

EU's subsidy system, that benefits big farming rather than sustainability, needs to change to prevent ongoing collapse in birds and insect numbers, warn green groups.

Europe's crisis of collapsing bird and insect numbers will worsen further over the next decade because the EU is in a "state of denial" over destructive farming practices, environmental groups are warning.

European agriculture ministers are pushing for a new common agriculture policy from 2021 to 2028 which maintains generous subsidies for big farmers and ineffectual or even "fake" environmental or "greening" measures, they say.

In a week when two new studies revealed drastic declines in French farmland birds – a pattern repeated across Europe – the EU presidency claimed that the CAP continued to provide safe food while defending farmers and "protecting the environment".

"The whole system is in a state of denial," said Ariel Brunner, head of policy at Birdlife Europe. "Most agriculture ministers across Europe are just pushing for business as usual. The message is, keep the subsidies flowing."

Farm subsidies devour 38% of the EU budget and 80% of the subsidies go to just 20% of farmers, via "basic payments" which hand European landowners £39bn each year.

Because these payments are simply related to land area, big farmers receive more, can invest in more efficient food production – removing hedgerows to enlarge fields for instance – and put smaller, less intensive farmers out of business. France lost a quarter of its farm labourers in the first decade of the 21st century, while its average farm size continues to rise.

A smaller portion – £14.22bn annually – of EU farm subsidies support "greening" measures but basic payment rules work against wildlife-friendly farming: in Britain, farmers can't receive basic payments for land featuring ponds, wide hedges, salt marsh or regenerating woodland.

Signals from within the EU suggest that the next decade's CAP – which will be decided alongside the EU budget by 2019 – will continue to pay farmers a no-strings subsidy, while cash for "greening", or wildlife-friendly farming, may even be cut.

Birdlife Europe said the "greening" was mostly "fake environmental spending" and wildlife-friendly measures had been "shredded" by "loophole upon loophole" introduced by member states.

The greening has also been criticised by the European court of auditors, the EU's independent auditor charged with protecting the interests of EU taxpayers. In December, the auditor concluded that greening was "unlikely to provide significant benefits for the environment and climate" because it changed practices on just 5% of EU farmland.

"Member states use the flexibility in greening rules to limit the burden on farmers and themselves, rather than to maximise the expected environmental and climate benefit," it concluded.

This week the European court of auditors renewed its criticism of the CAP, highlighting "inherent limitations" in the basic payment scheme and "insufficient progress on environmental care and climate action".

Harriet Bradley, agriculture policy officer at Birdlife Europe, said: "It's a massive scandal but the farm lobby is so powerful it hasn't penetrated public consciousness."

This week studies revealed that the abundance of farmland birds in France had fallen by a third in 15 years - with population falls intensifying in the last two years. It's a pattern repeated across Europe: farmland bird abundance in 28 European countries has fallen by 55% over three decades, according to the European Bird Census Council. Conservationists say it's indicative of a wider crisis - particularly the decimation of insect life linked to neonicotinoid pesticides.

According to Prof Richard Gregory of the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science, there is a strong correlation between higher cereal yields and fewer farmland birds.

"It's a worrying signal that ecosystem health and function is being severely impacted by the changes in farming and the drive to use more intensive methods," said Gregory.

While the farm lobby argues increased yields are needed to feed the world, Gregory said the RSPB's management of a commercial arable farm, Hope Farm, in Cambridgeshire, has shown "you can have your cake and eat it".

Hope Farm is 90% commercial crops but after managing 10% for wildlife since 2000, breeding farmland birds have trebled, with linnet and skylark increasing by more than threefold.

A study of 60 English farms in the highest level of EU agri-environment scheme found that 12 of 17 priority farmland bird species increased in abundance between 2008 and 2014, against a 56% national decline since 1970.

But farmers are critical of how they the EU pays them to help wildlife while simultaneously incentivising them to destroy it. Isabella Tree, the author of *Wilding*, a study of her and her husband's rewilding of their 3,500-acre dairy and arable farm in West Sussex, said the EU farm subsidy system was "crazy".

"Being paid to reverse what you're being incentivised to do on the other hand is just bonkers," she said. EU subsidies kept them farming in the 1990s, when it was "the wrong thing for this land and completely unsustainable". Since rewilding their farm, 16 singing male turtle doves - Britain's most endangered farmland bird - have returned to breed.

According to Tree, a “silver lining” of Brexit is the opportunity to devise a UK system that rewards sustainable farming. She believes that farms could be incentivised to create “pop-up” rewilding on parcels of land for 25-year periods, creating a rotational system of wildlife-rich scrub which also restores soil, allowing farmers to return one patch to agricultural land again and rewild another.

“Rewilding is not an enemy of farming – it boosts populations of pollinating insects and restores soil,” said Tree. “We hope the government will accept the idea of rewilding as an easy, cheap and powerful way to restore your soil, and providing scrub habitat for wildlife.”
Source: theguardian