

Making sense of the LULUCF Regulation: Much ado about nothing?

Annalisa Savaresi¹  | Lucia Perugini²  | Maria Vincenza Chiriaco² 

¹University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

²Euro-Mediterranean Centre on Climate Change Foundation, Viterbo, Italy

Correspondence

Email: annalisa.savaresi@stir.ac.uk

Abstract

The 2030 European Union (EU) climate and energy policy framework includes for the first time a dedicated instrument concerning greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF). The new LULUCF Regulation marks a significant expansion of the EU climate and energy *acquis*, with ramifications for other sensitive areas, such as agriculture, forestry and renewable energy. The Regulation has had a particularly troubled negotiation history. It has already been at the centre of litigation, and is set to be revisited and amended by 2021. This article assesses the role of the Regulation in the 2030 climate and energy policy framework, trying to make sense of its troubled history, with a view to ascertaining whether the scepticism with which it has been welcomed is justified.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF) activities can release greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere, acting as sources of emissions – for example when trees die as a result of deforestation, fires, pests, diseases or soil disturbances – or, conversely, store carbon – for example in biomass, in soils and in harvested wood products – thus acting as sinks. While globally the LULUCF sector is responsible for about 11 percent of total carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions,¹ in the European Union (EU) it is a net carbon sink.² Covering three quarters of the EU territory, in 2017 forests and agricultural land were estimated to offset about 7 percent of the EU's total GHG emissions, creating a net sink of about 284 million tonnes of CO₂.³

¹IPCC, *Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems, Summary for Policy Makers* (2019).

²This figure is based on 2016 data, as reported in: European Environment Agency (EEA), 'Annual European Union Greenhouse Gas Inventory 1990–2016 and Inventory Report 2018' (EEA 2018).

³European Union, '2019 National Inventory Report (NIR)' (2019) <<https://unfccc.int/documents/194921>>.

The 2019 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Land and Climate Change emphasizes that meeting the Paris Agreement's temperature goal will not be possible without radical changes in how land resources are utilized.⁴ Similarly, within the EU, the 2019 Communication 'The European Green Deal'⁵ sets the path towards a transition to a 'climate neutral' economy, which postulates deep decarbonization in all sectors by 2050, including LULUCF.

In spite of their important role in the global carbon cycle, however, until 2020 LULUCF activities in the EU did not count towards the achievement of the EU's climate change mitigation target. There were several reasons for this omission. The LULUCF sector has historically been regarded as difficult to regulate, and not only in the EU.⁶ Initially, there was a great deal of uncertainty over how to quantify LULUCF

⁴IPCC, *Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems* (2019).

⁵Commission (EU), 'The European Green Deal' (Communication) COM(2019) 640 final, 11 December 2019 (Green Deal Communication).

⁶See, e.g., K Dooley and A Gupta, 'Governing by Expertise: The Contested Politics of (Accounting for) Land-based Mitigation in a New Climate Agreement' (2017) 17 *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 483; JHA Krug, 'Accounting of GHG Emissions and Removals from Forest Management: A Long Road from Kyoto to Paris' (2018) 13 *Carbon Balance and Management* 1.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2021 The Authors. *Review of European, Comparative & International Environmental Law* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

emissions and removals, and how to measure their reductions and increases. The accounting of LULUCF emissions and removals posed specific methodological challenges concerning additionality and human-induced effects – that is, showing that mitigation efforts have gone beyond business-as-usual and that they are due to human activities. Forest carbon fluxes are affected by both natural and human-induced processes that occur simultaneously and are difficult to discern. The concern was therefore that any carbon ‘credits’ associated with natural processes – like forest growth – could be used to delay or avoid action to reduce emissions in other sectors, and thus undermine the integrity of countries’ accounts of their anthropogenic emissions and removals.⁷ Furthermore, the carbon stored in the terrestrial ecosystems can be released back to the atmosphere due to natural or anthropogenic disturbances (e.g. fires, storms, diseases, harvesting, etc.), endangering the permanence of the sink.

For these reasons, developing rules and methodologies for reporting emissions and removals from LULUCF activities has been a long and complex process, both at the international⁸ and at the EU level.⁹ At the international level, LULUCF emissions and removals are annually reported under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and partially accounted for under the Kyoto Protocol. At the EU level, the EU 2020 climate and energy package required Member States to report and account for LULUCF emissions and removals, largely in line with rules adopted under the Kyoto Protocol. As mentioned above, however, LULUCF credits or debits did not count towards the achievement of the EU’s 2020 climate change mitigation target.¹⁰

The 2030 EU climate and energy policy framework, instead, provides that the LULUCF sector will contribute, at least in part, to the achievement of the EU’s 2030 target. The LULUCF Regulation, therefore, lays down new rules for accounting LULUCF emissions and removals, and for assessing EU Member States’ compliance with these.¹¹ The Regulation was necessary to align the EU with the Paris Agreement’s requirements to establish economy-wide mitigation targets and to balance global anthropogenic GHG emissions by sources and removals by sinks in the second half of this century.¹² An exhaustive account of anthropogenic LULUCF emissions and removals is furthermore indispensable to monitor progress towards the

achievement of the long-term temperature goal enshrined in the Paris Agreement.¹³

The importance of the LULUCF Regulation can thus scarcely be overestimated. With it, the EU has become the first developed country party to the Paris Agreement to develop a comprehensive set of rules in a sector that was only partially regulated under the Kyoto Protocol.

The negotiations of the Regulation, however, were rife with complexity.¹⁴ This complexity related to four main factors. First, there were the specific technical challenges associated with measuring emissions and removals from LULUCF activities discussed above.¹⁵ Second, there were complexities associated with moving away from the piecemeal approach with which the sector had been regulated in the past – both in the EU and internationally. Third, regulating the LULUCF sector in the EU has ramifications in other politically sensitive areas of the *acquis* – such as agriculture, forestry and renewable energy from biomass – in which the EU has historically exercised only limited competences. Fourth, forest characteristics vary greatly between Member States. While in some Member States forests are actively managed for productive purposes, in others they play a predominantly protective role and have little economic importance. Negotiations of the LULUCF Regulation therefore exposed rifts between Member States’ interests, which made it difficult to agree on a common approach.

At the beginning, EU Member States were not clear on whether the Regulation was at all necessary.¹⁶ When they concluded it was,¹⁷ they struggled to agree on its contents. After much work and controversy, the Regulation received a lukewarm reception from experts and stakeholders alike.¹⁸ Civil society has described the Regulation as a ‘missed opportunity’¹⁹ and legal challenges against it have already been brought before the Court of Justice of the EU.

We have elsewhere analysed the background against which the Regulation was negotiated and adopted.²⁰ This article builds on that work to analyse the role of the LULUCF Regulation in the 2030 climate and energy policy framework. It tries to make sense of the troubled history of the Regulation, with the objective of ascertaining whether the scepticism with which it has been received is justified.

⁷G Grassi et al, ‘Science-based Approach for Credible Accounting of Mitigation in Managed Forests’ (2018) 13 Carbon Balance and Management 8.

⁸For an analysis, see A Savaresi and L Perugini, ‘Article 5: Sinks, Reservoirs of GHG and Forests’ in G Van Calster and L Reins (eds), *Commentary to the Paris Agreement* (Edward Elgar fc).

⁹For an analysis, see A Savaresi and L Perugini, ‘The Land Sector in the 2030 EU Climate Change Policy Framework: A Look at the Future’ (2019) 16 Journal for European Environmental and Planning Law 148.

¹⁰Decision (EU) 529/2013/EU on accounting rules on greenhouse gas emissions and removals resulting from activities relating to land use, land-use change and forestry and on information concerning actions relating to those activities [2013] OJ L165/80.

¹¹Regulation (EU) 2018/841 on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry in the 2030 climate and energy framework, and amending Regulation (EU) 525/2013 and Decision 529/2013/EU [2018] OJ L156/1 (LULUCF Regulation) art 1.

¹²Paris Agreement (adopted 12 December 2015, entered into force 4 November 2016) 55 ILM 740 art 4(1–2).

¹³See G Grassi et al, ‘Reconciling Global-model Estimates and Country Reporting of Anthropogenic Forest CO₂ Sinks’ (2018) 8 Nature Climate Change 914.

¹⁴Savaresi and Perugini (n 9) 149.

¹⁵See, e.g., JG Canadell et al, ‘Factoring Out Natural and Indirect Human Effects on Terrestrial Carbon Sources and Sinks’ (2007) 10 Environmental Science and Policy 370; Grassi et al (n 7).

¹⁶As reported in GJ Nabuurs et al, ‘A New Role for Forests and the Forest Sector in the EU Post-2020 Climate Targets’ (European Forest Institute 2015).

¹⁷European Council, ‘Conclusions, 23 and 24 October 2014’, EUCO 169/14, para 2.14.

¹⁸See, e.g., GJ Nabuurs, EJMM Arets and MJ Schelhaas, ‘Understanding the Implications of the EU-LULUCF Regulation for the Wood Supply from EU Forests to the EU’ (2018) 13 Carbon Balance and Management 18; AMI Kallio et al, ‘Economic Impacts of Setting Reference Levels for the Forest Carbon Sinks in the EU on the European Forest Sector’ (2018) 92 Forest Policy and Economics 193; B Solberg et al, ‘Grassi et al. Miss their Target’ (2019) 104 Forest Policy and Economics 157.

¹⁹See, e.g., H Aho, ‘The EU’s New LULUCF Regulation: Is it Fit for (Climate) Purpose?’ (Fern, 17 April 2018) <<https://fern.org/LULUCFRegulationResult>>.

²⁰Savaresi and Perugini (n 9).

The article opens with a short analysis of key provisions and innovations introduced by the LULUCF Regulation. It considers the rules that have proved to be most contentious so far, namely: those concerning forest reference levels and those concerning so-called flexibility arrangements. The article then explores overlaps between the LULUCF Regulation and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and the recast of the Renewable Energy Directive (RED), respectively. It concludes with a reflection on the role of the LULUCF Regulation in the 2030 climate and energy policy framework, and on reforms that may be enacted, in the context of the reform envisioned by the European Green Deal.

2 | THE LULUCF REGULATION IN A NUTSHELL

Already before the adoption of the Paris Agreement, the EU had decided to rely also on the LULUCF sector, as a means to achieve its economy-wide emission reduction target for the period 2021–2030.²¹ Accordingly, the EU's 2015 Intended Nationally Determined Contribution announced that specific rules for the LULUCF sector would be set, as soon as technical conditions allowed, and in any case before 2020.²²

The EU discarded the option of including the LULUCF sector in the EU emissions trading system (ETS) from the outset.²³ Inclusion in the ETS would have entailed subjecting land holdings to monitoring and reporting processes comparable to those for installations covered by the ETS. The European Commission regarded the development of a monitoring system for all types of land as impractical, arguing that it would be impossible to guarantee the compatibility and consistency of national accounting and reporting systems and to sustain the related monitoring and administrative costs.²⁴ At the same time, the LULUCF sector provided an opportunity to balance the low mitigation potential of the agriculture sector, where emissions – mainly from livestock and fertilization – are commonly deemed to be difficult to reduce, without repercussions on food production and security.²⁵

As a result of these challenges, the Commission identified two main options for bringing LULUCF emissions and removals into the 2030 EU climate and energy policy framework. The first

option was to include the LULUCF sector in the scope of the 'Regulation on binding annual greenhouse gas emission reductions by Member States from 2021 to 2030 contributing to climate action to meet commitments under the Paris Agreement' (the so-called Climate Action Regulation, CAR).²⁶ This covers the non-ETS sectors presently falling within the scope of the Effort Sharing Decision (ESD) for the period 2021–2030, for instance agriculture, transport, waste and buildings. The second option was to develop a separate, self-standing LULUCF pillar in EU climate policy.

After long debate, an intermediate approach was taken. The LULUCF Regulation introduced a new pillar in EU climate policy, with dedicated rules and the commitment that the LULUCF sector remains emissions 'neutral' in the period 2021–2030 – the so-called 'no-debit rule'.²⁷ However, the LULUCF pillar is connected to the CAR. This means that debits and credits from the LULUCF sector will contribute, to a certain extent, to the achievement of the emission reduction target set by the CAR.

When compared with the ESD, the inclusion of the LULUCF sector in the CAR is an important step forward. Under the ESD, only those agricultural activities that emit GHGs other than CO₂ – such as methane from livestock enteric fermentation or from rice pads, and nitrous dioxide from fertilizers and manure management – contributed to the EU 2020 mitigation target. Instead, the CAR mitigation target includes, to a certain extent, both emissions of GHG other than CO₂ from agriculture and GHG emissions and removals from LULUCF activities – which together form the so-called Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Uses (AFOLU) sector.

Specifically, the LULUCF Regulation requires Member States to account for emissions and removals from: managed forest land; land subject to deforestation, afforestation or reforestation activities in the past 20 years (or 30 years, if duly justified);²⁸ and cropland and managed grassland.²⁹ Wetland management activities will be accounted for starting from 2026.³⁰ Emissions and removals from harvested wood products – such as paper, panel and saw wood – are also accounted for. The Regulation allows Member States to exclude from their accounts emissions and removals caused by natural disturbances on forest land – like fires, storms, large pest outbreaks, etc. – but only according to specific criteria. To be excluded, emissions must be beyond certain thresholds, and the affected land should be georeferenced, tracked and not converted to other land uses after the disturbances have occurred.³¹

²¹European Council (n 17) para 2.14.

²²Submission by Latvia and the European Commission on behalf of the European Union and its Member States Riga, 6 March 2015, Intended Nationally Determined Contribution of the EU and its Member States' <<https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/ndcstaging/PublishedDocuments/European%20Union%20First/LV-03-06-EU%20INDC.pdf>>.

²³Commission (EU), 'Impact Assessment of the Directive amending Directive 2003/87/EC so as to improve and extend the EU greenhouse gas emission allowance trading system, COM(2008) 16 final; and Extended Impact Assessment on the Directive amending Directive establishing a scheme for greenhouse gas emission allowance trading within the Community in respect of the Kyoto Protocol's project based mechanisms' COM(2003) 403 final, 23 July 2003.

²⁴Commission (EU), 'Commission Staff Working Document, Impact Assessment on the role of land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) in the EU's climate change commitments' SWD(2012) 40 final, 12 March 2012 para 8.5.

²⁵European Council (n 17).

²⁶Regulation (EU) 2018/842 on binding annual greenhouse gas emission reductions by Member States from 2021 to 2030 contributing to climate action to meet commitments under the Paris Agreement and amending Regulation (EU) No 525/2013 [2018] OJ L156/26 (CAR).

²⁷LULUCF Regulation (n 11) art 4.

²⁸ibid art 6.

²⁹ibid art 7.

³⁰ibid.

³¹ibid art 10.

In sum, the LULUCF Regulation is an important step to better account for anthropogenic emissions and removals in the EU. The Regulation has increased the transparency and the comprehensiveness of accounting, establishing the conditions to keep better track of mitigation activities in the land sector, especially in managed forests. In spite of these undoubtedly positive developments, some rules in the Regulation were particularly contentious, and for this reason merit further consideration.

3 | THE CONTENTIOUS RULES

Similar to what happened when LULUCF rules were negotiated at the international level,³² EU negotiations over rules concerning the accounting of emissions and removals from managed forest land were particularly acrimonious and complex. Two subject matters were particularly contentious, namely: the rules for accounting emissions and removals from managed forests and for setting so-called 'forest reference levels'; and the fungibility of LULUCF credits and debits with debits and credits from other sectors, so-called 'flexibility arrangements'. This section therefore looks at these matters in detail.

3.1 | Rules on forest reference levels

Forest fluxes are determined by natural factors – such as rainfall, temperature variations, natural disturbances – and by human action – such as tree planting and harvesting. As a result, identifying fluxes that may be attributed to human action is not straightforward. In addition, the forest sector is characterized by long time frames, whereby current forest age structure and management are defined by past management choices, forest ecology and natural disturbances. For example, a country's forest stands could largely be at the harvesting age during a given commitment period. Using a base year approach, that country's account for normal management practices (harvesting at the end of the stand cycle) would result in a large carbon debit. Conversely, if the country undergoes significant harvesting in the base year, it would accrue a large sink in the commitment period, without implementing any mitigation measures.

These complexities have prompted experts to develop the so-called reference level approach to accounting for the effects of mitigation actions in the forest sector.³³ The reference level is a business-as-usual benchmark against which the forest fluxes are assessed. If forest management leads to a decrease in the sink when compared with the reference level, this results in 'debits'. Conversely,

if the sink increases above the reference level, then the difference will result in 'credits'.

The reference level approach was first applied in the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (2013–2020). The criteria adopted under the Kyoto Protocol,³⁴ however, left scope for diverging interpretations, allowing parties to set their reference levels in a way that may generate credits in the accounting process, which did not necessarily reflect a real change or improvement in management activities.³⁵ To address this concern, rules adopted under the Kyoto Protocol introduced a 'cap' – equal to 3.5 percent of the base year emissions, mostly referring to 1990 levels³⁶ – to limit credits from the LULUCF sector.

During the negotiations of the LULUCF Regulation, the matter of how to overcome the shortcomings derived from States' diverging interpretations of Kyoto rules was at the centre of a heated debate.³⁷ The European Commission suggested calculating reference levels on the basis of historical forest management practices, but considering future forest characteristics in terms of age-class structure.³⁸ Some viewed this as the most robust and verifiable approach.³⁹ Others, however, feared that this approach would curtail the economic potential of the forestry sector, engender GHG leakage – due to the sourcing of wood and biomass from outside the EU – and encourage the use of more emissions-intensive materials, like cement.⁴⁰

This debate concluded with the decision to calculate reference levels on the basis of the continuation of past forest management practices that were in place between 2000 and 2009. As a result, Member States' reference levels for the period 2021–2025 and 2026–2030 consist of an estimation of emissions and removals resulting from past forest management practices, considering forests' future age-class structure.⁴¹ This approach rewards countries that implement measures that increase forest sinks vis-à-vis past management practices.⁴² This arrangement places the LULUCF sector on an equal footing with the other sectors included in the CAR, whose emissions and removals are accounted for on the basis of deviations from past conditions.

EU Member States had to submit their proposed forest management reference levels for the period 2021–2025 by 31 December 2018.⁴³ These reference levels were reviewed by the Commission, in consultation with experts appointed by Member

³⁴UNFCCC 'Decision 2/CMP.7, Land Use, Land-use Change and Forestry' UN Doc FCCC/KP/CMP/2011/10/Add.1 (15 March 2012).

³⁵As argued in Grassi et al (n 7) 8.

³⁶Decision 2/CMP.7 (n 34).

³⁷Decision 529/2013/EU (n 10).

³⁸Commission (EU), 'Proposal for a Regulation on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry into the 2030 climate and energy framework and amending Regulation 525/2013 on a mechanism for monitoring and reporting greenhouse gas emissions' COM(2016) 479 final, 20 July 2016.

³⁹Grassi et al (n 7) 8.

⁴⁰Kallio et al (n 18); Solberg et al (n 18).

⁴¹LULUCF Regulation (n 11) art 8(5).

⁴²ibid art 8(3).

⁴³ibid.

³²ZE Bailey, 'Sink that Sank The Hague: A Comment on the Kyoto Protocol' (2002) 16 Temple International & Comparative Law Journal 103; Savaresi and Perugini (n 8).

³³Terrestrial Carbon Group, 'Tools for Setting Reference Emissions Levels' (2009) 2; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 'Decision 2/CMP.6, The Cancun Agreements: Land Use, Land-use Change and Forestry' UN Doc FCCC/KP/CMP/2010/12/Add.1 (15 March 2011).

States.⁴⁴ In June 2019, the Commission issued its assessment on Member States' proposed reference levels.⁴⁵ Virtually all Member States received recommendations to revise their reference levels. However, most recommendations did not require a change in the proposed reference levels, but simply consisted of requests for clarification. Member States' revised forest reference levels had to be submitted by 31 December 2019 and are currently under review by the Commission, with a view to be formally adopted by October 2020.

3.2 | Rules on flexibility arrangements

The LULUCF Regulation provides a set of 'flexibility arrangements' to provide a certain degree of fungibility of credits and debits generated by the LULUCF sector. This means that to a limited extent, debits and credits may be 'swapped' within the LULUCF categories and between sectors covered by the CAR (*inter-pillar flexibility*), within Member State's accounts (*intra-account flexibility*) and between Member State's accounts (*intra-pillar flexibility*).

First, net removals from the LULUCF sector can compensate emissions from other sectors included in the CAR, up to a point (*inter-pillar flexibility*).⁴⁶ To address the concern of a potential over-supply of credits, the contribution of the LULUCF sector to the achievement of the CAR target is capped to 280 million tons of CO₂ equivalent (MtCO₂-eq) of net removals for the period 2021–2030, which correspond to 1 percent of the annual ESD emissions in 2005. If, however, the LULUCF sector produces net emissions, other sectors covered by the CAR must compensate for LULUCF debits.

Second, Member States can use credits in one land-use category to compensate debits from other land uses, and also transfer spare removals from the 2021–2025 period to the 2026–2030 period (*intra-account flexibility*). The LULUCF Regulation enables compensating net debits deriving from increased logging in managed forests, which may thus not be included in the Member State's accounting balance. This however can only happen if emissions from the LULUCF sector do not exceed total removals at the EU level, and if the affected Member State demonstrates that it is implementing or has planned to implement measures to enhance its forest sink. In all events, net emissions can only be compensated up to a certain level, which varies from one Member State to another – ranging from –61.5 millions of CO₂-eq to –0.03 Mt CO₂-eq.⁴⁷ In total, 370 Mt CO₂ can be potentially compensated for at the EU level over the period

2021–2030, corresponding to 10 percent of the EU forest sink. An extra compensation budget of 10 million tons of CO₂ was granted specifically to Finland,⁴⁸ which has the highest percentage of forest area cover in the EU, with biomass contributing around 80 percent of its renewable energy production.⁴⁹

Finally, the LULUCF Regulation enables the transfer of credits from one Member State account to another, when a surplus of removals is generated, which goes beyond that which can be used to compensate emissions from CAR sectors (*intra-pillar flexibility*).⁵⁰

These flexibility arrangements have proven to be controversial. Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have argued that the LULUCF Regulation's flexibility arrangements potentially undermine the economic incentive to maintain the LULUCF sink, *de facto* allowing the forest industry to increase emissions.⁵¹ Another criticism concerns the possibility to use LULUCF removals to offset emissions in other sectors covered by the CAR, thus reducing the EU's overall level of ambition.

The Regulation has also already been at the centre of a legal dispute. The so-called *Peoples' Climate Case*⁵² asked the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) to order the EU to set aside three core instruments of the 2030 climate and energy framework, namely: the EU ETS Directive, the CAR and the LULUCF Regulation.⁵³ The applicants argued that these instruments lack ambition, and asked the CJEU to order the EU to adopt and implement more stringent measures to reduce GHG emissions.⁵⁴ The applicants further argued that the no-debit rule enshrined in the LULUCF Regulation fails to create an incentive for the EU to increase its sink. They also specifically criticized the flexibility arrangements, maintaining that they had an effect of 'diluting' the targets set by the CAR.⁵⁵ In line with its established case law, in May 2019 the CJEU rejected the case on admissibility grounds, arguing that the applicants 'are not sufficiently and directly affected by these policies' to instigate

⁴⁸ibid art 13(4).

⁴⁹Eurostat, 'Renewable Energy Statistics' <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Renewable_energy_statistics#Renewable_energy_produced_in_the_EU_increased_by_two_thirds_in_2007-2017>.

⁵⁰ibid.

⁵¹Fern, 'Fern Analysis of the EU's LULUCF Regulation' (April 2018) <https://www.fern.org/fileadmin/uploads/fern/Documents/Analysis%20of%20trilogue%20outcome%20on%20LULUCF%20Regulation_final_0.pdf>.

⁵²Case T-330/18, *Carvalho and Others v Parliament and Council*, ECLI:EU:T:2019:324. See S Bogojevic, 'Human Rights of Minors and Future Generations: Global Trends and EU Environmental Law Particularities' (2020) 29 *Review of European, Comparative and International Environmental Law* 191.

⁵³Directive 2018/410 amending Directive 2003/87/EC to enhance cost-effective emission reductions and low-carbon investments, and Decision (EU) 2015/1814 [2018] OJ L76/3; Regulation 2018/842 on binding annual greenhouse gas emission reductions by Member States from 2021 to 2030 contributing to climate action to meet commitments under the Paris Agreement and amending Regulation (EU) No 525/2013 [2018] OJ L156/26; Regulation 2018/841 of on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry in the 2030 climate and energy framework, and amending Regulation (EU) No 525/2013 and Decision No 529/2013/EU [2018] OJ L165/1.

⁵⁴Carvalho and Others, *Application* (2018) <<https://peoplesclimatecase.caneurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/application-delivered-to-european-general-court.pdf>> para 35.

⁵⁵ibid paras 264–267.

⁴⁴ibid art 8(6).

⁴⁵Commission (EU), 'Assessment of the National Forestry Accounting Plans Regulation (EU) 2018/841 on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry in the 2030 climate and energy framework, and amending Regulation (EU) 525/2013 and Decision 529/2013/EU Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission, United in delivering the Energy Union and Climate Action – Setting the foundations for a successful clean energy transition' COM(2019) 285 final, 18 June 2019.

⁴⁶CAR (n 26) art 7. See the analysis in Savaresi and Perugini (n 9) 162.

⁴⁷LULUCF Regulation (n 11) Annex VII.

litigation.⁵⁶ The applicants have nevertheless lodged an appeal against the Court's decision.⁵⁷

4 | RAMIFICATIONS FOR OTHER KEY AREAS OF THE EU ACQUIS

The subject matter of the LULUCF Regulation closely intersects with that of other EU law and policy instruments dealing with agriculture and forestry, most saliently the CAP and the RED. This section therefore looks at these intersections and at their complexities in greater detail, as well as at the implications of the reform associated with the Green Deal Communication.

4.1 | Common Agricultural Policy

The CAP has long been the main EU law and policy instrument in the agriculture and forestry sectors. Launched in 1962, the CAP was not initially conceived with specific environmental objectives in mind. The aim was rather that to provide affordable food for EU citizens, while supporting farmers' income. Climate-change-related concerns have however been gradually incorporated into the CAP, and the 2003 and 2013 reforms attempted to promote more climate-friendly agriculture.

The CAP for the period 2013–2020 includes climate change mitigation and adaptation objectives for agriculture and forestry. Still, it does not set specific targets for emissions reductions or increases in carbon sinks, but rather sets minimum financial thresholds for investments in climate action in agriculture. Regulation 1307/2013 asks that 30 percent of the total expenditure on direct payments for each Member State be used to support agricultural practices beneficial to the climate and the environment – so-called greening measures. These include crop diversification, the maintenance of permanent grassland and the establishment of ecological focus areas.⁵⁸

Similarly, Regulation 1305/2013 specifically includes the aim to promote less intensive agricultural practices, by limiting emissions from activities such as livestock production, fertilizer use, and by preserving carbon sinks and enhancing carbon sequestration from the LULUCF sector.⁵⁹ Between 2014 and 2020, Member States must spend a minimum of 30 percent of the funds they receive from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development on climate and environmental measures, and at least 5 percent on

so-called links between the rural economy and development actions. These requirements are in line with the ambition to devote at least 20 percent of the EU budget to climate change objectives.⁶⁰

A 2019 study commissioned by the European Commission on the impact of the CAP on GHG emissions found that, while the sector had made efforts to improve sustainability, more needed to be done to make EU agriculture climate-friendly.⁶¹ The study estimates that greening measures have reduced agricultural GHG emissions by 2 percent, while rural development programmes have contributed to a reduction of emissions by 1.5 percent per year. These estimates must however be taken with caution, given that they were produced on the back of limited data on GHG fluxes in the agriculture and forestry sectors, especially in relation to soil management. Some NGOs have furthermore contested the actual climate impacts of some CAP measures.⁶²

Therefore, while so far the CAP has produced some emission reductions, these are rather limited, especially if one considers the significant financial investment made. For these reasons, it is crucial to better align the CAP with other instruments included in the 2030 EU climate and energy policy framework.

In 2018, the European Commission presented proposals for the 2021–2027 CAP.⁶³ These proposals set out to make the CAP more responsive to current and future challenges, including more ambitious action on the environment and climate change. In particular, the proposals aim to: contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as sustainable energy production; foster the sustainable development and efficient management of natural resources; and contribute to the protection of biodiversity, to enhanced ecosystem services and to the preservation of habitats and landscapes.⁶⁴ The proposals include the provision of farm advisory services focused on climate objectives – so-called *eco-schemes* – and an enlarged set of behavioural rules for environmental protection that farmers must comply with – so-called *conditionality*.

The proposals suggest the adoption of good farming practices and standards – known as Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions and Statutory Management Requirements. The Good

⁵⁶Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013 of 17 December 2013 on the financing, management and monitoring of the Common Agricultural Policy and repealing Regulations (EEC) No 352/78, (EC) No 165/94, (EC) No 2799/98, (EC) No 814/2000, (EC) No 1290/2005 and (EC) No 485/2008 [2013] OJ L347/549 art 110(b).

⁵⁷D Mottershead et al, *Evaluation Study of the Impact of the CAP on Climate Change and Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Final Report* (2019) <http://publications.europa.eu/publication/n/manifestation_identifier/PUB_KF0418460ENN>.

⁵⁸D Bartz et al, 'Agriculture Atlas' (Heinrich Boell Stiftung 2019) <https://www.foeue.rope.org/sites/default/files/agriculture/2019/agriculture_atlas_2019_final_0.pdf>.

⁵⁹Commission (EU), 'Proposal for a Regulation establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 and Regulation (EU) No 1307/2013' COM(2018) 392 final, 1 June 2018; and Commission (EU), 'Proposal for a Regulation on the financing, management and monitoring of the Common Agricultural Policy and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013' COM(2018) 393 final, 1 June 2018.

⁶⁰*ibid*.

⁵⁶*ibid*.

⁵⁷Carvalho and Others, *Appeal* (2019) <<https://peoplesclimatecase.caneurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/appeal-carvalho-and-council-and-parliament.pdf>>.

⁵⁸Regulation (EU) No 1307/2013 establishing rules for direct payments to farmers under support schemes within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy and repealing Regulation (EC) No 637/2008 and Regulation (EC) No 73/2009 [2013] OJ L347/608.

⁵⁹Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 [2013] OJ L347/487.

Agricultural and Environmental Conditions would set standards for climate change mitigation and adaptation; for addressing water challenges, and delivering soil protection and quality, biodiversity and landscape. The Statutory Management Requirements would link the CAP to wider EU legislation on the environment, public health, animal health, plant health and animal welfare. The proposed Statutory Management Requirements include requirements to respect obligations under the Habitats Directive,⁶⁵ the Birds Directive,⁶⁶ the Nitrates Directive,⁶⁷ and elements of the Water Framework Directive⁶⁸ and Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive.⁶⁹ If these proposals come to pass, the 2021–2027 CAP may therefore incentivize and stimulate sustainable and climate-friendly land uses in the EU more vigorously than its predecessors.

4.2 | Renewable Energy Directive

The use of bioenergy on farms and in rural areas and the supply of bioenergy from agriculture and forestry is encouraged both by the CAP⁷⁰ and by the RED.⁷¹ At present, EU forests supply more than 60 percent of all EU domestic biomass for energy purposes.⁷² However, starting with 2021, bioenergy demands will need to align with the 'no-debit rule' set by the LULUCF Regulation.

In spite of the accounting rules introduced by the LULUCF Regulation, implementation of the RED could still lead to perverse outcomes. This concern arises from the fact that neither the RED nor the LULUCF Regulation properly account for emissions from the burning of wood fuels. For example, if a country's forest management for 2000–2009 and future age classes allow for an increase in forest harvests for bioenergy purposes, this increase will be included in the reference level, and not be accounted for. The LULUCF Regulation's flexibility arrangements allow for an increase in logging beyond the reference level, and Member States do not need to completely account for this, as far as the criteria enshrined in the Regulation are satisfied. In fact, as explained above, the LULUCF Regulation enables compensating net debits deriving from increased logging in managed forests up to a certain

limit, thus not fully accounting for emissions generated by forest biomass used for bioenergy use.

This point is demonstrated by a 2018 study, which estimated that the EU may increase forest harvest from 420 million m³ in 2000–2009 to 560 million m³ in 2050, without creating any debits.⁷³ The study flagged the risk that some Member State may harvest at a rate that is greater than the annual forest increment. This would in turn mean that the woody stock accumulated in the previous years would be used up, with a negative annual carbon stock balance. To ensure that the EU carbon stock increases, the study suggested a sustainability criterion for harvesting a maximum of 90 percent of the annual increment for each country.⁷⁴

The 2018 recast of the RED Directive already asks Member States using biofuels produced from forest biomass to comply with certain criteria, including preserving and enhancing carbon stocks and sinks, and providing evidence that reported LULUCF-sector emissions do not exceed removals. Whether these criteria will actually be sufficient to ensure the carbon integrity of the EU's forest harvests in future, however, remains to be seen.

In the meantime, the sustainability of the biomass regime delivered by the interplay between the recast of the RED Directive and of the LULUCF Regulation is at the centre of another legal dispute before the CJEU. The *Biomass Case* filed in 2019⁷⁵ challenged the treatment of forest biomass in EU law. Specifically, the applicants argue that the recast of the RED will increase harvesting pressure on forests in the EU to meet the growing demand for woody biomass. They therefore maintain that the RED may lead to increases in CO₂ emissions from burning wood fuels, which would not be properly accounted for. The applicants further allege that considering forest biomass as a source of renewable energy is incompatible with the environmental objectives set out in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU.⁷⁶ They contend that the inclusion of forest biomass in the Directive violates the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU,⁷⁷ with each applicant alleging that they have already suffered, and will continue to suffer, direct harms from the implementation of the Directive's provisions. At the time of writing, the CJEU is in the process of deciding whether to hear the case.

4.3 | The Green Deal Communication

In December 2019, during the United Nations Climate Conference in Madrid, the European Commission launched its 'European Green Deal' to tackle climate and environmental challenges. This policy document includes the specific objective to make of the EU 'the first climate neutral continent', with no net emissions of GHGs in 2050

⁶⁵Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora [1992] OJ L206/7.

⁶⁶Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds [2010] OJ L20/7.

⁶⁷Directive 91/676/EEC concerning the protection of waters against pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources [1991] OJ L375/1.

⁶⁸Directive 2000/60/EC establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy [2000] OJ L327/1.

⁶⁹Directive 2009/128/EC establishing a framework for Community action to achieve the sustainable use of pesticides [2009] OJ L309/71.

⁷⁰European Commission, 'Common Agriculture Policy and Bioenergy' <<https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/sustainability-and-natural-resources/bioenergy/cap-and-bioenergy>>.

⁷¹Directive 2018/2001 on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources [2018] OJ L328/82.

⁷²European Commission (n 70).

⁷³Nabuurs et al (n 18).

⁷⁴ibid.

⁷⁵Case T-141/19, *Sabo and Others v Parliament and Council* <<http://eubiomasscase.org/>>.

⁷⁶Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [2012] OJ C326/47 art 191(1).

⁷⁷Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union [2012] OJ C326/2, 391 arts 32 and 57.

and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use.⁷⁸ To this end, the document outlines a roadmap, which includes the target to reduce GHG emissions by at least 50 percent, and possibly towards 55 percent, by 2030 compared with 1990 levels.

Achieving the climate goals envisioned in the Green Deal will require a deep cut in emissions in all sectors. The LULUCF sector is set to play a key role in this connection, by compensating emissions that cannot be reduced, such as those linked with food production and waste. For this reason, the Green Deal roadmap provides for the revision of elements of the 2030 climate and energy policy framework, including the LULUCF Regulation and the RED.⁷⁹ While these proposals will not be published until June 2021, in March 2020 the Commission published a proposal for a Regulation establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality.⁸⁰ The proposal specifies that the EU sink of forests, soils, agricultural lands and wetlands should be maintained and further increased.⁸¹

Beyond the revision of the 2030 climate and energy policy framework, the Green Deal Communication envisions transformational changes in food, agriculture and forestry, in order to protect and improve the EU's natural capital. Accordingly, the Communication announces the launch of a 'Farm to Fork Strategy', with the objectives to provide affordable and sustainable food; tackle climate change; protect the environment; preserve biodiversity; and increase organic farming.⁸²

The Communication envisions that, under the new CAP to be launched in 2022, national strategic plans for agriculture will support sustainable practices, such as precision agriculture, organic farming, agro-ecology, agro-forestry and stricter animal welfare standards. The idea is to 'reward farmers for improved environmental and climate performance', including managing and storing carbon in soils, improving nutrient management to support water quality and to reduce emissions.⁸³

The new CAP is furthermore expected to incentivize forest managers to preserve, grow and manage forests sustainably.⁸⁴ Simultaneously, the new EU Forest Strategy, to be introduced in 2020, is expected to support effective afforestation, forest preservation and restoration, to help increase the absorption of CO₂, reduce forest fires and promote the bio-economy.⁸⁵ The external dimension of forestry will also be targeted, with the revision of the Communication 'Stepping Up EU Action to Protect and Restore the World's Forests',⁸⁶ in order to promote the import of products and

value chains that do not involve deforestation and forest degradation.⁸⁷

While the devil typically is in the details, at least on paper the Green Deal could engender a veritable revolution in EU forestry, agriculture and land uses. How these sweeping changes will be implemented, both at the EU and at the Member State level, remains to be seen. What seems clear is that the 2020–2030 decade is set to change beyond recognition the EU's approach to the LULUCF sector.

5 | CONCLUSION

The LULUCF sector is key to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, as prescribed by the Paris Agreement. The design of robust rules to account for variations in emissions and removals is therefore essential. By this measure, the LULUCF Regulation is an important step to better account for anthropogenic emissions and removals in the EU. The Regulation has increased transparency and the comprehensiveness of accounting, establishing the conditions to keep better track of mitigation activities in the forest sector, with much improved criteria for setting reference levels. The Regulation has also taken the largely overdue step to enable the LULUCF sector to contribute to the EU's mitigation target, even if only to a very limited extent.

Yet, the LULUCF Regulation presents manifest shortcomings. First, the Regulation fails to fully capture emissions and removals from EU forests, due to the operation of the complex rules limiting the use of forest credits, and to the possibility to compensate net debits from forest management at the level of individual Member States. This is a significant shortcoming, as the Paris Agreement requires parties to account for anthropogenic emissions and removals in a transparent, accurate, complete, comparable and consistent manner.⁸⁸

Second, in spite of the key role that the LULUCF sector is expected to play in achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, the LULUCF Regulation does very little to incentivize virtuous forest management in the EU. Limits set for the LULUCF sector's contribution to the achievement of the EU's target in the 2030 climate and energy policy framework were understandable, given the relatively modest mitigation target originally envisioned. The review of the LULUCF Regulation announced in the Green Deal will hopefully provide an opportunity to better tap into the sector's sizeable mitigation potential, now that the EU has decided to significantly increase its level of ambition for 2030.

Third, the review of the RED and of the LULUCF Regulation announced by the Green Deal should address once and for all the perverse incentives associated with the use of biomass in the EU. The reform of the RED could include better and more stringent sustainability criteria and safeguards against leakage. Failing this, there is a serious risk that by the end of the decade the EU forest sector may turn into a source, rather than a sink of emissions.

⁷⁸Green Deal Communication (n 5) 1.

⁷⁹ibid Annex.

⁸⁰Commission (EU), 'Proposal for a Regulation Establishing the Framework for Achieving Climate Neutrality and Amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1999 (European Climate Law)', COM(2020) 80 final, 4 March 2020.

⁸¹ibid 7.

⁸²ibid 12.

⁸³ibid.

⁸⁴ibid 12–14.

⁸⁵ibid 15.

⁸⁶Commission (EU), 'Stepping Up EU Action to Protect and Restore the World's Forests' (Communication) COM(2019) 352 final, 23 July 2019.

⁸⁷Green Deal Communication (n 5) 14.

⁸⁸Paris Agreement (n 12) art 4(13).

In this connection, the overlaps between the LULUCF Regulation and the CAP may prove to be a blessing or a curse. If the Green Deal manages to fully integrate climate action into the CAP, better and more accurate data collection concerning emissions and removals from agriculture will be crucial to monitor progress and reward farmers that engage in virtuous behaviour, and penalize those who do not. The robustness of the accounting rules in the LULUCF Regulation will be crucial in this connection, and again the review envisioned by the Green Deal provides a welcome opportunity to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

These considerations leave us with a half-full, half-empty glass picture. Only the upcoming reform of the 2030 climate and energy policy framework and its subsequent implementation will reveal whether the shortcomings highlighted in this article will undermine the carbon integrity of the LULUCF pillar, or, worse, of the whole framework. For the time being, it seems fair to acknowledge that some concerns do exist, that they cannot be easily resolved, and that the LULUCF Regulation has been a first step to address these. With the Green Deal, EU Member States have given themselves an opportunity to revisit the 2030 architecture and to deliver more ambitious climate action. They will hopefully use this opportunity wisely and address the concerns raised by experts and civil society, and bolster the environmental and carbon integrity of the 2030 framework, while delivering much-needed enhanced climate action.

ORCID

Annalisa Savaresi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4255-3696>

Lucia Perugini  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7539-9528>

Maria Vincenza Chiriaco  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9662-914X>

Annalisa Savaresi, PhD, is Senior Lecturer in Environmental Law at Stirling University, Scotland. She has several years' experience researching, teaching and working with environmental law. Her research focuses on climate change, renewable energy, environmental liability, and the interplay between environmental and human rights law. She has extensively researched law and policy measures to reduce emissions from land uses, and her work has been published in numerous peer-reviewed outlets and widely cited. Annalisa has taught at institutions all over the world, including the University of Edinburgh, the University of Copenhagen and the University of La Sabana, Colombia. She regularly serves as a consultant for international organizations and think tanks, and advises governments and governmental bodies. She is a member of the IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law, Director for Europe of the Global Network for the Study of Human Rights and the Environment, and associate editor of the *Review of European, Comparative and International Environmental Law*.

Lucia Perugini is a senior scientific manager at CMCC Foundation (Italy). Her scientific background is in forestry and climate change. Since 2003 she has been involved in the UNFCCC negotiations, as part of the Italian delegation, dealing with issues related to LULUCF and REDD+. Expert in GHG inventories in the land sector, she contributes to the compilation of the National Inventory Report of Italy (2018, 2019). She is currently active in several national and European research projects related to the carbon cycle in forestry and agriculture ecosystems and relevant links between the scientific and policy communities (e.g. EU FP7 project LUC4C 2013–2017; H2020 project VERIFY 2018–2022).

Maria Vincenza Chiriaco, PhD, is a researcher at CMCC Foundation (Italy) working on the role of agro-forest ecosystems in the carbon cycle. She is an expert in sustainable management of agro-forestry systems in view of mitigation and adaptation to climate change, and works on several national and international projects related to the sustainability of agricultural and forestry policies. She is also an expert of rural development policies and tools of environmental sustainability such as the life-cycle assessment (LCA) applied to agricultural areas and farming enterprises. As an expert in GHG inventories in the land sector, she is involved in the compilation of the National Inventory Report of Italy (2018, 2019). She is one of the authors of the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC.

How to cite this article: Savaresi A, Perugini L, Chiriaco MV. Making sense of the LULUCF Regulation: Much ado about nothing?. *RECIEL*. 2020;29:212–220. <https://doi.org/10.1111/reel.12332>