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Addressing environmental harm: Reforming agricultural support

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Climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and food security are among the foremost issues facing the world today. Many countries have committed to improving environmental outcomes, including reducing emissions, and improving biodiversity levels in a variety of international agreements. Despite international commitments to reform, hundreds of billions of dollars are still spent on environmentally harmful agricultural support every year. Around the world, this environmental harm is funded by taxpayers, and by consumers facing higher prices as a result of government policies. The challenge for policy is to enable agricultural production systems that efficiently deliver food while minimising environmental impact.

The challenge for policy is to enable agricultural production systems that deliver food security while minimising environmental harm

The food system has multiple objectives and choices

For the food system to deliver food security and better environmental outcomes, agricultural resources must be put to their best use. Multiple and competing economic, social and environmental objectives often exist simultaneously and balancing these objectives can involve trade-offs between agricultural production and the environment. The challenge for policy being to enable agricultural production systems that deliver food security while minimising environmental impact.

Given global commitments to improve environmental outcomes such as the Paris Agreement, Global Methane Pledge and Convention on Biological Diversity, policy choices in agriculture are increasingly prominent given sometimes competing environmental policy objectives.

Agricultural policy can influence production decisions regarding what is produced, where it is produced and how it is produced. Agricultural production systems, and their connection to land-use, livestock, fertilisers and pesticides, are linked to agricultural emissions, biodiversity loss, soil erosion and water extraction (UNFCCC 2024; Ash & Cox 2019). This creates a challenge for policy to enable agricultural production systems that deliver food security, while also ensuring economic, social and environmental sustainability. It is often the case that agricultural support policies inadvertently support inefficient agricultural production resulting in greater environmental impact relative to support-free environments.

What is agricultural support?

Agricultural support refers to government policies, such as tariffs, price floors, subsidies and investment in knowledge and information systems, that are claimed to address a broad range of issues such as food security, agricultural incomes, risk management, agricultural productivity and preservation of traditional cultures. Environmentally harmful support (EHS) is a subset of these support policies that can encourage production decisions that create harmful effects on the environment relative to what would occur in the absence of support.

EHS typically influences what agricultural commodities are produced, where in the world they are produced and how they are produced, by distorting profitability. This enables production by less efficient producers and enables greater production of commodities above and beyond what society demands in the absence of policy interventions, but in doing so, harms the environment by incentivising additional output and/or input use by inefficient producers. This distortion to production can lead to greater greenhouse gas emissions, water-use and soil erosion, for example, and as such, these production-boosting support mechanisms can be linked to environmental harm (OECD 2003, DeBoe 2020).

Figure 1 Agricultural support leads to inefficiencies in production, which can lead to environmental harm

What kind of support is the most environmentally harmful?

Policies that provide input- or output-based payments with no constraints, or price floors/ceilings or tariffs (market price support; MPS), are usually deemed most environmentally harmful (Ash & Cox 2022, DeBoe 2020, Henderson & Lankoski 2019, Henderson & Lankoski 2020, Lankoski & Thiem 2020).

These forms of support are often aimed at raising production or stabilising incomes by influencing the costs or revenues of producing one specific commodity relative to another (Henderson & Lankoski 2019, DeBoe et al. 2020, Matthews & Karousakis 2022) (Figure 2). This artificially increases the profitability of the targeted product, resulting in more production, contributing to higher on-farm emissions, potential adverse land-use change, soil degradation and other negative environmental outcomes.

Support that is not linked to production or input use is considered 'less environmentally harmful' as it does not directly distort production decisions relative to the case of no support. However, as it can still promote the profitability of some commodities over others, certain forms of production and input use are also often increased, ultimately negatively influencing environmental outcomes.

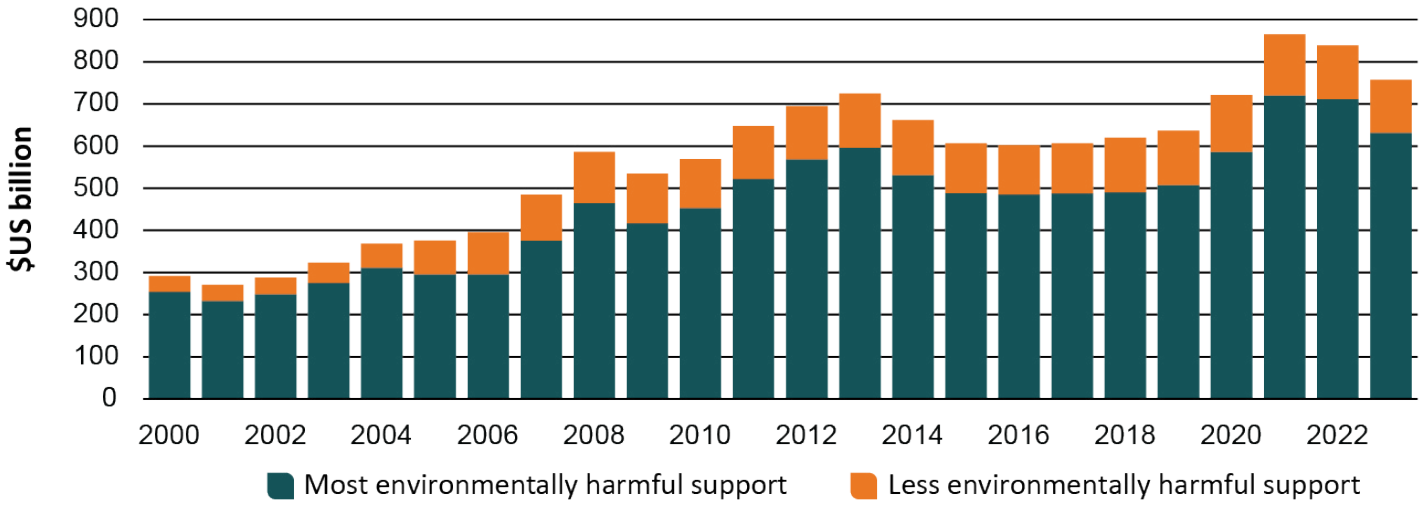
Figure 2 Environmentally harmful support alters the revenue or costs associated with production

Market price support	Support based on inputs	Support based on outputs
Policies which alter domestic prices relative to the world price	Policies which subsidise inputs	Policies which increase revenue based on production volume
Tariffs and price floors	Fertiliser subsidises	Payment per bale of wool

Hundreds of billions of dollars of global agricultural support harm the environment

Agricultural support policies deemed 'most environmentally harmful' have provided an average US$472 billion annually to agricultural producers over the period 2019 to 2023, paid for by taxpayers and consumers, in the forms of tariffs, price floors and payments directly linked to agricultural inputs and production. When export restrictions and other market price-deflating policies are also included, this figure climbs to US$631 billion annually. While further work is needed to explore the links between these policies and environmental outcomes, it is likely where this negative support distorts a country's production mix there will also be worse environmental outcomes.

Figure 3 Taxpayers and consumers are funding environmentally harmful agricultural support policies around the world through producer support



Note: Categories are based on descriptions in Ash & Cox (2022). Negative producer support is included in the most environmentally harmful series as it is fully comprised of negative market price support.

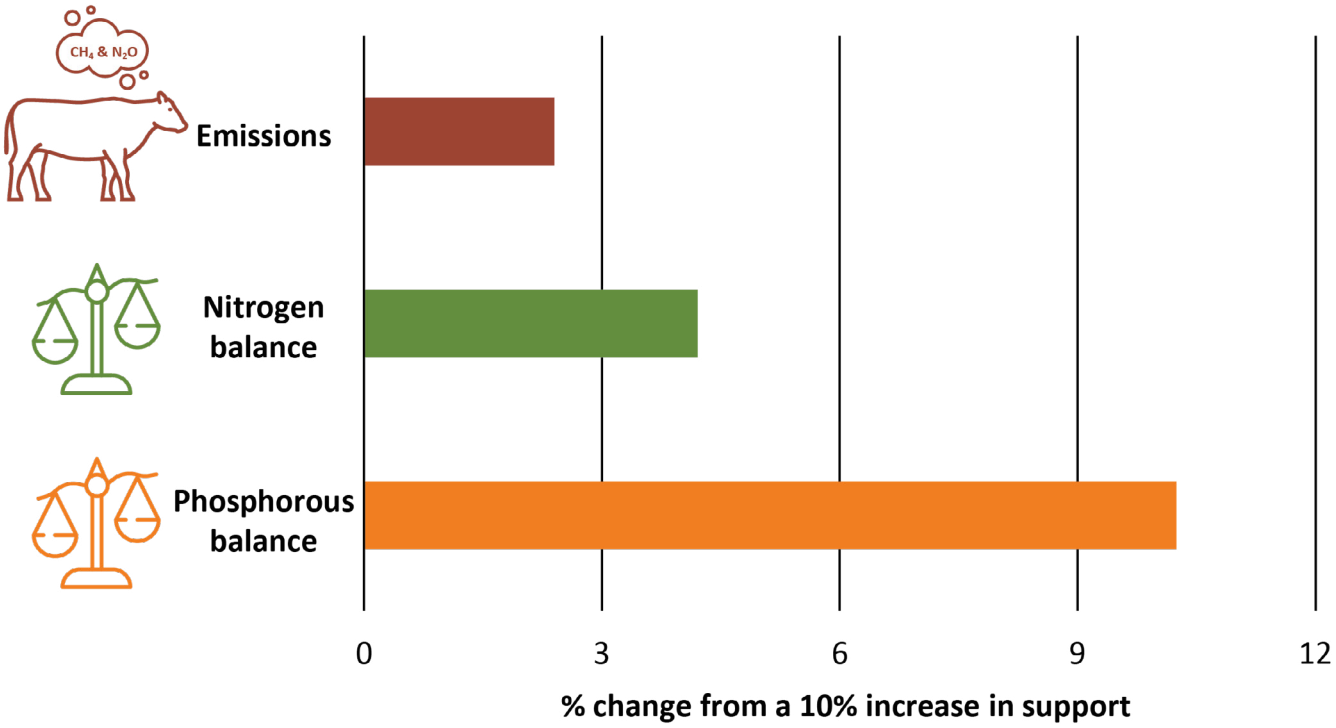
Source: ABARES analysis of OECD data.

Research repeatedly links agricultural support to poor environmental outcomes

Support that boosts production generally has a greater adverse impact on the environment relative to non-supported production systems. Nonetheless, changes in environmental impacts resulting from the removal of support depend on the idiosyncrasies of the respective production systems and environments around the world (Cao et al. 2023, Fell et al. 2022, DeBoe 2020). For example, "production processes in different countries have different emissions intensities…the removal of support, causing a shift in demand to an alternative (e.g. non-supporting) country, could lead to a global rise or fall in emissions depending on relative emissions intensities." (Fell et al. 2022). As a result, modelling is useful to provide guidance on the removal of agricultural support, for both local and global outcomes. Demonstrations and examples across a wide cross-section of studies are also available in a literature review by the OECD (DeBoe 2022).

Higher agricultural support is generally associated with poorer performance in agri-environmental indicators such as soil health (nitrogen and phosporous balance), pesticide use and greenhouse gas emissions (Henderson & Lankoski 2019). Figure 5 presents the environmental outcomes that result from a 10% increase in producer support payments, averaged across different cases and types of support as modelled in Henderson & Lankoski (2019).

Figure 4 Across various countries and support types, increases in support result in worse environmental outcomes on average



Notes: Nitrogen and phosphorous balance are influenced by fertiliser use. The results above reflect the published results in Henderson & Lankoski (2019), which are not comprehensive. Emissions increases are based on animal-number based payments and crop-area based payments. Nitrogen-balance changes are based on animal-number based payments, crop-area based payments and input based payments. Phosphorus balance changes are based on animal-number based payments, crop-area based payments and input based payments and market price support.

Source: Henderson & Lankoski (2019)

Ash & Cox (2022) provide a stocktake of the harmful environmental outcomes caused by agricultural support. Overall, in relation to market price support and coupled subsidies, "Studies have shown their negative impacts on water quality and direct agricultural GHG emissions, and they may negatively influence biodiversity by promoting less diverse agricultural systems (DeBoe, 2022; Lankoski and Thiem, 2020)".

Payments based on variable input use without constraints are linked to negative impacts on water quality and emissions. Additionally, Ash & Cox (2022) report that "Excessive or inadequate pesticide use has been associated with declines in populations of birds, insects, amphibians and aquatic and soil communities, as well as negative impacts on human health". In a meta-analysis of environmental effects, DeBoe found that "Overall, the environmental effects of payments based on variable input use are generally negative if water, fertiliser and pesticide are subsidised." Henderson & Lankoski (2019) find that such payments resulted in negative environmental and biodiversity effect in almost all cases.

Henderson & Lankoski (2019) consistently found negative impacts of market price support (price floors and tariffs) across almost all environmental indicators and farm types used in their analysis, and across both the modelling frameworks. Arguments have been made that MPS could provide incentives to achieve scale efficiencies in some production systems (DeBoe 2020), however, "empirical evidence demonstrating this positive link [between market price support and technical efficiency] is scant". Citing examples from the European Union, Japan and Switzerland, DeBoe adds "MPS is usually expected to lead to negative environmental impacts." Fundamentally, elevated prices created by market price support raise agricultural production, driving excessive natural resource and input use.

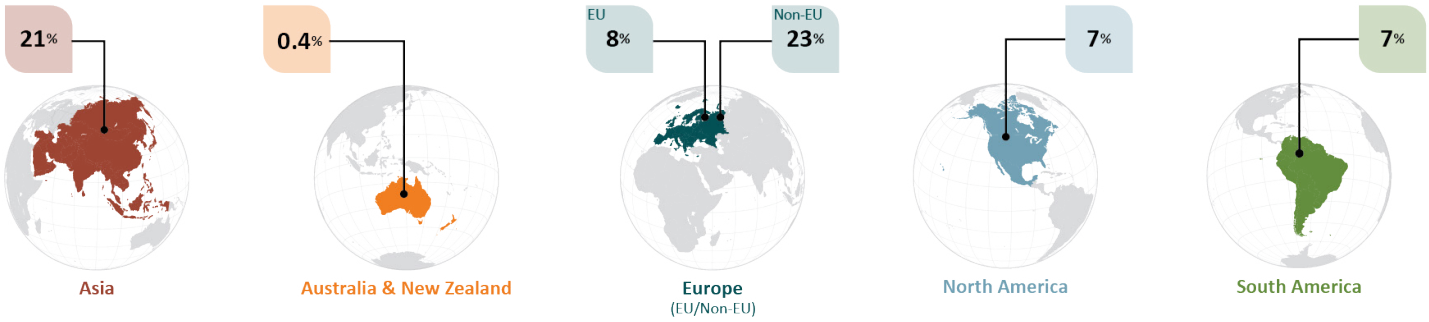
"Studies have shown… negative impacts on water quality and direct agricultural GHG emissions, and [support] may negatively influence biodiversity by promoting less diverse agricultural systems"
Ash & Cox 2022

Taxpayer-funded environmentally harmful agricultural support varies around the world

Environmentally harmful support can be measured as a percentage of farm income. This reflects the share of farm revenue that is transferred from taxpayers and consumers, that is considered environmentally harmful.

As shown in Figure 5, some regions provide more EHS than others, with some areas providing negative support, arising from polices that depress domestic prices relative to world markets (such as an export tax). Figure 6 shows that just five regions of the world provide over 80% of the world's environmentally harmful support in agriculture.

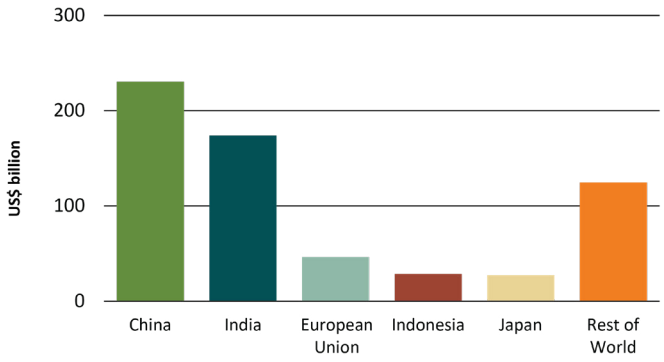
Figure 5 Asia and non-EU Europe provide the most environmentally harmful support as a share of farm income



Note: 5 year average, 2019-2023.Not all countries are included in the respective regions due to data availability. Africa is not shown due to limited data availability. The countries included are: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Switzerland, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, the European Union, Great Britain, Indonesia, India, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Norway, New Zealand, Philippines, Russia, Türkiye, Ukraine, USA, Vietnam and South Africa. The absolute value of negative market price support is added to the positive market price support as it also distorts production.

Data source: OECD (2024b)

Figure 6 The most environmentally harmful support is concentrated in 5 regions



Note: Values presented are the 5 year average nominal value (2019-2023). The absolute value of negative market price support is added to the positive market price support as it also distorts production.

Data source: OECD (2024b)

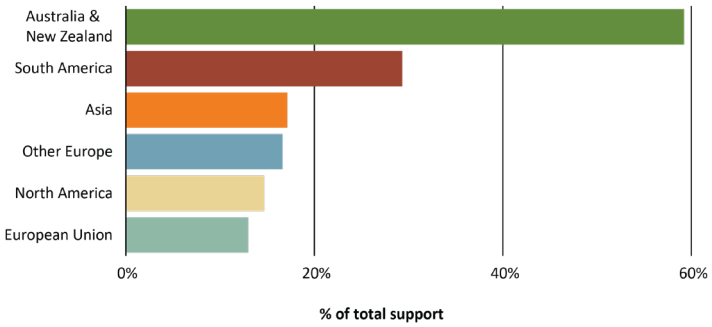
Examples of these environmentally harmful support policies include minimum price guarantees (price floors) in China, payments for area and livestock in the European Union, and tariffs on high-volume imports (rice, pork and milk) in Japan.

Environmentally harmful support can be redirected to minimally environmentally harmful options

Options exist to redirect environmentally harmful support to options that are not associated with direct environmental harm caused by agriculture. Support can be redirected to policies that provide more generalised support, such as development of infrastructure and provision of research and development, to support productivity growth, income growth and long run competitiveness (Burns et al. 2022). These forms of support can even boost the efficiency of production. This is the pathway that has been taken in some parts of the world (Figure 7).

Between 2019 and 2023, most of the world's EHS was provided by China (37%), India (28%), EU-27 (7%), Indonesia (5%), and Japan (4%).

Figure 7 Minimally environmentally harmful support options are used proportionately more in some parts of the world



Note: Chart shows percentage of total agricultural support provided by 'general services support', as documented by the OECD. Data are five-year averages for 2019-2023.

Source: OECD (2024).

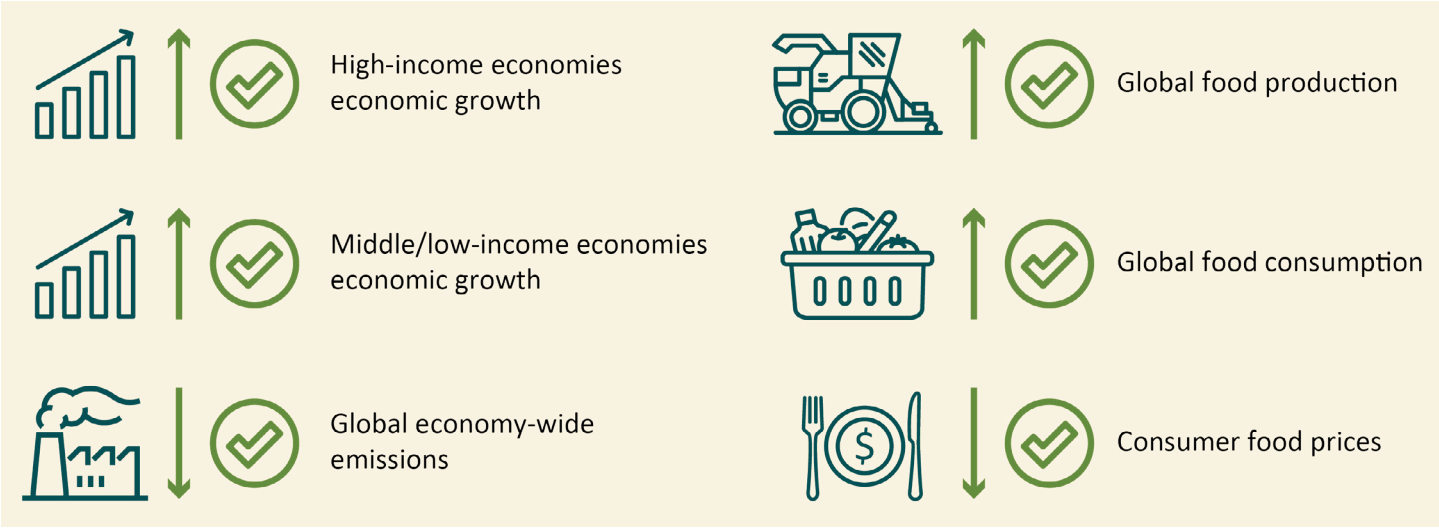
Removing or redirecting environmentally harmful support is a mechanism for improving future food security and environmental outcomes

The removal of environmentally harmful support potentially raises concerns in some countries about food security. The removal of support has been modelled in several studies to demonstrate the effect on emissions, incomes and food security.

Food security can be maintained or improved with the removal of agricultural support. Cao et al. (2023) and Gautam et al. (2022) found that global emissions fall with a comprehensive removal of agricultural producer support (i.e. subsidies, price floors and tariffs), as does aggregate agricultural production. However, a fall in aggregate agricultural production does not necessarily mean a fall in food production or consumption and as such in relation to food security, it is insufficient to just assess agricultural output (as per Gautam et al. 2022).

Agriculture is an input to food, and more efficient food production requires fewer inputs. Cao et al. (2023) demonstrated that not only can the comprehensive removal of agricultural support lead to lower emissions, it can also increase food consumption, reduce food prices and raise global economic growth. Food production and consumption increase, and food prices fall, as the location and type of agriculture and food production change globally, and fewer agricultural inputs (e.g. livestock, paddy rice and cereal grain) are required to produce food outputs (e.g. meat, dairy products, milled rice and flour). In other words, agriculture and food production shift to more efficient producers.

Figure 8 Modelling shows that the comprehensive removal of all agricultural support can cut emissions, boost food security and raise global incomes



Sources: Fell et al. (2022), Cao et al. (2023)

The removal of environmentally harmful support can be tied to concrete and identifiable benefits not just globally but also locally. For example, Australia removed floor prices for wool, leading to a significant reduction in agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions. The Republic of Korea removed fertiliser subsidies which improved their soil nitrogen balances and reduced emissions. Costa Rica's removal of subsidised interest rates for cattle producers contributed to a reversal of deforestation.

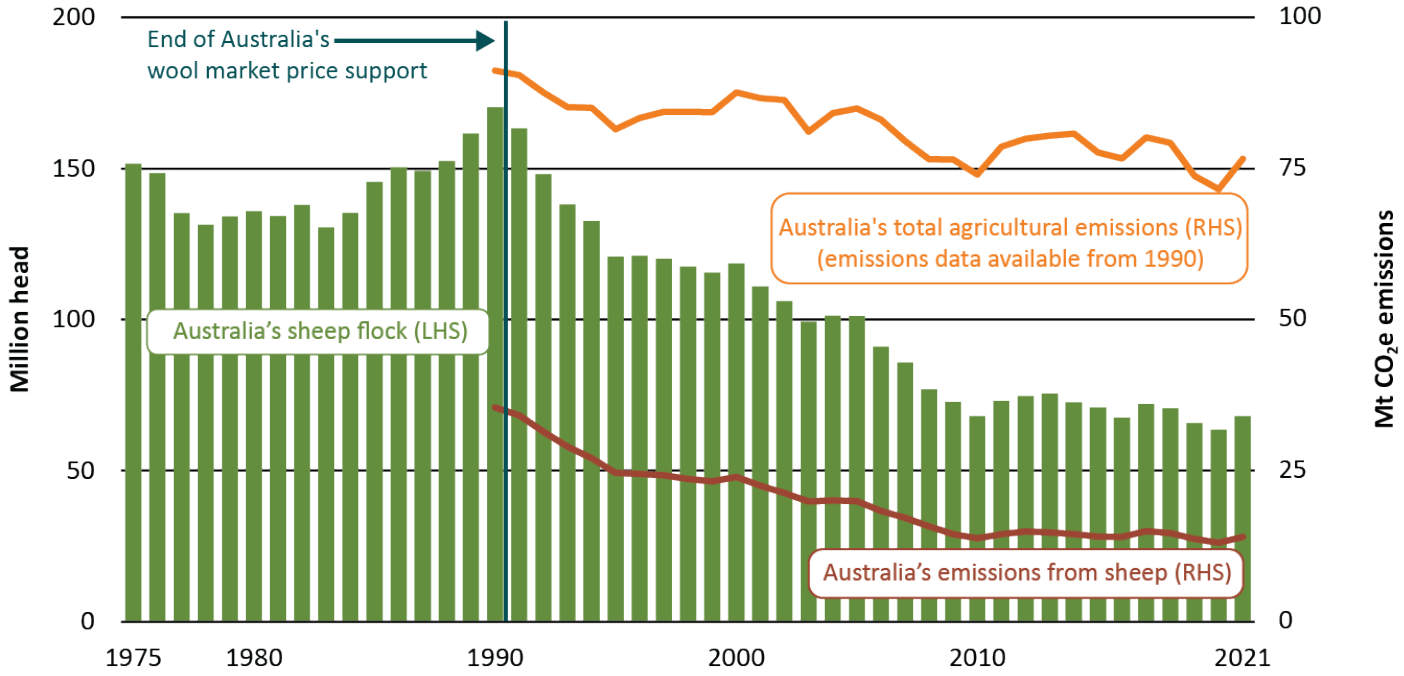
Removing wool market price support reduced Australia's emissions

Australia's wool Reserve Price Scheme (RPS) provided wool producers with a minimum price guarantee between 1971 and 1991. Under the scheme, the Australian Wool Corporation purchased and stockpiled wool when prices fell below a certain threshold.

The scheme encouraged wool production by making it more profitable than alternative agricultural pursuits through artificially higher prices. Higher volumes of inputs into wool production, such as sheep, were required, leading to excessive greenhouse gas emissions. The removal of wool market price support reduced the sheep flock and consequently led to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Australia's agricultural production pivoted towards cropping, which, coupled with broader agricultural and macroeconomic reforms, changed the composition of Australian agriculture, leading to long term growth in the value of agricultural production (ABARES 2023).

In the 5 years after the removal of environmentally harmful support, CO_2 equivalent emissions fell by an average of 2,000,000 kg each year (DCCEEW, 2024).

Figure 9 The removal of Australia's wool market price support reduced emissions from sheep, and total agricultural emissions



Note: Emissions data is only available from 1990.

Source: ABS (2023), DCCEEW (2024)

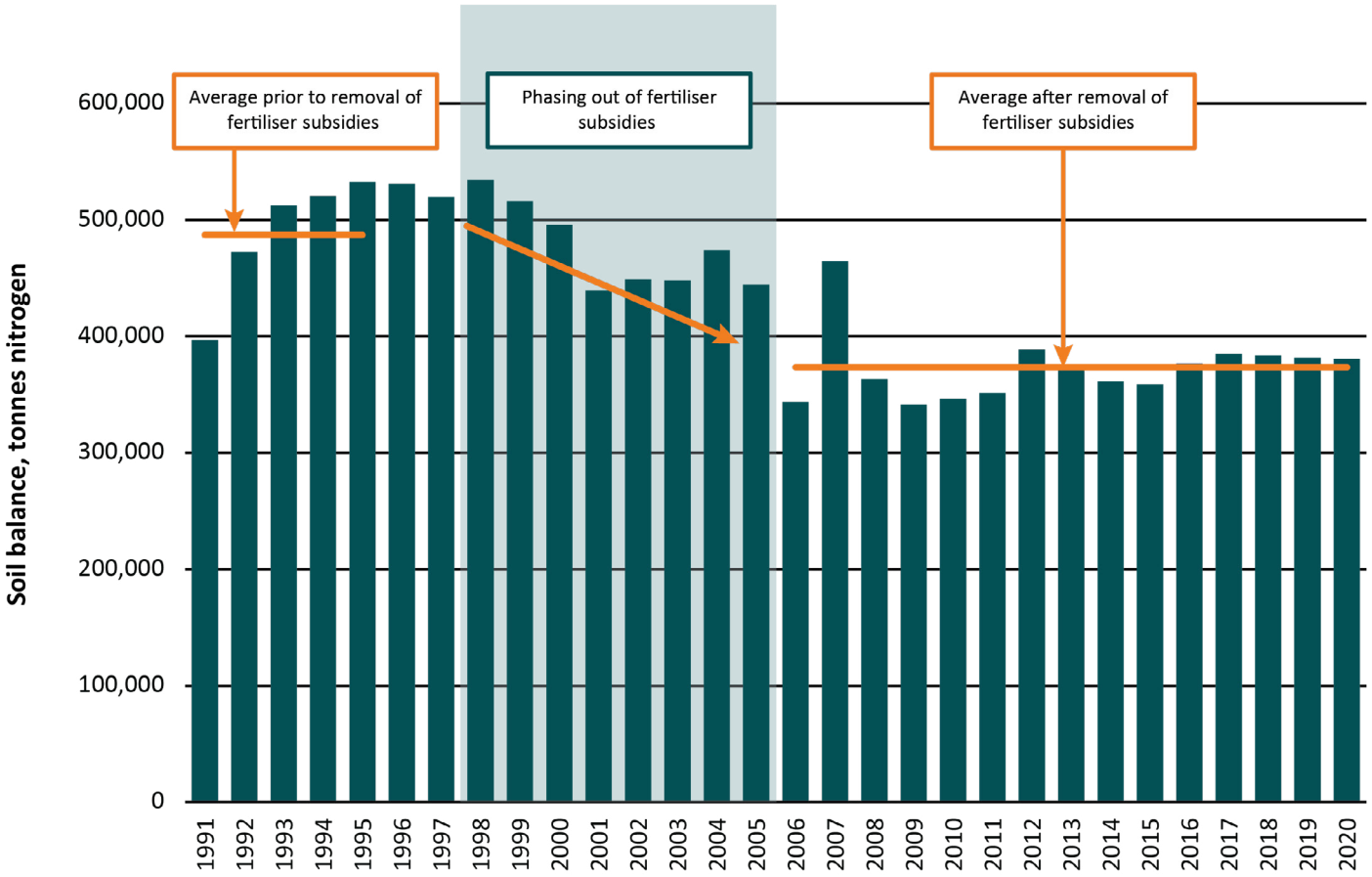
Removing fertiliser subsidies contributed to improved soils and lower emissions in the Republic of Korea

Between 1996 and 2005, the Republic of Korea phased out its fertiliser subsidies (Cassou 2018). Direct support for inputs is one of the most environmentally damaging forms of agricultural support. It incentivises the use of pollutants above and beyond what the market needs. In the case of fertiliser subsidies, direct support creates soil imbalances, exacerbates leaching and increases emissions attributed to fertiliser use.

After the removal of fertiliser subsidies was complete in 2005, Korea's nitrogen soil balances improved by 24% (Figure 11) when comparing the average after the removal of subsidies with the average prior to the completion of their removal. Likewise, fertiliser-related emissions declined by 38% between the two periods (Figure 12).

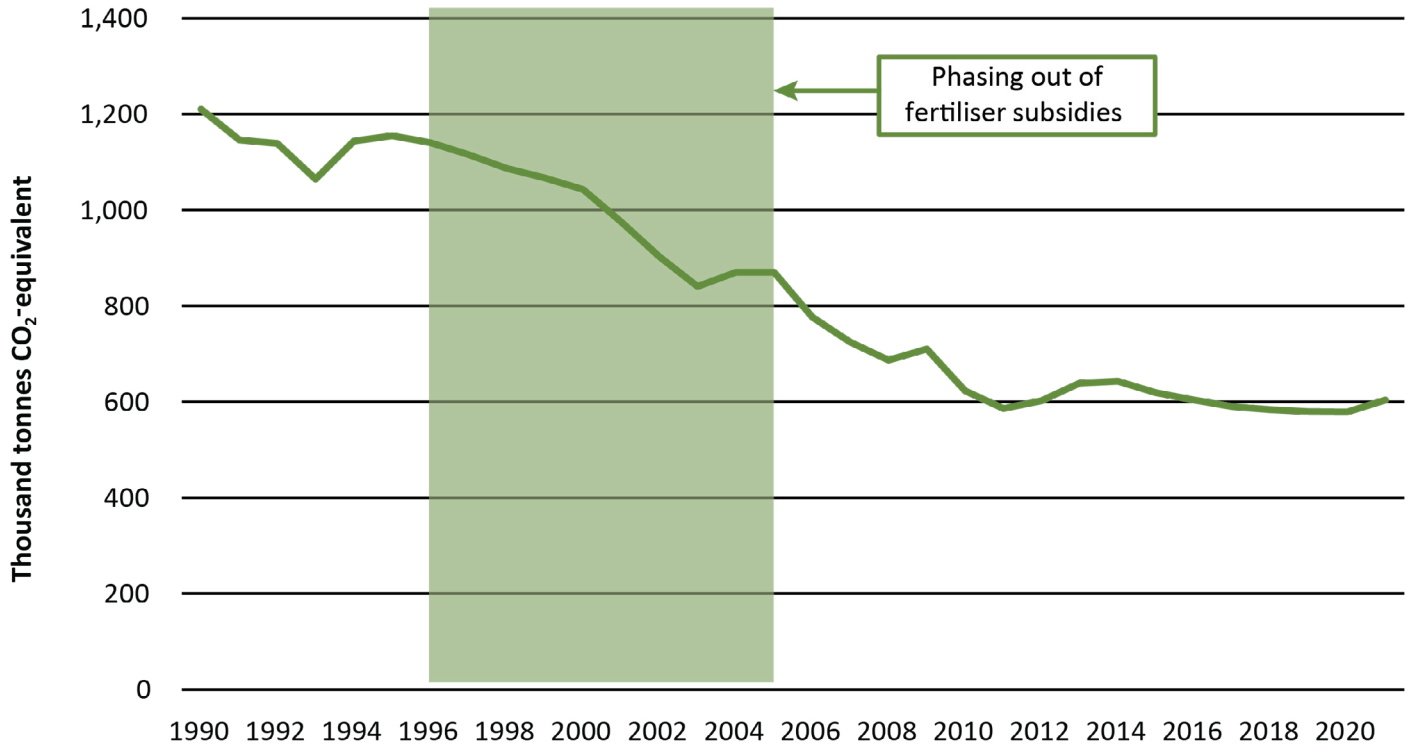
While the removal of fertiliser subsidies contributed to improved environmental outcomes, other policy changes also contributed. These included the replacement of state purchasing of rice at inflated prices with a direct payment to farmers, and ultimately introducing imported rice into their domestic market. However, this was also accompanied by a deficiency payment to cover the difference between the market price of rice and a target price. Nutrient management programs were also introduced (Cassou 2018).

Figure 10 Nitrogen soil balance, Republic of Korea, before and after removal of fertiliser subsidies



Source: OECD (2024a)

Figure 11 Republic of Korea's direct nitrous oxide emissions from synthetic fertiliser fell as farmers adjusted to the removal of agricultural support



Note: Emissions data is from agricultural soils, attributable to synthetic fertilisers
Source: Greenhouse Gas Inventory and Research Center of Korea (2023)

Reforestation, Costa Rica and environmental harm from subsidised loans

For decades, Costa Rica provided de-facto taxpayer funded deforestation, in the form of subsidies for livestock producers. A series of programs provided agricultural credit in Costa Rica since at least the 1960s (IBRD 1968, World Bank 1985, Kaimowitz 1996). Across part of this period, low interest loans were available to livestock producers, including leniency with loan repayments (Kaimowitz 1996, Lutz & Daly 1991). Kaimowitz (1996) reports that "real interest rates for livestock credit were negative between 1970 and 1983, at times reaching below -10 per cent." Roebeling & Hendrix (2010) demonstrated, through modelling, how the interest rate subsidies were tied to deforestation. The subsidised loans improved the profitability of cattle farming, which encouraged the removal of forest cover to make way for pastoral grazing.

During the subsidised loan period, deforestation was significant, with forest cover dropping from 60% of Costa Rica's land area to 40% (Sanchez-Azofeifa 2015). By 1990, the livestock interest rate subsidies had been fully removed following the broader removal of subsidised agricultural credit (Lutz & Daly 1991). Deforestation has not only slowed, but has reversed, and Costa Rica has recorded net gains in forest cover since the late 1980s (Figure 13). FAO (2020) data show a net 4% increase in forest cover since 1990, while Sanchez-Azofeifa (2015) shows a net increase of 26% in forest cover between 1990 and 2013.

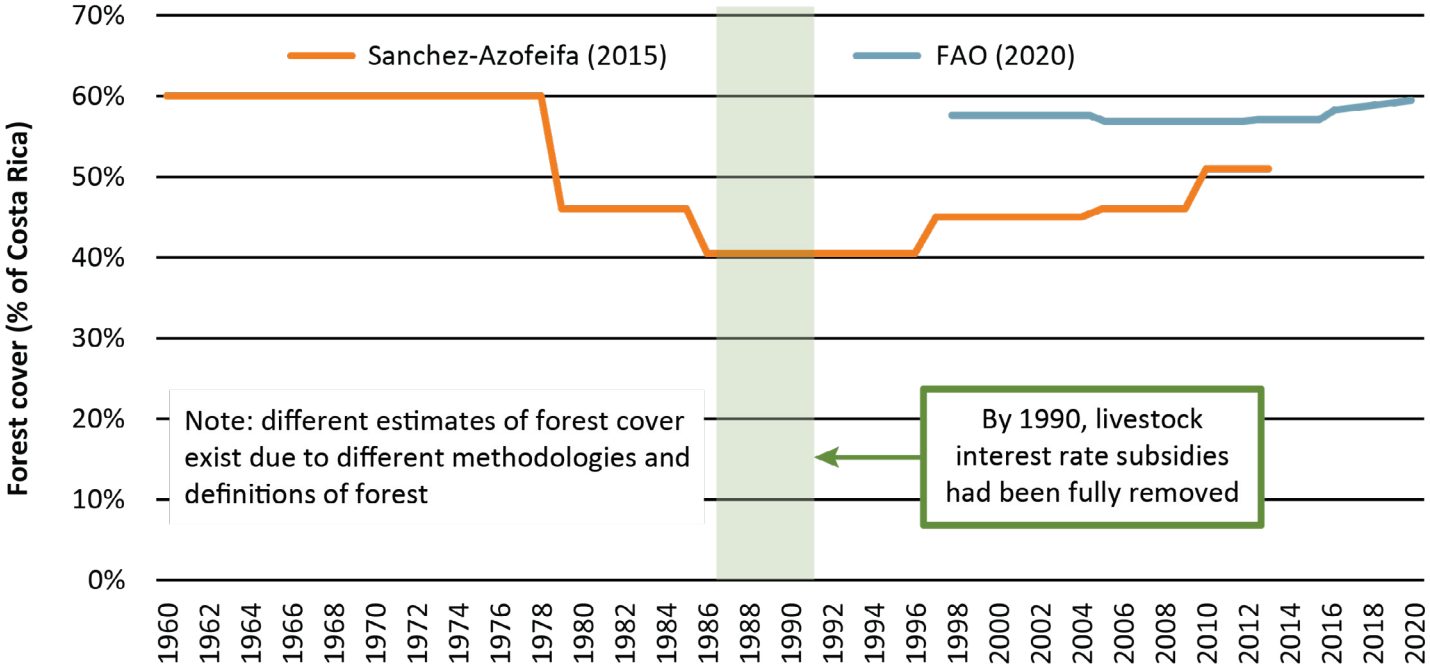
Costa Rica also removed other agricultural support and introduced direct environmental payments. Costa Rica now has some of the lowest levels of agricultural support in the world (OECD 2024b). According to the World Bank (2022), "Costa Rica is widely recognized as a global leader for its environmental accomplishments, not least of which is its success in forest conservation. It is the first tropical country in the world to have reversed deforestation. Its highly biodiverse tropical rainforests now cover close to 60% of the country, having shrunk as low as 40% in 1987."

Environmentally harmful agricultural support should be reduced

To reduce emissions and improve environmental outcomes, consideration should be given to the adverse impact of environmentally harmful agricultural support. Hundreds of billions of dollars of environmentally harmful support are paid to farmers every year, with the costs borne by taxpayers and consumers. These payments encourage the excessive use of inputs and boost agricultural production above and beyond what the market demands, leading to excessive environmental harm. Support can be redirected without harming food security.

To minimise the impacts of agriculture on the environment it is important to focus on efficient and environmentally sustainable agricultural production; and ensure support to the agriculture sector does not encourage unnecessary production or incentivise overuse of damaging inputs. Enabling production where it is most efficient will support food security and reduce global emissions from agriculture.

Figure 12 Forest cover in Costa Rica is now recovering following the removal of agricultural support



Sources: Sanchez-Azofeifa (2015), FAO (2020)

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