Sustainable Carbon Cycles

2022/2053(INI) - 21/03/2023 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety adopted an own-initiative report by Alexander BERNHUBER (EPP, AT) on sustainable carbon cycles.

General considerations

In its communication on sustainable carbon cycles, published on 14 December 2021, the Commission proposes sustainable solutions for increasing carbon removals from the atmosphere. If the EU is to offset the effects of its CO2 emissions, it will have to significantly reduce its dependence on fossil carbon, upscale carbon farming to store more carbon in nature and promote industrial solutions to sustainably and verifiably remove and recycle carbon. Removing and storing more carbon, from the atmosphere, oceans and coastal wetlands, is essential to achieve the EUs legally binding commitment to become climate neutral by 2050, as outlined in the European Green Deal.

The report stressed that the EU should aim to achieve negative emissions as well as emission reductions. While welcoming the Commission's plan on how carbon offsets can help achieve net negative emissions, Members called on the Commission to define a list of practices with the highest absorption potential, which is important for farmers, and to invest more in developing accessible and affordable carbon-removal technologies. Members stressed that removals should be counted towards a separate removal target to ensure that they do not slow down economy-wide decarbonisation efforts.

The report stressed that agriculture and forestry should play a significant role in achieving the EU's carbon removal target for the land-use sector and, like all economic sectors, should contribute to the EU's climate neutrality objective. Healthy natural ecosystems can be an important source of long-term removals.

Carbon farming

The report stressed that the growing interest in carbon farming should be an opportunity for farmers to transform their business model and should allow for better rewards for farmers who engage in a transition to sustainable agroecological agroforestry practices. Carbon farming can be a voluntary activity. Therefore, financial rewards for carbon farming should compensate farmers and foresters for additional efforts beyond their obligations under EU and Member State legislation.

Members considered that carbon farming should be developed on the basis of a credible and effective policy framework, taking into account the need for a clear set of rules for farmers and foresters who decide to implement carbon farming practices.

The report stressed the need to keep in mind the different starting points of Member States and farmers, and insisted on the need to ensure equitable opportunities for farmers and foresters in carbon farming across the EU. It calls for the integration of carbon farming into the forthcoming CAP national strategy plans, in line with Member States' assessments and needs.

Blue carbon

Stressing that the blue carbon economy has great potential to contribute to CO2 storage in coastal regions, the report encouraged the Commission to collect more data on blue carbon sequestration and storage.

Members recalled the need to map marine and freshwater ecosystems. They reaffirmed Parliament's position on extending the scope of the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) regulation to include greenhouse gas emissions and removals from marine, coastal and freshwater ecosystems, and to apply specific targets to these emissions and removals.

CCS and CCU

Members believe that more needs to be done to significantly reduce the environmental footprint of current carbon capture technologies, particularly with regard to energy and water use.

The report highlighted that solutions based on CO2 capture and storage (CCS) and CO2 capture and utilisation (CCU) technologies can play a role in decarbonisation, especially for the mitigation of process emissions in industry, for those Member States that opt for these technologies. The Commission is urged to put in place an efficient and reliable system of traceability of captured CO2, distinguishing between carbon capture on site and from the atmosphere to avoid double counting and to safeguard the integrity of removals.

Members noted that carbon storage is not allowed in all Member States and that Member States are free to decide whether or not to authorise the geological storage of CO2 on their territory. They called on the Commission and Member States to sufficiently document the long-term effects of carbon storage in areas with geological storage capacity and to support research to obtain more data on the overall environmental impact, energy efficiency, social acceptability, economic costs and risk of leakage and geological perturbations, before its large-scale deployment.

Funding carbon cycling

Members recalled that public funding under CAP, revenues generated by the EU Emissions Trading Scheme and funds from other EU programmes such as LIFE, the Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Just Transition Fund, can already support carbon sequestering and biodiversity-positive approaches in forests and agricultural lands and should be further targeted for that purpose.

The report called on the Commission to review current funding options to reward practices with scientifically proven climate and environmental benefits that lead to long-term and sustainable increase in carbon sequestration in soils and other biogenic carbon pools while ensuring societal co-benefits. Research and innovation concerning sustainable carbon cycles should be encouraged and financed, using different EU financial instruments, such as the LIFE and Horizon Europe programmes or the Innovation Fund.

Knowledge sharing and cooperation

The report highlighted the need for increased cooperation, exchange of information and sharing of best practices between stakeholders to promote better knowledge and understanding of opportunities and risks in the implementation of carbon cycling initiatives. The Commission and Member States should promote knowledge transfer through targeted training and education programmes, along with access to advisory services to increase the uptake of carbon farming by land managers, farmers and foresters. International cooperation with third countries and international institutions should be encouraged to promote sustainable carbon removals at the global level.