

BirdWatch - A service to measure and improve biodiversity using satellite data for monitoring, evaluation and optimization of CAP greening initiatives



Policy Brief: Farmland bird protection in Flanders, Belgium

January, 2026

Summary

Flanders, like other regions in the EU, experiences increasing tensions between its natural environment and the socio-economic needs of its population. An intensification of agricultural production severely impacts the habitats of birds, especially those who breed on agricultural land. Agri-environmental policies have been put in place to protect Flanders ecosystems, with varying degrees of success. With a rising number of socio-economic, geopolitical, as well as climate-related challenges and the accompanying competition for an ever-decreasing budget, nature restoration and conservation measures have to become more efficient and targeted. With BirdWatch, we propose a service which supports pertinent decision-making by offering input for tailored spatial planning and impact assessment for ecologically coherent policies.

As observed across the EU, the numbers of farmland birds in Flanders have been declining for decades. Farmland birds have trouble to hatch a nest or raise and feed their young. Among the species most impacted are the arable birds, such as the skylark¹.

Common reasons for the decline in farmland birds are the loss, degradation or fragmentation of their habitats along with the intensification of agricultural and land use practices. To give a few examples: too early or frequent mowing destroys nests, shelters and food sources, the application of pesticides weakens egg shells and kills vital food sources, including insects. Along with an increase of the scale of farm operations and, thus, ever-larger plots, there is an accompanying decrease in diversity of crops. There is also a reduction in the quality of soil due to the presence of agricultural nitrate at the surface and in the groundwater, soil compaction and the loss in soil biodiversity^{2,3}.

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<https://www.vlaanderen.be/inbo/indicatoren/trend-broedvogels-van-weiden-en-akkers>

2

https://www.vlm.be/nl/SiteCollectionDocuments/Natuurinrichting/Brochure_natuurinrichting.pdf

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<https://backoffice.biblio.ugent.be/download/01K80CDYYSY2TBN4A2SRPZ68B1/01K80CKJA87CHCG44C1MBMKXC1>

Existing policies and the road ahead

Existing policies

The **Flemish Nature Decree** has been the cornerstone of Flanders nature policy since 1997. Its goal is the conservation, restoration and sustainable management of nature. It established nature management plans, supports species-based policies and species protection and sets conservation objectives, inline with EU policy⁴.

Based on the Nature decree of 1997, the Flemish government adopted the species protection regulation ("**soortenbesluit**") in 2009⁵, laying the groundwork for special species protection programmes ("**Soortenbeschermingsprogramma's**"). These programs improve the conservation status of priority species, including specific farmland birds, with the aim of achieving a population recovery. Each species protection programme includes a number of protection measures for the endangered species that apply for a minimum of five years. A total of 27 of such species protection programmes currently exist in Flanders, addressing different

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<https://www.b-tree.be/en/boomadvies/boomtechnisch-raad-gever-juridisch/natuurdecreet-21-oktober-1997/>

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<https://codex.vlaanderen.be/Portals/Codex/documenten/1018227.html>

taxa, not just birds⁶. Furthermore, there are currently 38 **Special Protection Zones** under the Habitats Directive and 24 **Special Protection Zones** under the Birds Directive. These areas partially overlap, resulting in a total of 41 protection zones across Flanders, also known as **Natura 2000 areas**.

On agricultural land, compensation for the implementation of agri-environmental measures is possible through a complex landscape of financial support, where funding is available from different sources, including agricultural management agreements, land- and nature design projects, subsidies for non-productive investments, subsidies for the protection of nests of grassland birds, project subsidies focussed on nature in general and project subsidies focussed on specific species.

Farmers can be compensated for specific actions which target the improvement or conservation of biodiversity. These compensations are often financed in the context of eco-schemes part of the 1st pillar of the **EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**, as agri-environmental measures subsidised through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) (2nd pillar of the CAP), or via local financing.

⁶ <https://natuurenbos.vlaanderen.be/dieren-en-planten/soortenbescherming/soortenbeschermingsprogrammas-sbps>

These measures are voluntary and the actual implementation is therefore strongly dependent on the willingness of the landowners. Just as an example, owners, tenants, or users of agricultural plots who have not yet mowed or harvested at least part of the plot at the place and time of the observation of a nest of specific bird species can ask for compensation when they agree to comply with measures taken to protect the nest and hatchlings⁷.

Each year, Flanders thus invests millions of euros in agri-environmental measures, and yet farmland birds continue to fare poorly. In 2024, the indicator for farmland birds was still pointing downwards, with the numbers of the 12 selected indicator birds being the lowest since 2007⁸.

The farmers are not to blame. In 2024, almost 9 out of 10 farmers applied ecoschemes or agroenvironmental measures⁹. And available

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<https://natuurenbos.vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/documenten/Infobundel%20nestbescherming.pdf>

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<https://www.vlaanderen.be/inbo/indicatoren/trend-broedvogels-van-weiden-en-akkers>

⁹

<https://lv.vlaanderen.be/nieuws/87-van-de-actieve-landbouwers-nemen-deel-aan-ecoregelingen-agromilieuklimaatmaatregelen>

schemes are updated regularly, to allow for improvements¹⁰.

This points to another likely issue: The implemented measures are not sufficient or appropriate to halt the decline in bird populations. Further, different bird species have different needs. Sometimes these needs overlap, whereas others may be in conflict, which can result in the implementation of measures benefiting one species while harming another. While certain safeguard systems are in place to prevent unintended harm, negative impacts still occur in practice. This highlights the need for coherent, region-wide policies and clear communication to ensure consistent implementation on the ground.

Policy developments

Institutions, such as the [Research Institute on Nature and Forest](#), keep a close eye on the development and trends of bird populations across Flanders¹¹. These activities are also important for policies as trends for woodland, meadow and farmland birds have become important indicators for the **EU Nature Restoration Regulation** (NRR), which stipulates

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<https://lv.vlaanderen.be/nieuws/nieuwigheden-glb-2026-gerealiseerd-met-en-voor-landbouwers>

¹¹

<https://www.vlaanderen.be/inbo/persberichten/populaties-van-broedvogels-tonen-licht-herstel-of-blijven-stabiel-behalve-voor-weide-en-akkervogels/>

that these trends must increase by 2030 and thereafter, with 2025 serving as reference year.

The NRR is a new opportunity for the restoration and protection of nature, setting specific, time-bound goals across different types of ecosystems.

However, the agricultural and horticultural sectors are also of great strategic, economic importance to Flanders. A healthy, functioning agricultural ecosystem is needed to support affordable, sustainable, healthy, and balanced food production. Especially w.r.t. the increasing population and a changing climate. Nature restoration and conservation is challenged by multiple crises, also impacting funding priorities. An initial draft of the **EU's Multiannual Financial Framework** for the period of 2028-2034 indicates that the agricultural sector might have to compete with the EU's strife for increased competitiveness and security, eventually affecting budget decisions across Member States.

The current Flemish minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature acknowledges both the challenges and opportunities which come with a more sustainable agriculture¹². Flanders is now working on a **guiding vision for 2030-2050** that

¹² <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/71076>

will outline how a profitable agricultural model fits within Flanders' ecological boundaries which offers farmers and horticulturists a long-term perspective and contributes to the realisation of various European obligations, including those related to nature, climate, and the environment. The latter is an emphasis on the mutual reinforcement between agricultural and food policy, rural policy, and environmental and climate policy. The minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature in Flanders highlights that: "the core mission of Flemish farmers is and remains food production. They must be able to do this in a context that is economically viable, socially sustainable, and ecologically compatible." A first forum was organised in September 2025¹³ which demonstrated that this vision, which will define the future policy direction, will be developed via a bottom-up approach, consulting, e.g., farmers, scientists and economists. This guiding vision is thought to develop an answer to the European long term vision on agriculture and food production from February 2025: "A Vision for Agriculture and Food: Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations".

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<https://vilt.be/nl/nieuws/eerste-forum-geeft-inkijk-in-vlaamse-landbouwvisie-2030-2050>

How can BirdWatch play its part?

A *landscape-spanning approach* to policy implementation could play an important role in achieving agri-environmental and climate goals, while also addressing socio-economic needs. Measures which focus only on individual plots ignore the complexity of landscapes, which could, for example, consist of a network and interplay of various green elements, such as roadside elements and gardens. This is particularly relevant in highly urbanised regions such as Flanders, where these small green elements are abundant near farmland¹⁴. A *co-design approach*, involving actors representing the different view points of the parties affected by a policy, could provide crucial input for landscape-scale spatial planning and policy coherence.

BirdWatch provides decision-support for spatial planning on landscape level, to help define, monitor, evaluate and report on **policy targets**, activities which are, for example, needed for the **EU's Nature Restoration Regulation**.

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<https://ilvo.vlaanderen.be/en/dossiers/biodiversity-and-ecosystem-services-in-relation-to-agriculture>

Satellite-based monitoring allows to quantify the habitat structure and makeup, as well as their changes over time.

Farmland bird habitat suitability supports environmental policies by serving as an indicator to **detect and delineate areas of high ecological importance** or feed into large-scale, harmonized, and **repeatable assessments of habitat condition and trends**.

Habitat suitability modeling allows for the assessment of the possible **impact of changes in the climate** on species and thus can be combined with climate scenarios. This can, for example, support the evaluation or design of protection zones, which have been shown to not always fully account for the community impact of changes in climate¹⁵.

As habitat models reflect the species- and region-specific habitat requirements, they provide quantifiable guidelines for ecologically consistent policy-making, especially if new policies and a **common vision for a region** are needed.

To **avoid the implementation of conflicting policies**, BirdWatch includes a spatial optimisation framework which proposes agri-environmental measures, taking into

account both the economic consequences and the specific, not always agreeing, habitat preferences of local farmland birds.

In this way, BirdWatch can optimise Flanders' meadows and fields in such a way for them to **remain agriculturally productive areas while better addressing the needs of Flanders' birds**.

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<https://www.vlaanderen.be/inbo/publicaties/interactions-between-climate-warming-and-management-actions-determining-bird-community-change-in-protected-areas>

Project information

BirdWatch - a Copernicus-based service for the improvement of habitat suitability of farmland birds via satellite-enabled monitoring, evaluation and optimisation of CAP greening measures

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Project Lead:



Consortium:

