

AUDIT

Audit of biodiversity contributions in agriculture

Federal Office for Agriculture

KEY FACTS

The Confederation pays around CHF 450 million annually with the aim of preserving and promoting biodiversity in agriculture. Firstly, farmers receive quality contributions if they comply with certain requirements, such as the time of cutting grass or if there is a certain amount of biodiversity on their land. Secondly, there are networking contributions: the cantons define measures in projects to specifically promote important species and to improve connectivity between the areas. The Confederation fully funds the quality contributions and the cantons contribute 10% of the funding for networking. The Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG) exercises overall supervision.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) conducted a performance audit of the biodiversity contributions. It focused on the economic use of financial resources. According to federal surveys, the various types of biodiversity contributions have an overall positive effect on biodiversity. However, the use of funds is not efficient in various areas. Various efforts by the FOAG to increase the effectiveness of biodiversity promotion areas, for example by providing more advice or targeted measures in arable areas, failed in Parliament.

No subsidies are needed to meet requirements

Since 2015, the Confederation has been surveying the diversity of species and habitats on agricultural land and in summering areas. Analyses of this survey show that the biodiversity contributions have a positive effect overall. However, the data also shows that the diversity of species and habitats is significantly lower in low-lying areas than in mountainous regions. In the SFAO's view, agricultural policy objectives related to the promotion of biodiversity should be defined more clearly. They should also take account of the different levels of pressure to act depending on the zone.

In order to receive direct payments, farmers must fulfil the proof of ecological performance (PEP). The PEP includes requirements regarding environmentally friendly farming. This includes a portion of the farm's land being managed as biodiversity promotion areas. In return, the farmers receive the same contributions as for other biodiversity promotion areas that they also maintain – this is inefficient. Due to the great interest in receiving direct payments, most farms would fulfil the PEP requirements even without the biodiversity contributions. The SFAO estimates the potential for efficiency gains at around CHF 40 million. This could be used to provide targeted incentives for higher quality land or for regions with a greater need for action.

Networking contributions are not very efficient

Various cantons also pay a networking contribution for almost all biodiversity promotion programmes. This means that there is too little targeted support for areas that are particularly important for biodiversity. In addition, only a few cantons use their room for manoeuvre to vary their contributions; as a rule, the maximum possible amounts are paid out. With the existing surveys, it is also not possible to assess the impact of the networking contributions in the individual cantons. Together with the landscape quality contributions, the networking contributions will be transferred to a new direct payment type, the contributions for regional biodiversity and landscape quality, from 2028. The FOAG must make use of this reorganisation to better ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of subsidies for the conservation and promotion of biodiversity.