

Rural planning

Since the beginning of the 1970s, rural France has undergone major change in land use, population distribution and land development. To accommodate these changes and ensure that rural development takes place in a sustainable context, tools in the form of legislation and incentives have been introduced at both national and European level. The main agricultural policy guidelines impacting the utilisation of land and its development are presented below, as is the impact of the common agricultural policy and the biomass plan.

French rural development policy

French rural development policy is aimed at providing concrete support for the development of rural areas, currently undergoing rapid change. It takes account of their diversity and strives to tailor tools to the specific situation of each area. The existing tools are both national and community-level instruments.

The law on the development of rural areas

Law No. 2005-157 of 23 February 2005 on the development of rural areas (LDTR) is the first legislative text specifically dedicated to rural areas, with the goal of refocusing national regional development policy on the full range of rural areas. In this context it is part of more global public action taken on rural areas.

The inter-ministerial (fifteen signatory ministries) scope and the scale and diversity of the provisions of the LDTR (240 articles in 8 sections) reflect the wide variety of situations and issues for which the government and the parliament have proposed solutions in order to meet the expectations of rural France. The law as passed makes a toolkit available to rural stakeholders, enabling them to develop their projects and their rural areas.

The structure of the LDTR is based on a number of main objectives. First, support for economic development, especially in areas with declining populations, and measures to boost employment and enhance existing buildings so as to improve the housing offer and encourage people to start up businesses and take over existing ones. The law further guarantees a better supply and equality of access to services to populations, because this is essential to economic appeal, quality of life and more broadly equal opportunities for the French. It aims, moreover, to conserve specific or sensitive areas (peri-urban zones, mountains, pasturage, forests and wetlands) and to protect the environment by clarifying the Natura 2000 programme and extending the land use planning system. Finally, the law reinforces the intervention capacity of certain public establishments in rural areas.

The European framework and changes in structural funds

Strengthening the appeal of rural areas is also supported by two major European policies: the rural development policy within the second pillar of the CAP and the economic, social and territorial cohesion policy.

With respect to the first, intervention opportunities are focused on four fundamental areas:

- improving the competitiveness of agriculture, food products and forestry;
- improving land management;
- diversifying the rural economy and quality of life in rural areas;
- implementing local LEADER development strategies.

The economic, social and territorial cohesion policy, for its part, aims to improve the competitiveness of all areas through three major priorities: the knowledge and innovation economy, environment and risk prevention, transport and communication. One of the main objectives of this policy will be to reduce the digital divide so as to provide rural areas with equal opportunities.

Study of the causes of rural exodus and elaboration of policies aimed at reversing the trend

There may be grounds for questioning the pre-conceived concept of uniform rural exodus. Indeed, "rurbanisation" is a growing trend, given the desire of new workers to enjoy quality of

life more in tune with their aspirations (safety, space, nearby recreation) and income (increase in urban property prices); annual census adjustment surveys carried out by Insee illustrate the phenomenon. Only 4 rural *départements* exhibited a real population decline in 1999, due to the negative effects of natural decrease and net migration.

Main economic growth and social development factors in rural areas (agriculture, creation of small and medium-sized enterprises, employment and other non-farm activities, for example)

Farming is no longer the dominant economic activity in France, either in terms of jobs or of added value. But it remains the activity that structures space and occupies the majority (55%) share of the territory.

Agriculture, undergoing rapid change, directly employs over one million workers. Farmers are on average younger and better trained than the rest of the population. Their farms retain a family dimension but are evolving into genuine enterprises that are better structured and increasingly attentive to quality of production and environmental issues.

Downstream of production, the food processing industry is one of the leading sectors in France. It is present throughout rural areas, where it accounts for nearly two million jobs. Forestry activities have moderate economic weight but lend real impetus to the rural economy and play a major role in the land occupancy and land-use planning. The manufacturing sector represents, in addition to food processing, an increasing proportion of rural employment and is present in most rural areas. Meanwhile the personal care services sector is expanding rapidly as a result of the increase in population under way in many rural areas and the ageing of the population. The growing mobility of urban dwellers fosters the development of a tourism offering in rural areas, both agri-tourism (on-farm holiday accommodation) and conventional tourism (recreational facilities, conventional accommodation).

Improving access to services and facilities in rural areas (suitable housing, education, jobs, health care and sanitation, etc.)

Basic rural infrastructure needs are ensured across the entire country, and mobile telephones and high-speed Internet are available in virtually all municipalities. Apart from network renewal, progress is now primarily qualitative (level of sewage treatment, quality of electricity supply, etc.).

Financial and tax incentives specific to rural areas are devoted to rental housing and housing for seasonal workers, farm labourers and apprentices. The improvement in access to rural services and facilities is pursued with a view to territorial equity and improving the appeal of these areas to foster their development. Improvement is based in particular on pooling and combining the varied service offering, with, in particular, grouping and one-stop provision of social and employment services, as well as health care professionals (public service houses of relays, job houses, medical houses, etc.). The extended possibility of obtaining on-line information on services, especially in the agricultural sphere, is also a factor in enhancing access to services.

More systematic analysis of local needs and earlier coordination with and among local authorities make it possible to better adapt the service offering, improve its quality and make it a part of balanced rural land-use planning.

Improving access to reliable and affordable energy services, modern technologies applied to biomass and firewood; commercial biomass activities in rural areas

The sustainable use of biomass is an environmental necessity and an economic opportunity: it opens new paths toward a sustainable development of agriculture and forestry, creates jobs and alleviates the energy and environmental constraints weighing on the economy.

France has embarked on the development of sectors complementing the agricultural and food sector: biofuel for transport, heat and power and bioproducts and biomaterials with their many applications: wood derivatives, bioplastics, solvents, lubricants, plant fibres, organic fertilizers, etc.

The "Biofuel Plan", launched in 2004 and reinforced in 2005 by the government, aims at achieving the inclusion of 7% biofuel by 2010. This objective, which is both ambitious and realistic, places France in the European vanguard. The programme represents 30,000 jobs in France, both in the agricultural and industrial sectors. In order to further improve energy efficiency, environmental balance and yield of biofuels without directly competing with demand for food, France will experiment with the production of so-called "second-generation" biofuels from wood and whole plants: biological ethanol and synthetic biodiesel via the thermochemical process.

For heat and power biofuel sectors, the goal is to raise the share of biomass in final heat consumption in France to 15% by 2012 and to triple the amount of co-generated power from these resources.

The industrial use of biomass as materials or plant-based chemicals also holds out major prospects for the environment, agricultural and forestry outlets, innovation and industrial development in France. A "strategic plan for plant chemistry and biomaterials" was prepared in early 2007 to foster the use of renewable raw materials to replace fossil raw materials in these sectors. The government's policy on sustainable use of biomass is being implemented by large industrial groups and small and medium sized enterprises throughout the country. This policy supports local development programmes, in harmony with employment policy and environmental requirements. It is expected that that nearly 50,000 jobs will be created in all these new sectors between now and 2015.

Greater emphasis on sustainable tourism

France, as the world's leading tourist destination, has a duty to seek changes in its tourism offering so as to achieve greater sustainability in terms of both accommodation and modes of transport. A large number of experiments in France and abroad, undertaken by companies, associations and public bodies, were recently reviewed in a publication, which makes it possible to assess the current status and set out a common strategy in this area. The commitment at national level is also reflected in a major initiative at international level, France having decided to chair the international task force on sustainable tourism development, one of the task forces of the Marrakech process on sustainable consumption and production headed by UNEP and UNDESA.

Study of the environmental impact of rural development activities

Law No. 2005-157 of 23 February 2005 on the development of rural areas (particularly Articles 78 - 80 to 95) changed the agricultural and forestry land use planning procedures. Implementing decree No. 2006-394 was enacted on 30 March 2006. The procedures have now been broadly decentralized to General Councils, but environmental issues remain a prerogative of the State.

The State's involvement, re-focused on the environment, will henceforth take place in three stages:

- notify at the beginning of the procedure;
- establish specifications before the start of the operational phase;
- obtain the agreement of the various competent authorities with a view to authorization at the end of the procedure.

An inter-ministerial circular is being drafted that will spell out the State's intervention, with the objective of preventing disputes.