
The Ecologization of Hedgerows in the Grand Est Region: A Perspective

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Abstract

Hedgerows are often presented as an ecological ‘Tower of Babel’ (OFB, 2021) of biodiversity (refuge, reproduction, food, mobility for multiple species), or as a ‘Swiss army knife’ of ecology (Magnin, 2024) because of the multiple ‘ecosystem services’ they provide (OFB, 2022): water quality, climate regulation, pest control, etc. However, the national hedgerow line shows a loss of 23,571 km/year between 2017 and 2021, against 3,000 km of replanting per year during the same period (CGAER, 2023).

Multiscalar agro-ecological, energy and bio-economic policies (Dassot et al., 2022) are attempting to reverse the trend. At European level, the CAP makes subsidies conditional on the maintenance of hedgerows (GAEC system) and pays a “hedgerow bonus”, in addition to funding for agroforestry under the EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development). At French level, the ‘hedge pact’, launched in 2023, provides for €110 million in subsidies to plant 50,000 km of linear hedges by 2030. At regional level, the Grand-Est region has set itself the target of planting 4,000 km of hedgerows by 2030, enabling local initiatives to get under way. In addition to subsidies, carbon credits under the Low Carbon Label, supported by the public authorities, are attracting private funding for farmers, by offsetting industrial CO₂e emissions by storing carbon in wood and agricultural soils.

We propose to put this policy into perspective on the basis of observations and lessons learned from the Tétrahaies research programme, co-funded by INRAE and the Grand-Est region, and conducted in partnership with the CIVAM Oasis. To do this, we will draw on social science research that helps us to understand the (re)mobilisation of stakeholders in favour of hedgerows and the greening of hedgerows (Magnin, 2024). Stéphane Sachet (2020) has shown how wide range stakeholders mobilisation (scientists, associations, GIEEs, etc.) since the 1970s has converged with the desire of the Ministry of Agriculture to move away from co-management with the FNSEA and develop an agro-ecology that can be appropriated by all actors. In his thesis, Léo Magnin (2021) documented the major role played by a network of stakeholders within the Afac association (renamed ‘Réseau Haies’ on 1 January 2025) in ensuring that hedgerows were taken into account in the 2015 CAP. It also describes how the mapped inventory of hedgerow lines (‘graphical parcel register’) was developed in response to the European ‘fine’ of 2013 (€1 billion at stake, see p.163 and p.214).

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This work highlights, sometimes in great detail, the fact that hedgerows are first and foremost objects in the workings of negotiations that take place on multiple political, spatial and temporal scales: from the supranational space in which European and French regulations clash, to the agricultural plot where the technical adviser of a chamber of agriculture adjusts his recommendations to the expectations of the farmer (or groups of farmers). As we know, the period 2023-2024 was marked by a large-scale protest movement by the farming profession, led by various unions and groups. These protests focused on standards and economic instruments for greening agriculture. In this debate, hedgerows replanting appears to be a major component. These difficulties provide an opportunity to put the hedgerow support networks in the Grand Est region to the test.

On the basis of an analysis of the interplay of actors, a documentary study with some historical depth (Guilman et al., 2023), and our field observations since the start of the Téra'haies project in 2023, we propose to give an account of the various political, social and economic negotiations that hedgerows are currently the subject of in the Grand Est region, which is not a traditional bocage area.

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