

Climate adaptation requires room for innovation



Dr. Jurgen TACK
ELO Secretary-General



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Countryside Magazine: Last summer brought heatwaves, droughts and major wildfires across Europe. Has climate change become a tangible reality for land managers?

Jurgen TACK, Secretary-General of ELO: Absolutely. What scientists have warned about for decades is now part of everyday reality. Farmers, foresters and landowners are experiencing it directly through water shortages, changing growing conditions, forest decline and rising wildfire risks. Mitigation remains essential, but it is no longer enough. We must also adapt our agriculture, forests and natural areas to a climate that is already changing.

Countryside Magazine: What is holding Europe back?

Jurgen TACK: There is a fundamental contradiction: climate adaptation requires change, while much of our legislation was designed to prevent change. European environmental legislation has achieved important results, but the ecological conditions it seeks to protect are themselves changing. Tree species that have thrived for centuries may no longer be suited to future conditions. Crops face new pests, diseases and water stress. Habitats will shift. The question is therefore simple: can we protect ecosystems by asking them to remain unchanged while the climate around them fundamentally changes?

Countryside Magazine: Wildfires make that contradiction particularly visible. What needs to change?

Jurgen TACK: We need to invest much more in prevention. Firefighting is essential, but active landscape management is just as important. Forest thinning, grazing, removing combustible vegetation, creating firebreaks and, where appropriate, prescribed burning can all reduce risk. Yet land managers may face nature, forestry and permitting rules that slow down precisely these measures. A forest maximally protected from human intervention is not necessarily a forest maximally protected from climate change.

Countryside Magazine: Is agriculture facing the same problem?

Jurgen TACK: Yes. Farmers need access to innovation. New genomic techniques, for example, can help develop crops that are more resistant to drought and disease, or that use water and nutrients more efficiently.

Europe has often regulated new technologies through frameworks designed for an earlier generation of innovation. Recent changes to the EU approach to New Genomic Techniques are therefore welcome.

The broader lesson is clear: when innovation moves faster than legislation, regulation intended to protect sustainability can end up becoming an obstacle to achieving it.

Countryside Magazine: Are you calling for weaker environmental legislation?

Jurgen TACK: No. We need smarter and more adaptive legislation. The precautionary principle remains important, but doing nothing also carries risks. Instead of asking only, "How do we preserve what was here?", we should also ask, "What functioning, biodiverse ecosystem can survive here under the climate of 2050?" That requires experimentation, flexibility and adaptive management.

Countryside Magazine: What should Europe do now?

Jurgen TACK: I would introduce a climate adaptation stress test for European legislation. For every major regulation, we should ask: does this make it easier or harder to adapt Europe to the climate of 2050?

We need ambitious environmental objectives, but regulation should become more outcome-based and less prescriptive. Farmers, foresters and land managers need room to develop solutions that work on the ground. Climate adaptation means change. European legislation must not only control that change. It must enable it.

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