6

German Agriculture and the Environment

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have outlined the development of agricultural structures and policies in the FRG, GDR and reunified Germany, within the context of European agricultural policy and international trade policy. Throughout the previous discussion the potential environmental implications of agricultural structural change and intensification of production have been mentioned. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the past and present situation of German agriculture and the environment and to investigate in detail environmental implications of recent policy developments in pre- and post-reunification Germany.

Following from the conceptual theme of Germany as either a leader, partner or obstructor in European agricultural policy-making that underlies the argument of this book, we will focus on the role that Germany (and the FRG before 1990) has played in the development and implementation of European AEP. The conceptual framework for the argument in this chapter is based around the notion that policy (and therefore inevitably also politics) is the key regulatory framework for countryside protection in the EU (we adopt an approach based on the notion of ‘strong’ policy; cf. Winter, 1990, 1996), and a specific focus will be placed on the question whether AEPs are environmental policies or farm income support in disguise. We also acknowledge that actors such as farmers, consumers and the general public are important decision-makers in the environmental management process (Wilson and Bryant, 1997) and may, at times, also strongly influence countryside management decisions (cf. Morris and Potter, 1995; Wilson, 1997c).

First, it is important to outline the environmental impacts of agricultural practices on the German countryside in order to contextualise the parameters within which AEPs have been established. Section 6.2 will, therefore, analyse agricultural impacts on the environment in the FRG, GDR and reunified Germany. Section 6.3 will then explore the policy framework for German countryside management by investigating both EU and national
AEPs, and by looking in detail at the German agri-environmental pro-
gramme and the German role in EU agri-environmental policy-making. 
Section 6.4 will analyse the geography of German AEP in more detail, and 
will discuss possible factors that have led to highly uneven implementation 
of AEPs in different German Länder, including a brief discussion of whether 
German agriculture has shifted from a productivist to a post-productivist 
ethos. The question whether German AEP mechanisms could act as blue-
prints for other EU countries is further explored in Section 6.5, with a 
specific emphasis on comparing the policy effectiveness of regulatory 
versus voluntary AEP approaches, and by discussing the success of food 
safety policies. Section 6.6 will draw together these arguments by exploring 
why voluntary and regulatory policy mechanisms have differed in their 
environmental effectiveness.

6.2 Agricultural impacts on the environment

Chapter 4 has discussed how agricultural policies, structures and ideologies 
differed between the former FRG and GDR. As a result, the nature and 
causes of agricultural environmental impacts also differed between the two 
countries. It is, therefore, necessary first to analyse the environmental situ-
ation of the countryside in these two countries separately (Sections 6.2.1 
and 6.2.2), before investigating developments in reunified Germany since 
1990 (Section 6.2.3).

6.2.1 The FRG

Environmental impacts of agriculture in the FRG were closely associated 
with the rapid agricultural structural change that took place after the 
Second World War outlined in Chapter 2. The rapid reduction in the 
number of farms and consequent farm amalgamation into larger and more 
efficient holdings (from an average size of 8.1 ha in 1949 to 24.1 ha in 
1998; see Table 2.1), the rapidly increasing mechanisation of farms, the 
increasing intensity of farming with regard to livestock densities per forage 
area and applications of external inputs (especially fertilisers and pesticides 
on arable land), the conversion of permanent grassland to arable land, and 
reductions in the number of crops in rotations all resulted in rapidly rising 
pressures on the environment and subsequent degradation of water, 
wildlife and landscape resources (Priebe, 1985; RSU, 1985; Heißenhuber et 
al., 1994). Structural changes coincided with the rapid disappearance of tra-
ditional farming systems – a process further aided by agricultural support 
mechanisms aimed at both increasing productivity of farms and raising 
farm incomes (see Chapter 2).

A few figures may illustrate the rapid environmental changes that took 
place in the FRG between 1949 and 1990. As in most other EEC9 member 
states at the time, the over-application of fertilisers and pesticides emerged