



Press Release

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Greater use of new imaging technologies needed in agri-monitoring, say EU Auditors

The European Commission has promoted the uptake of new imaging technologies in agri-monitoring, but a number of obstacles to their more widespread use remain, according to a new report from the European Court of Auditors. Technologies such as the EU's Copernicus Sentinel satellites are a potential game-changer for managing and monitoring the common agricultural policy (CAP). However, while the EU has in recent years encouraged their use to assess area-based direct aid to farmers, progress has been slower on using them to monitor environmental and climate requirements, say the auditors.

Since 2018, paying agencies in Member States have been able to use Copernicus Sentinel data and other new technologies, such as geotagged photos and drones, to assess farmers' compliance with CAP rules. This automated assessment, called 'checks by monitoring', makes it possible to identify crops and monitor activities (such as tillage, harvest and mowing) on individual agricultural parcels throughout the growing season. The new approach can also reduce the cost of checks while making it possible to monitor all farmers (instead of focusing on a sample of them). The auditors examined whether the European Commission and Member States had done enough to unlock the potential benefits of these new technologies for the management and control of the CAP.

They found that the Commission had been active in promoting and supporting the use of new imaging technologies. It amended the legal framework for using Sentinel data to monitor direct payment area aid, making it clearer. In May 2018, a first paying agency in Italy started using 'checks by monitoring' in one province (Foggia, Puglia). In 2019, 15 paying agencies (in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Malta and Spain) used this new approach for some of their schemes. A further 13 in eight other Member States intend to start this year for some aid schemes and for part of the area for which they are responsible.

The auditors identify several current obstacles to the more widespread use of these new technologies. One is the paying agencies' concern that the Commission may question decisions taken on the basis of checks by monitoring. In addition, applying the new approach requires significant changes to paying agencies' procedures and IT systems. The Commission has sought to facilitate and standardise access to Sentinel data via cloud-based services, but their uptake for operational purposes is still low. It has also financed some relevant research projects, but their results are yet to be exploited.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at eca.europa.eu.

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To date, the Commission's work has prioritised the use of new technologies to monitor area-based direct payment schemes, rather than environmental and climate requirements. In 2019, none of the paying agencies implemented checks by monitoring for these conditional requirements and rural development schemes. This is partly because a number of them cannot be monitored with Sentinel data alone. The auditors also found that the proposed set of performance indicators for the future CAP was largely not designed for direct monitoring with Copernicus Sentinel data.

As the new CAP for 2021-2027 is currently being designed, the auditors recommend that the European Commission:

- promote the 'checks by monitoring' approach as a key control system for paying agencies, for instance by identifying synergies for satellite data processing, storage or acquisition;
- make better use of new technologies for monitoring environmental and climate requirements and developing action plans to remove obstacles to their wider uptake.

Notes to Editors

The common agricultural policy has a long history of using satellite or aerial images to check area-based aid, which nowadays accounts for almost 80 % of EU funding for agriculture and rural development. While these images usually have very high spatial resolution, before 2017 they were not available often enough to verify activities taking place on agricultural land throughout the year.

Special report 04/2020 "Using new imaging technologies to monitor the Common Agricultural Policy: steady progress overall, but slower for climate and environment monitoring" is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages.

The ECA recently also published an Audit Preview on [the EU's space assets](#) and their use.

The ECA presents its special reports to the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, as well as to other interested parties such as national parliaments, industry stakeholders and representatives of civil society. The vast majority of the recommendations we make in our reports are put into practice.

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