

EU Policy & Supporting Initiatives on Food Waste and Plant-Based Food

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Tackling the environmental impact of the EU food system requires a dual focus on reducing food waste and shifting toward more sustainable diets. While food waste leads to significant greenhouse gas emissions and resource loss, the increase of plant-based foods in diets is a powerful strategy to reduce environmental pressures in the food system. The European Union has introduced a range of policies and initiatives aimed at preventing food waste and supporting a more sustainable food system in the last years.

Food waste is a major environmental and ethical issue. In the EU alone, nearly [59 million tons of food](#)—or about 131 kg per person—are wasted annually, accounting for about 16% of the total Greenhouse Gas emissions from the EU food system.

Legally Binding Food Waste Reduction Targets

The [revised Waste Framework Directive](#) that obliges member states to reduce and monitor food waste levels and report annually was adopted on 30 May 2018. Under this directive, member states are also required to develop targeted food waste prevention programs, promote food donation and redistribution for human consumption, giving priority to feeding people over using food waste for animal feed or non-food processing in line with the waste hierarchy by offering incentives that make food donation easier.

In July 2023, the European Commission [proposed binding national food-waste reduction targets](#) under a revision of the [Waste Framework Directive \(Directive 2008/98/EC\)](#).

The proposal requires Member States to reduce food waste by:

- 10% in processing and manufacturing, and
- 30% in retail, food services, and households (measured by weight per capita), by 2030, compared to a baseline year.

These targets align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12.3, and are aimed to bring consistency, and accountability to national food waste prevention efforts.

To support these ambitions, the EU introduced a harmonized [methodology](#) for food-waste measurement, ensuring reliable data across Member States. Additionally, the [EU Guidelines on Food Donation](#) that was published as a part of Circular Economy Action Plan, help clarify safety, liability, and logistical concerns, encouraging the redistribution of surplus food rather than its disposal. The guidelines were prepared with a consultation to the [EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste](#), which is established by the EU Commission, and that serves as a forum for sharing best practices, developing guidance, and fostering collaboration across the food supply chain.

These tools lay the basis for systemic change, but achieving consistent reductions in food waste also requires action at the individual and community level.

“Zero Waste, More Taste!” & the Food Waste Prevention Hub

Behavioral change is therefore critical in reducing food waste at the consumer and retail level. The EU’s [“Zero Waste, More Taste!”](#) campaign promotes awareness around food waste prevention through supplying creative tips and recipes that were prepared with chefs. The campaign highlights simple actions—like proper food storage, meal planning, and using leftovers—that can significantly reduce household waste.

Moreover, the [EU Food Loss and Waste Prevention Hub](#) acts as a central platform for knowledge sharing, hosting national strategies, best practices, case studies, and data collection tools. It plays a crucial role in empowering local governments, businesses, and civil society actors to act.

Tackling food waste is only one part of the equation; addressing the unsustainable nature of current dietary patterns, particularly the heavy reliance on animal-based foods, is as essential to drive food systems into sustainable direction.

Plant-Based Shifts in the [Farm to Fork Strategy](#)

Farm to Fork Strategy—central to the European Green Deal—acknowledges that the current food system is unsustainable. It encourages a move toward more sustainable diets, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, land degradation, and water use.

However, the strategy avoids addressing the systemic role of industrial animal agriculture, despite its well-documented environmental and public health impacts. The EU continues to frame food sustainability and dietary change as a consumer choice rather than a structural priority, therefore misses an opportunity to enable the policy environment for plant-based food to thrive in. The strategy does not set any targets for cutting back meat production, although the report advises policymakers to update food labelling regulations to let consumers make informed food choices around sustainability and animal welfare.

The strategy supports:

- Sustainable public procurement, including school meals with more fruits, vegetables, and legumes.
- Efforts to rebalance food environments, such as clearer labeling and responsible marketing, which help consumers make healthier, low-impact choices.
- Research and innovation funding for sustainable protein alternatives, including EU-grown plant-based protein to reduce the dependency of EU and address the plant protein deficiency.

Recognizing that dietary change must be supported by changes in how food is produced, the EU has begun integrating the objectives of the strategy into the broader food and farming system through reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP): Incentivizing Diversification and Legume Cultivation

The [Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\)](#), traditionally criticized for favoring intensive livestock and monoculture systems, has undergone significant reform. The 2023–2027 CAP now includes eco-schemes that reward farmers for practices such as:

- Growing legumes and other nitrogen-fixing crops,
- Practicing crop rotation and cover cropping, and

- Transitioning to organic and agroecological systems.

On 8 October 2024, the European Commission published a series of data-rich factsheets under the heading [“Reducing the plant protein deficit of the European Union”](#) examining both the supply and demand of plant-based proteins in the EU, and illustrates how CAP tools—such as coupled income support, eco-schemes, rural investments, and innovation projects—are now being deployed across Member States to reduce import dependencies, improve local legume and oilseed cultivation, and develop robust protein value chains.

These changes support the production of plant-based ingredients, improve soil health, and reduce dependency on synthetic fertilizers and imported feed—contributing to a more circular and resilient agricultural system. Despite these recent reforms, the CAP continues to heavily subsidize intensive animal agriculture. A significant portion of CAP payments still goes to livestock production and feed crops, reinforcing unsustainable practices. These new measures also remain optional and underfunded compared to the core direct payments tied to land ownership and animal headcounts.

Environmental Protection as a Lever for Food System Change

Complementary to food-specific strategies, broader environmental regulations are also pushing agriculture toward sustainability.

- The [Nature Restoration Law](#), adopted in 2023, sets legally binding targets to restore at least 20% of the EU’s degraded land and sea areas by 2030, with a focus on habitats such as peatlands and wetlands, which are often impacted by overgrazing and intensive farming.
- The proposed [Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation](#) aims to reduce chemical pesticide use and risk by 50% by 2030, creating incentives for farmers to diversify crops and adopt more sustainable pest management techniques, which can help enable a more plant-rich food system.

What’s Missing?

The EU’s policy framework still lacks direct support for plant-based innovation and dietary transitions. Subsidies and investments heavily favor traditional livestock and dairy industries, while plant-based alternatives receive a fraction of the funding. Civil society organizations continue to call for an [Action Plan for Plant-Based Foods](#).

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