

# [***Frustrated farmers are rebelling against EU rules. The far right is stoking the flames***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTV-JKP1-DYMD-64V7-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

ANDEREN, Netherlands — Inside the barn on the flat fields of the northern [*Netherlands*](https://apnews.com/hub/netherlands), Jos Ubels cradles a newborn Blonde d'Aquitaine calf, the latest addition to his herd of over 300 dairy cattle.

Little could be more idyllic.

Little, says Ubels, could be more under threat.

As Europe seeks to address the threat of [*climate change*](https://apnews.com/hub/climate-change), it's imposing more rules on farmers like Ubels. He spends a day a week on bureaucracy, answering the [*demands of European Union and national officials*](https://apnews.com/article/eu-climate-nature-protection-farmers-protests-7b222f346d4898e32766b230da781385) who seek to decide when farmers can sow and reap, and how much fertilizer or manure they can use.

Meanwhile, competition from cheap imports is undercutting prices for their produce, without having to meet the same standards. Mainstream political parties failed to act on farmers’ complaints for decades, Ubels says. Now the radical right is stepping in.

Across much of the 27-nation EU, from Finland to Greece, Poland to Ireland, [*farmers' discontent is gathering momentum*](https://apnews.com/article/europe-farmers-protests-eu-concessions-73c6329573a6a058d88ec1cd8e0284b4) as June EU parliamentary elections draw near.

Ubels is the second in command of the Farmers Defense Force, one of the most prominent groups to emerge from the foment. The FDF, whose symbol is a crossed double pitchfork, was formed in 2019 and has since expanded to Belgium. It has ties to similar groups elsewhere in the EU and is a driving force behind a planned June 4 demonstration in Brussels it hopes will bring 100,000 people to the EU capital and help define the outcome of the elections.

“It is time that we fight back,” said Ubels. “We’re done with quietly listening and doing what we are told.”

Has he lost trust in democracy? “No. \u2026 I have lost my faith in ***politics***. And that is one step removed.”

The FDF itself puts it more ominously on its website: “Our confidence in the rule of law is wavering!”

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**‘DON'T LET UP!'**

In March, protesting farmers from Belgium [*ran amok at a demonstration outside EU headquarters*](https://apnews.com/article/eu-farmers-protest-climate-change-a97ef80dd7ef7adfc6ded4506bef1ab0) in Brussels, setting fire to a subway station entrance and attacking police with eggs and liquid manure. In France, protesters tried to storm a government building.

In a video from another protest, in front of burning tires and pallets, FDF leader Mark van den Oever said two politicians made him sick to his stomach, saying they would "soon be at the center of attention.” The FDF denies this was a threat of physical violence.

Across the EU, over the winter, tractor convoys blockaded ports and major roads, sometimes for days, in [*some of the most severe farm protests*](https://apnews.com/article/eu-farmers-protest-summit-4f3912f5c98a73bc550f1f38ca9e60bb) in half a century.

Farmers and the EU have had a sometimes testy relationship. What's new is the shift toward the extreme right.

Destitute after World War II and with hunger still a scourge in winter, Europe desperately needed food security. The EU stepped in, securing abundant food for the population, turning the sector into an export powerhouse and currently funding farmers to the tune of over 50 billion euros a year.

Yet, despite agriculture's strategic importance, the EU acknowledges that farmers earn about 40% less than non-farm workers, while 80% of support goes to a privileged 20% of farmers. Many of the bloc's 8.7 million farm workers are close to or below the poverty line.

At the same time, the EU is seeking to push through stringent nature and agricultural laws as part of its [*Green Deal to make the bloc climate-neutral by 2050*](https://apnews.com/article/europe-climate-climate-change-business-environment-and-nature-f30384a397a820da15cc800f3a1a489e). Agriculture accounts for more than 10% of EU greenhouse gas emissions, from sources such as the nitrous oxide in fertilizers, carbon dioxide from vehicles and methane from cattle.

Cutting these emissions has forced short-notice changes on farmers at a time of financial insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic and surging inflation have increased the cost of goods and labor, while farmers' earnings are down as squeezed consumers cut back.

And then there's the war next door. After Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the EU granted tariff-free access for [*agricultural imports from Ukraine*](https://apnews.com/article/eu-ukraine-grain-exports-war-russia-d1fae3b978f2893c13d74fa2e152603b), many of them exempt from the strict environmental standards the bloc enforces on its own producers. Imports surged from 7 billion euros in 2021 to 13 billion euros the following year, causing gluts and undercutting farmers, [*particularly in Poland*](https://apnews.com/article/poland-farmers-protest-ukraine-green-deal-68e62bb822ce6a09eefefe9b2909c023).

“Don't let up,” Marion Maréchal, the lead candidate for France's extreme right Reconquest! party in the June elections, exhorted farmers at a protest earlier this year. “You have to be in the streets. You have to make yourself heard. You have to —” she tried to finish the sentence but was drowned out by shouts of “Don't Let Up! Don't Let Up!”

**FERTILE GROUND**

Farming in Europe is about more than just food; it touches on identity. In France, the far right taps into the love of “terroir,” that mythical combination of soil, location, culture and climate.

“The French realize that the farmers are the roots of our society," said Maréchal.

Such sentiments echo across Europe. In Ireland, where more than a million people died in the famine of 1845-1852, farming "is deep in our culture, in our psyche,” said Environment Minister Eamon Ryan, a Green Party lawmaker.

The far right has used farming as a way to attack mainstream parties. In Italy, the [*far right has mocked the EU's efforts*](https://apnews.com/article/italy-meloni-farright-migrants-2b3fc3bb92058eff65a7b38fa639693c) to promote a low-carbon diet, playing on farmers' fears that lab-grown proteins and insects could one day replace meat.

“Revolt is the language of those who are not listened to. Now, back off,” warned far-right Italian lawmaker Nicola Procaccini in February. In a few months, he said, the European elections "will put people back in place of ideologies.”

Such calls fall on fertile ground. According to predictions by the European Council on Foreign Relations, the radical right Identity and Democracy group could become the third biggest overall in the next European Parliament, behind the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, but edging out the Liberals and Greens. The farm protests are providing vital leverage.

**A SPADE IS A SPADE**

One farmer sidestepping militant demonstrations is Bart Dochy in western Belgium. As the Christian Democrat mayor of the farming town of Ledegem and a regional parliamentarian in Flanders, he represents the traditional forces in European farming communities: Christianity and conservativism. When Socialism took the big cities, the countryside and its farmers remained staunchly Christian Democrat.

That's now changed. Once, billboards with the cry, “Save our farmers!” would have come from his party; now, they bear the logo of the far-right Flemish Interest, predicted by polls to become the biggest party in Belgium in June.

“In a sense it is only logical that the extreme parties have specialized in capturing that discontent. They call a spade a spade. And that is good,” he said. But farming is complicated, he warned: nature, trade, budgets, commodity prices and geopolitics are all involved. Solutions will have to come from common sense, "not from the extremes.”

Dochy's Christian Democrats are part of the biggest group in the EU parliament, the European People's Party, once a strong proponent of the EU's Green Deal. Farmers, after all, are among the biggest losers from climate change, affected at different times by [*flooding, wildfires, drought and extreme temperatures*](https://apnews.com/article/europe-climate-risk-assessment-report-disasters-a229d11b378df08b93ab77a2e27250c9).

But ever since the demonstrations started, EU ***politics*** on agriculture and climate have shifted rightwards, outraging many of the center right’s old allies with whom it set up the Green Deal. [*Measures to reduce pesticide use*](https://apnews.com/article/eu-farmers-protest-parliament-climate-change-9cd382bf283a986b7e11969ab3dae904) and protect biodiversity have been weakened, while the protesters' demands to cut regulation have been heard.

But as the rhetoric heats up, so too does the climate. Data for early 2024 shows record-breaking temperatures in Europe. In Greece — where an [*estimated 1,750 square kilometers (675 square miles) burned*](https://apnews.com/article/greece-wildfires-fd0c877fc9a2332caf5f1934406af53f) in 2023, the worst fire in EU records — wildfires are already breaking out, weeks earlier than expected.

The far right offers no detailed solutions to the climate crisis but it has proved adept at tapping into farmers’ frustrations. In its program for the June elections, the Dutch far-right party, the PVV, is short on details but big on slogans about “climate hysteria” and its “tsunami of rules.” Nature and climate laws, it said, “should not lead to whole sectors being forced into bankruptcy.”

Ubels made the case for farmers' realpolitik.

“The government doesn't listen to us, but the opposition does,” he said.

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