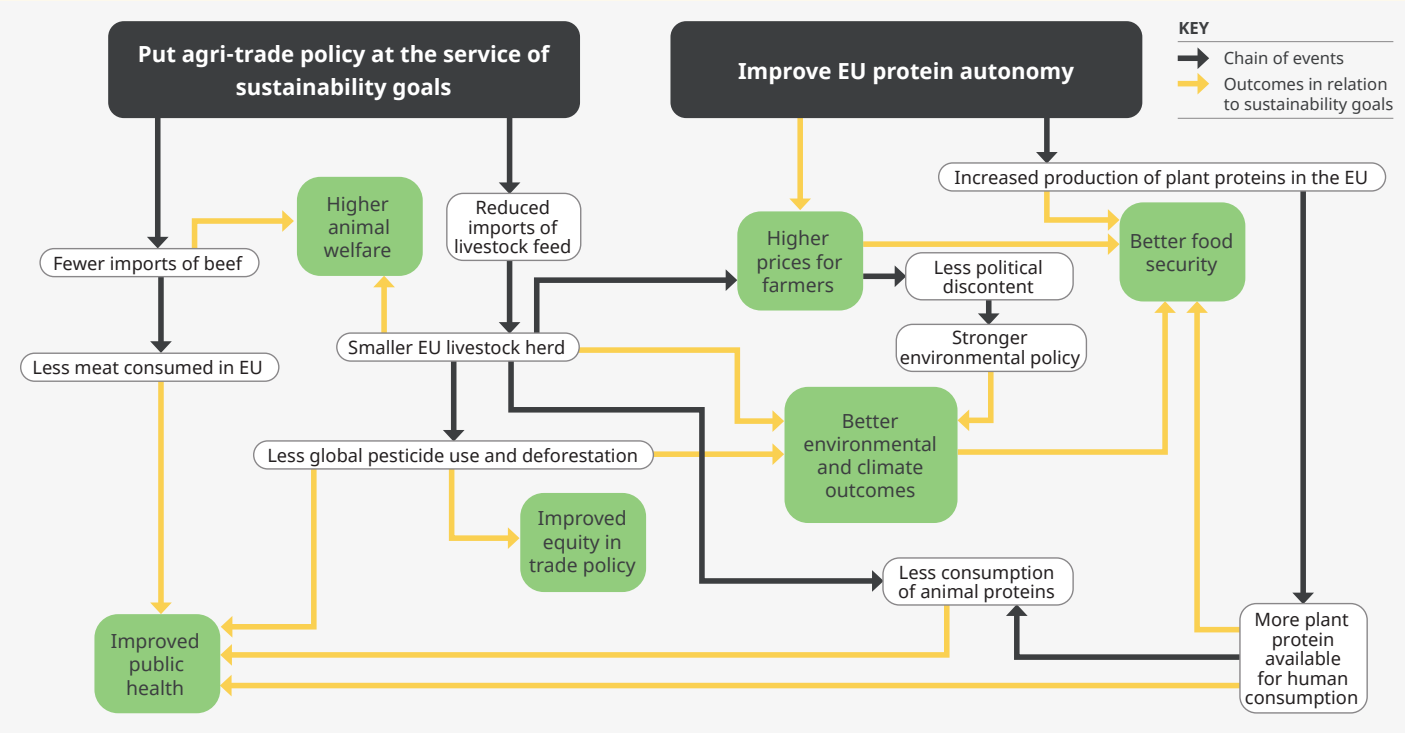
- 1. **The climate crisis:** by supporting a livestock sector that contributes to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.
- 2. **Public health:** by enabling meat- and dairy-heavy diets that harm human health while importing residues of dangerous pesticides, antibiotics, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

- 3. **Food security and EU farmers’ livelihoods:** by hampering the ability of EU farmers to get a fair price for their food while reducing the amount of food available for human, rather than animal, consumption.
- 4. **Global equity:** by maintaining unfair and neocolonial double standards concerning the use of pesticides in third countries and perpetuating land-grabbing from local and Indigenous communities.
- 5. **Animal welfare:** by accepting the meat import of animals subject to less stringent animal welfare and veterinary standards than the EU would require.

As the EU prepares to mark the fifth anniversary of its landmark Farm to Fork strategy and enters a new legislative period from 2024–2029, the time to act on putting the EU’s trade policy at the service of sustainability is now. A business-as-usual approach will make it impossible for the EU to achieve its sustainability goals².

Against this backdrop, this briefing reaffirms the need for a realignment of EU agri-trade policy (see Figure 1) to enable the urgent transformation of our food system. Integrating sustainability into trade policy will allow policymakers to tackle multiple issues simultaneously: the urgency of promoting more plant-based diets, public health, global equity, food security, farmer’s livelihoods, and animal welfare.

Figure 1: Agri-trade policy framework



Credits: Feedback EU, 2024.

The report therefore recommends that EU policymakers:

1. PUT EU AGRI-TRADE POLICY AT THE SERVICE OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

1.1 Champion new possibilities for integrating sustainability and trade

The EU should act as a global leader in integrating sustainability and trade objectives, working through existing WTO mechanisms and supporting the development and implementation of new tools like the “Codex Planitarius” created by the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF).

1.2 Conduct sustainability assessments of new and existing trade agreements

The EU should require all new and existing trade agreements to be assessed against goals related to commitments made to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Paris Climate Agreement, the European Green Deal, and other European strategies.

1.3 Strengthen mirror measures related to health and sustainability

While acting to integrate trade and sustainability more holistically, the EU should strengthen existing mirror measures — provisions that stipulate the same production standards in traded goods as would be required within the EU — to mitigate the health and environmental impacts of agri-trade in third countries^a.

1.4 Close gaps in current import regulations and improve enforcement capacities

The EU should act urgently on gaps in trade regulations that allow for the import of commodities harmful to human health and the environment, and the climate, including by bolstering customs and veterinary authorities and revising the scope of the delayed Regulation on Deforestation-free Products (EUDR) to protect sensitive biomes in Latin America (which as of now are not covered).

1.5 End double standards and inconsistencies on the use and export of banned substances

The toxic double standard of European companies exporting harmful pesticides banned in the EU to third countries must end, as should import tolerances for agrichemicals whose long-term impacts on human health, particularly when combined (so-called ‘cocktail effects’), are unknown.

1.6 Rectify market distortions of and import dependency on key proteins

The EU should seek to reduce imports of cheap livestock feed from third countries – which undercuts EU farmers growing plant-based proteins – within the framework of new trade-sustainability requirements and an EU-wide protein plan (see Recommendation 2.1).

2. IMPROVE EU PROTEIN AUTONOMY AND PROMOTE A SHIFT TOWARD PLANT-BASED DIETS

2.1 Create an EU-wide protein plan to guide the shift towards protein autonomy

A key focus of the new 2024-2029 EU legislative period should be to create a comprehensive and binding European protein plan to promote the growth of plant-based proteins for human consumption while improving the sustainability of the livestock sector and the position of EU farmers.

2.2 Ensure the CAP incentivizes plant protein production for human consumption

The CAP should invoke environmental provisions (including the Good Agriculture and Environment Conditions, or GAEC, that were recently rolled back under political pressure¹⁵) to incentivize the production of plant proteins for human consumption, while prioritising a shift towards more climate- and environment-friendly agricultural practices.

^a Technical proposals on mirror measures in European agri-trade are the subject of a new report by Feedback and partners, ‘Double Standards on Our Plates: Using Mirror Measures to Mitigate the Impacts of EU Trade Policy for a Sustainable Food System’ (2024).

WORKS CITED (ABRIDGED FROM FULL REPORT)

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Feedback EU is a non-governmental food justice organisation based in The Hague, Netherlands with a representation in Brussels. Together with our sister organisation Feedback Global and our partners from the national / European level as well as from the Global South, we strive for a food system that is not only in balance with nature but also fair to those who produce and consume food. For this purpose, we do research, conduct advocacy campaigns, challenge power structures, catalyse action and empower people to achieve positive change.

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