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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN  
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL  
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**A Vision for Agriculture and Food  
Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations**

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## 1. SHAPING TOGETHER AN ATTRACTIVE EU FARMING AND FOOD SECTOR FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Farming and food are core to the European way of life. Rooted in rich traditions, the ways we produce and enjoy food have shaped the communities, cultures, and landscapes that define Europe.

**Farming and food, including fisheries, are strategic sectors for the Union**, providing safe, high-quality food to 450 million Europeans and playing a key role in global food security. The Niinistö report<sup>1</sup> recognises food as one of the sectors most critical for providing essential services to citizens. The Union support through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is at the heart of the European project for good reasons. European food security, safety and food sovereignty are non-negotiable. European citizens confirm this: 94% of citizens who took part in the latest Eurobarometer survey confirm that it is important to secure a stable supply of food in the EU at all times<sup>2</sup>.

**Food is also part of our competitiveness.** The agri-food system, anchored in the EU Single Market and in its diversity of enterprises, scope, scale and production methods, generated an added value of more than EUR 900 billion in 2022, providing employment to around 30 million people<sup>3</sup>, representing around 15% of total EU employment. As the largest agri-food exporter in the world, the EU has been steadily increasing its trade surplus over the years, reaching EUR 70 billion in 2023<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, the situation is different when it comes to the supply of fishery and aquaculture products, oilseeds and proteins crop among others, where the EU is highly reliant on imports.

**Farming and food are essential to sustaining vibrant and economically prosperous communities in rural and coastal areas.** Rural areas are home to 25% of the EU population and cover 75% of its territory, making them an integral part of Europe's identity<sup>5</sup>. Vibrant rural and coastal areas are key in fighting depopulation and enabling 'the right to stay'.

**Farming and fishing is about working with nature.** Farmers and fishers are custodians of nature, the foundation of a resilient Europe, and they are a vital **part of the solution** to the protection and resilience of our nature, soils, water, air, biodiversity, oceans and climate. **Farmers, fishers and food businesses are innovators and entrepreneurs.** Innovation opens new business models and rewards, making the transition a win-win for both farmers, fishers and nature, while supporting competitiveness.

**But we should never take our food sovereignty for granted.** The agri-food sector has withstood the shocks of the pandemic and high input costs, showcasing its incredible resilience. However, the pressure of geopolitical tensions, legacy effects of recent crises, devastating impacts of extreme weather events and environmental degradation as well as the consequences of structural trends are threatening the viability of this important sector and EU strategic autonomy.

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<sup>1</sup> Niinistö, S., *Safer together – Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness*, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission- Eurobarometer 2025: [Europeans, Agriculture and the CAP - January 2025 - Eurobarometer survey](#) .

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat, *Key figures on the European food chain – 2024 edition (europa.eu)*, 2024. Employment figures for agriculture are from 2020.

<sup>4</sup> DG Agriculture and Rural development, [Monitoring EU agri-food trade. Developments in 2023](#), March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat, [Urban-rural Europe - introduction - Statistics Explained](#), accessed February 2025.

The agri-food sector of today is facing challenging structural transformations, including significant discrepancies in the scale of farming operations and an aging farming population. Only around 12% of EU farmers are under the age of 40<sup>6</sup>. Even though income per person engaged in agriculture has been increasing over the past decades, the income remains significantly lower than the average in the rest of the economy<sup>7</sup>, which directly impacts the livelihoods of farmers and impedes their ability to invest, plan and innovate. This remains the number one factor in the mobilisation of farmers that the EU witnessed recently.

While many young people express an interest in farming as a career, and some are successfully engaged in thriving family farming enterprises, there are many challenges and barriers. Very uncertain income perspectives, in combination with complex regulatory requirements which can translate into stifling bureaucratic burdens, low profitability that hampers investments, crisis-prone production, demographic change, a gender gap, a lack of access to basic services in some rural areas, and the hardship of the profession are among the factors that can make farming increasingly unattractive for future generations. The cumulative impact of the agri-food sector often adds to high pressure on environment and climate, while at the same time farmers depend on nature to ensure future production. Most of these challenges are shared by primary producers in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors, as well as by the agri-food sector as a whole.

The lack of certainty and stability for the professional future of European farmers has led to recent wide-spread protests in the EU. Against this background, it is essential for the EU to **recognize the vital role farmers play in our lives and livelihoods, reignite the competitiveness and reinforce the attractiveness of this profession so it can thrive, innovate and provide its many benefits to our society - today, tomorrow and in 2040**. This is all the more relevant in light of the future enlargement, and the related challenges and opportunities for agriculture and for farmers, in present and future EU Member States.

This Communication sets out a vision for Europe's agri-food system for 2040 and beyond and presents a roadmap to guide EU action to ensure that **all policies work in step with this vision** and are adapted to new realities. In many areas, a better alignment between national and EU policies will be required to achieve the goals. This vision also supports the delivery of the EU Competitiveness Compass, the overarching EU flagship initiative to boost EU competitiveness<sup>8</sup>. The upcoming **Ocean Pact** will also set the frame for leveraging the EU's vast maritime area and coastline to boost food security, while preserving the natural asset that the fisheries sector relies on and boosting competitiveness through innovation. In addition, the Commission will prepare a vision for the fisheries and aquaculture sector with a 2040 perspective to ensure its long-term competitiveness and sustainability, work to ensure job creation and address pressing issues affecting the fishing community.

This Communication builds on multiple strategic inputs, including notably the Strategic Dialogue on the future of EU agriculture<sup>9</sup>, as well as the Draghi<sup>10</sup>, Letta<sup>11</sup>, and Niinistö<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Eurostat, [Farmers and the agricultural labour force - statistics - Statistics Explained](#), accessed February 2025.

<sup>7</sup> DG Agriculture and Rural development, [EU Farm Economics Overview](#), accessed February 2025.

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2025), *A Competitiveness Compass for the EU*, COM(2025) 30 final.

<sup>9</sup> [Strategic Dialogue on the future of EU Agriculture. A shared prospect for farming and food in Europe](#). 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Draghi, M., [The future of European competitiveness](#), September 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Letta, E., *Much more than a market. Speed, Security, Solidarity. Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens*, 2023.

reports. It also draws from the conclusions of the EU Heads of State and Government<sup>13</sup>, the conclusions of the Belgian Council Presidency on the future of agriculture (2024), as well as the 2024 Council conclusions on the future of the CAP. It further builds on the Opinions and Resolutions of the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

The policy response is articulated around **four fundamental priority areas**. The Communication spells out **work strands** on how these policy initiatives will be shaped in an inclusive and cooperative manner. The delivery of these priority areas rests largely on important flanking elements, namely **simplification** of the regulatory framework that impacts farmers and the entire agri-food value chain, and **innovation** that offers solutions for a sustainable transition.

### *New way of working: Building trust and dialogue*

The experience shows that certain topics related to food and agriculture can be very polarising and societal consensus is more likely to emerge from inclusive approaches. The core of this Vision is therefore a new way of working – building trust and dialogue across the entire agri-food system, in the EU and globally.

The first steps have already been achieved with the Strategic Dialogue and its unanimously agreed set of recommendations. But this dialogue must go deeper on the ground, with sustained and more effective interaction with farmers, food chain operators and civil society at local and regional level all over Europe, listening to their concerns and ideas. At the same time, the existing mechanisms to foster dialogue and cooperation with stakeholders at EU level, **such as the current Civil Dialogue Groups**, will need to be reviewed to guarantee more meaningful and effective participation in the design of future policies. The new **European Board on Agriculture and Food**<sup>14</sup> will be supporting the Commission in creating inclusive policies by providing strategic advice and fostering a new culture of dialogue among the different players in the agri-food chain. Additionally, the **EU CAP Network** will continue to facilitate exchanges across all relevant actors and **Annual Youth Policy Dialogues** will empower the meaningful inclusion of young citizens and farmers in policy discussions.

Finally, the Commission will continue to maintain a **permanent dialogue with all other EU institutions and bodies**, notably the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, as well as key international organisations and partners. To ensure **effective monitoring of the implementation of this Vision**, the Commission will report regularly to all EU institutions on the progress regarding the successful delivery of the various initiatives.

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<sup>12</sup> Niinistö, S., *Safer together – Strengthening Europe’s Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness, 2024*.

<sup>13</sup> The European Council’s Strategic Agenda 2024 – 2029, the 2022 Versailles Declaration, the 2023 Granada Declaration and the 2024 Budapest Declaration.

<sup>14</sup> [High-level advisory group](#) with 30 member organisations representing three stakeholder categories: the farming community, other actors in the food supply chain, and civil society, including areas such as environment and climate, animal welfare, and consumer issues.

## 2. VISION AND OBJECTIVES FOR 2040: AN AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS ATTRACTIVE, COMPETITIVE, SUSTAINABLE AND FAIR FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

The Union of 2040 must be a place where farming and food production thrive across our continent in all their diversity. A place where farming is attractive for future generations, and the agri-food sector is competitive, resilient, future-proof and fair.

The future of this strategic sector rests on the ability of the Union and its Member States to put in place the right conditions to enable:

- **An attractive and predictable agri-food sector where incomes enable farmers to thrive**, attracting future generations<sup>15</sup> that will continue producing food that is affordable for everyone and meets consumer demands; where conducive conditions are in place to allow the agri-food sector to leverage its entrepreneurial potential, supported by different income sources and skills to grasp the opportunities of innovation, technology and the green transition; where ecosystem services beneficial to the environment, water, soil or air quality, such as in the growing organic sector, are properly rewarded; where a fair functioning food chain ensures that the burden and costs of the transition are shared equitably along the chain.
- **An agri-food sector that is competitive and resilient in the face of rising global competition and shocks**. This hinges on the EU's ability to diversify its trade relationships, creating new export opportunities for the sector and reducing critical dependencies; where framework and global actions enable farmers to compete on a level playing field globally, alleviate the burden of bureaucracy at home and increase the resilience of the sector to be able not only to withstand and recover from shocks but also to adapt and transform. The EU continues to contribute to global food security and pursues its partnership-building role across the world.
- **A future proof agri-food sector that is functioning within planetary boundaries**, where farming and the food sector contribute together to the EU's climate objectives, while preserving healthy soils, clean water and air, and protecting and restoring Europe's biodiversity. Stakeholders along the food chain contribute jointly to delivering these results and share transition risks. All segments of the agri-food system are much better prepared to withstand the effects of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, use natural resources sustainably and efficiently and operate in line with a One Health approach.
- **An agri-food sector that values food, fosters fair working and living conditions and vibrant and well-connected rural and coastal areas**, including outermost regions; where rural areas enable their citizens' right to stay; where the link between food, territory, seasonality, cultures and traditions are cherished as integral parts of the European way of life; where the EU remains a world leader in food innovation and food safety, and food is affordable for citizens; where mental health is not a tabu but part of the social support system for farmers and workers; where living and working conditions attract more women and young

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<sup>15</sup> Krzysztofowicz, M., Rudkin, J., Winthagen, V. and Bock, A., *Farmers of the future*, EUR 30464 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, ISBN 978-92-76-26331-9, doi:10.2760/5237, JRC122308.

people to the profession and ensure the protection of rights of workers on farms and along the food value chain.

Finally, essential to the delivery of this Vision, Europe's agri-food system is investing and leveraging the transformative power that **research, knowledge, skills and innovation** offer.

### **3. DESIGNING TOGETHER THE POLICY RESPONSES FOR A THRIVING AGRIFOOD SECTOR**

This vision can only be achieved through a forward looking and coherent policy response articulated around the central question: how to build an agri-food system that is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable, and thus attractive, competitive, future-proof and fair for current and future generations?

#### **3.1. Building an attractive sector that ensures a fair standard of living and leverages new income opportunities**

Over 60 years ago, the EU has committed to ensuring a fair standard of living for the agricultural community, as established in Article 39 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. This commitment is as relevant now as it was then. On average, overall agricultural income per worker is still significantly lower than the average wages in the entire economy (60% of average wages in 2023)<sup>16</sup>, despite the efforts made.

Farmers do not want to depend on public support, but the volatile nature of this profession and market imbalances often require this. When defining the different measures to achieve a fair standard of living, **we must draw on all sources of income**: market revenues, public support as well as diversified and new complementary income sources.

#### ***Fair and equitable food chain***

Firstly, farmers must get a **better revenue from the market**, enabling them to make the necessary investments to future-proof and render their farms more resilient. A prerequisite for this is that current imbalances in the food chain where an unfair distribution of revenues, risks and the burden of costs often disproportionately affect primary producers, are corrected. **Practices where farmers are systematically forced to sell below costs will not be tolerated.**

First steps have already been taken to rebalance the positions and facilitate proper enforcement of rules tackling unfair trading practices with the proposals adopted by the Commission on 9 December 2024<sup>17</sup>. They will strengthen the producers' position in the negotiation and conclusion of contracts and better protect farmers against unfair trading practices.

Moreover, several Member States have resorted to national rules that aim to address the challenge of the production below cost, which might however lead to different approaches in the Single Market. As part of the evaluation of the current rules, unfair

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<sup>16</sup> [European Commission, Agri-food Data Portal: Jobs and Growth in Rural Areas. Farmers' income compared to wage in the rest of the economy, accessed February 2025.](#)

<sup>17</sup> The recently proposed amendments to the **Common Market Organisation Regulation (CMO)** aim to strengthen the producers' position in the negotiation and conclusion of contracts for the supply of agricultural products, foster cooperation among farmers and improve price transmission. Similarly, the proposed new rules on cross-border enforcement in the framework of the **Unfair Trading Practices Directive** should help us better protect farmers against unfair trading practices.

trading practices will be further investigated, together with a review of the national regulations as recommended by the Strategic Dialogue. The Commission will on this basis propose further initiatives, in particular the revision of the UTP directive to **address the principle that farmers should not be forced to systematically sell their products below production costs**, as well as the review of the CMO regulation in the context of the post-2027 CAP proposals.

At the same time, as suggested by the Strategic Dialogue, farmer's position in the value chain must be strengthened by encouraging them to join cooperatives and/or associations to reduce costs, increase efficiency and improve prices from the market. The CAP is already supporting farmers in this regard.

Furthermore, a key element to stimulate trust and fairness is **transparency** about how costs and margins are formed and shared in the food chain. The Commission will further enhance transparency along the food chain, including through the new **EU Agrifood Chain Observatory** (AFCO) that will elaborate and publish indicators related to the formation of prices in the food chain to guide further action. Those instruments should also support the long-term competitiveness of SMEs in the food and drink sector that have been particularly hit by the recent inflation.

### ***Fairer and better targeted public support***

To ensure the continuation of farming that attracts future generations of farmers across the EU, the public support through the **CAP remains essential to support farmers' income**. CAP direct payments still play a crucial role in supporting and stabilising agricultural income at farm level, accounting for 23% of farm income on average in 2020<sup>18</sup>.

The future CAP, as part of the future MFF proposals, will be simpler and more targeted, to support **an ambitious and future-oriented EU agricultural policy**. It will define a clearer balance between regulatory and incentives-based policies affecting farmers.

Furthermore, the Commission recognises that the public image of the CAP has been impacted by perceptions of a lack of fairness in the distribution of payments in some territories.

As a general principle, future CAP support will therefore be more directed towards farmers that **actively** engage in food production, towards the economic vitality of farms and the preservation of our environment. The approach should also consider prioritising production of agricultural products which are essential for the EU's strategic autonomy and resilience.

Small and medium-sized farmers form the social fabric of rural areas, protecting nature and livelihoods. They should have the conditions which enable them to farm without administrative over-burden. Given their scale, the Commission will consider making more attractive and extending the use of **simplified income support tools** with a streamlined system of conditions and controls.

The support should be further directed **towards those farmers who need it most**, with a particular attention to the farmers in areas with natural constraints, young and new farmers, and mixed farms.

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<sup>18</sup> European Commission (2023). *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: Summary of the CAP Strategic Plans 2023-2027: joint effort and collective ambition.*



Enhanced use of **measures such as degressivity and capping** will be considered, taking into account different structural and sectorial realities of Member States. All farmers should continue benefiting also from instruments such as payments for ecosystem services that will be streamlined and simplified, as well as investment support, and crisis and risk management tools.

Building on the experience of the current CAP Strategic Plans, **there is a need for further streamlining of how the CAP policy is implemented.** Current complexity calls for a more strategic approach.

The future CAP for post-2027 will rely on basic policy objectives and targeted policy requirements, while giving Member States further responsibility and accountability on how they meet these objectives.

Flexibility will be extended to farmers, giving them further agency in designing farming practices that are more tailored to their farms and context. The current system of conditionality will be simplified. Farmers have responded positively to the introduction of eco-schemes, which reward them to deliver ecosystem services that go beyond mandatory requirements. The Commission will orient the future CAP away **from conditions to incentives.**

### *Leveraging the opportunities of innovation that rewards*

Farmers are innovators and entrepreneurs by nature. **Young farmers want to be the drivers of innovation.** New opportunities are emerging for complementary sources of income for farmers and also fishers from a climate-neutral and nature-positive economy.

Concrete examples are the growing **organic sector and agroecological farming practices** which prove to be attractive options for younger farmers, combining economic possibilities with environmental results and social responsibility.

For others, innovation offers new and exciting opportunities. For example, **bioeconomy and circularity** offer a great potential for agriculture, forestry and the entire food system, as well as for reducing our critical dependencies. The new **Bioeconomy Strategy**, to be presented by the end of 2025, will aim at positioning the European Union as a global leader in the rapidly expanding bioeconomy market. We must accelerate the commercialization of bio-based and circular solutions, scale up breakthrough biotechnologies, capture emerging market opportunities and bridge investment gaps. This will be particularly beneficial for the farming community by enabling diversification of value streams, valorisation of farm residues, strengthening the role of primary producers in the value chain and generating new jobs in the rural areas. The Commission will work with international partners, in particular through the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), to together identify sustainable ways of mobilising the potential of the bioeconomy for farmers not only in Europe but also worldwide.

Innovative financing tools, including private and blended public-private financing for nature can, in addition to public support, reward farmers who maintain or transition to nature-positive practices and bring them together with companies and investors with a business interest in such practices.

**Carbon farming** is already emerging as an additional source of income. The Carbon Removals and Carbon Farming Regulation (CRCF)<sup>19</sup> has created the first EU-wide

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<sup>19</sup> Regulation 2024(EU)3012.

voluntary framework for certifying carbon removals, carbon farming and carbon storage in products across Europe, and certification methodologies are currently being developed to reliably monitor, report, and verify carbon removals, soil emission reduction, and biodiversity benefits. These methodologies will build where possible on existing schemes, that already successfully provide farmers with additional income. Once fully developed, effective ways of matching offer and demand of these voluntary credits should be stimulated to optimise their additional income opportunities for farmers.

Going forward, the Commission will complement this with developing opportunities for **nature credits**, units of nature-positive actions, representing quantified and certified high-quality nature-positive outcomes. A number of existing schemes developed by commercial operators and ongoing pilot projects, both at EU and international level, show the important potential for such projects, on which further work can build.

Important opportunities are also emerging on **renewable energy production**, an avenue which enhances energy security, decreases greenhouse gas emissions, and offers farmers and foresters additional income and innovation prospects. Farmers should not only be even more **energy-sufficient with for example solar panels, windmills and biogas production**, but also be able to **deliver their energy products to the market**, including through energy communities.

Examples:

Digitalisation (including AI), research and innovative AgriTech technologies have a potential to revolutionise farming and reduce on-farm costs, thus contributing to better incomes.

- E-commerce platforms, digital marketing tools, and online marketplaces can help farmers and other agri-food system actors reach a wider customer base and diversify their revenue streams.
- Precision farming and data-based solutions can increase profitability through the optimisation of inputs.
- The 100 living labs of the Horizon Europe research and innovation mission ‘A Soil Deal for Europe’ are an unprecedented resource to support farmers to improve their soils in the context of high inputs prices for fertilisers and water scarcity and other extreme phenomena such as floods.

### ***Building an ambitious investment agenda***

A resilient and sustainable agri-food system requires significant investment and hence **bold action to finance and de-risk the sustainability transition**. The farm sector is confronted with a significant financing gap estimated at EUR 62 billion (for 2022), much higher than in 2017<sup>20</sup>. But getting a loan from a bank, financial institutions or a private investor is hard, especially for young farmers. This is a consequence of the relatively small farm size, low or modest returns on investment, highly variable profitability and risks, unpredictable production output due to weather and climate impacts and exposure to volatile (global) commodity markets.

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<sup>20</sup> European Commission & EIB, *Financing gap in the EU agricultural and agri-food sectors*, FI Compass, 2023.

The CAP will continue to finance investments to foster the competitiveness, sustainability and resilience of the farming sector. This includes the often relatively small-scale investments at farm level as well as public and private infrastructure needed for the modernisation of the sector. Existing instruments can only reinforce each other, if they are used in a smarter way in future.

The Commission will work to efficiently use public funding and investment and leverage and de-risk private capital, working closely with institutional investors such as the **European Investment Bank Group (EIBG)** as well as the banking sector.

In this respect, the Commission will explore options to establish risk insurances schemes for primary producers and also explore public-private partnerships to **attract investments for SMEs in agriculture and food business** to step-up the agri-food chain transformation.

### *Fostering entrepreneurship: a new generational renewal strategy*

The future of food sovereignty in Europe in 2040 rests on the shoulders of young and new farmers of today.

One of the preconditions for an increased attractiveness of the agricultural sector is **to tackle the key barriers to generational renewal**, in particular access to land, investments, skills, and more. “The right to stay” can be applied to the setting up of young farmers who wish to stay and farm in their territories.

But this responsibility cannot be solely borne by the CAP. Stimulating a true generational renewal requires a whole-of-society approach and a policy mix across different areas and responsibilities, many of which lie within national and regional competences.

The Commission will lead the work on the **Generational Renewal Strategy** that will be delivered in 2025, in close cooperation with the Member States, European Parliament and the key stakeholders. This strategy will **provide recommendations** for the policy response and measures needed, both at the EU and national/regional level.

The limited availability of fertile **land** in a context of growing competition for its use and the consequence of climate change puts the farming community, and particularly the new entrants to the sector, in a difficult situation. Land policy covers many aspects, mainly within national competences. This work should consider land mobility and transfer conditions, as well as land take mitigation principles, building on the good examples from several Member States in land mobility schemes. Equally important is transparency in land planning and buying. Member States have potential to develop strong levers in their national toolbox that could facilitate generational renewal, including through **retirement schemes and tax incentives**.

In response to the European Parliament’s request, and in line with the recommendation from the Strategic Dialogue, the European Commission will work towards launching an **EU Observatory on Farmland**<sup>21</sup>. We will enhance transparency and cooperation in domains such as land transactions and transfers of land use rights, price trends and market behaviour, changes in land use, as well as loss of agricultural and natural land. The observatory will also help the Member States take informed decisions on the regulation of their farmland markets. Enhanced transparency of market developments and

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<sup>21</sup> PP 08 25 01 — *EU observatory for agricultural land, control and access to farmland*; European Parliament legislative resolution of 27 November 2024 on the joint text on the draft general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2025, P10TA(2024)0050.

cooperation across the EU will make it easier to achieve legitimate interests of agricultural policy in compliance with single market freedoms.

### 3.2. A competitive and resilient sector in the face of global challenges

In an interconnected world in which the EU is both the world's largest agri-food exporter and one of the largest importers, the way we produce, consume and trade agricultural products has a major impact on our relations with third countries<sup>22</sup>.

Wars and conflict are the major drivers of food insecurity. Conversely, food insecurity can also lead to instability, and in the changing global order, food is being used as a weapon. Our trade partners resort to unilateral actions that target our key sectors, our exports still face barriers and global supply chains are at risk of distortions. The EU's pursuit of high global standards to protect universal objectives of environmental protection, human health, animal health and welfare, plant health and food safety, is often seen as a trade irritant. At the same time, farmers in the EU are increasingly concerned by unfair global competition and lack of reciprocity.

But these challenges will not stop the Union from continuing strengthening ties with many willing partners, including through the Global Gateway investment strategy. **Global food security and European food sovereignty will remain an integral part of the EU's overall security, competitiveness and sustainability agenda.** With high levels of hunger, acute food insecurity and rising food prices around the world, the EU will continue to support third countries in their food sovereignty, resilience and sustainability, ensuring access to safe, high quality and nutritious food for all, including the most vulnerable through humanitarian assistance and the respect of the International Humanitarian Law.

#### *Diversifying supply chains and promoting transformative resilience*

In a world marked by geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions, “**dependencies are becoming vulnerabilities**” in Draghi's words<sup>23</sup>. Today, the EU's food sovereignty depends to a large extent on imported inputs, such as fertilisers, feed and energy, and this usually from geographically concentrated regions. **Reducing these strategic dependencies and derisking supply chains is therefore crucial**, while supporting a transition to a clean and increasingly resource-efficient low-carbon economy<sup>24</sup>.

In terms of key import dependencies, the Union's **protein supply** is heavily reliant on high-quality imports from a limited number of origins, making our food system vulnerable to global market fluctuations and sustainability risks<sup>25</sup>. We need to consider both the way protein is produced and consumed in the EU. The Commission will therefore **develop a comprehensive plan** to address these challenges, integrating policy, research and on the ground efforts to create a more self-sufficient and sustainable EU protein system, while at the same time diversifying imports.

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<sup>22</sup> The value of EU agri-food exports amounted in 2023 to €230 bn (9% of total exports) and the one of EU imports to €160 bn (6% of total imports), generating a €70 bn trade surplus. Source: DG Agriculture and Rural development, [Monitoring EU agri-food trade. Developments in 2023](#), March 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Draghi, M., [The future of European competitiveness. Part A: A competitiveness strategy for Europe](#), September 2024, p.15.

<sup>24</sup> Spain's National Office of Foresight and Strategy, [Resilient EU 2030. A future-oriented approach to reinforce the EU's Open Strategic Autonomy and Global Leadership](#), 2023.

<sup>25</sup> DG Agriculture and Rural Development, [Protein supply and demand](#), September 2024.

Another important dependency is on **imported raw materials and fertilisers** which are essential for food production and security. There has been an increasing concentration of imports from a few origins, particularly for urea, with about 88% of EU imports supplied by four countries<sup>26</sup>. Reducing these dependencies is a win-win: (i) for the **European clean industrial competitiveness** by supporting domestic production of fertilisers; (ii) **for the farmers** who can count on a reliable supply and stable prices, and (iii) for **environment and climate** through the support for the uptake of low-carbon fertilisers and recycled nutrients, such as RENURE and digestate after appropriate treatment, and their efficient use.

Looking ahead, the future enlargement of the EU will bring opportunities for the EU's resilience, with the objective of maintaining and strengthening production and export capacity in both current and future Member States, thereby strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy and weight in global agri-food trade. But there are also challenges that require careful consideration, in particular as regards the impact on the EU farmers. Preparing for and effectively addressing the challenges for EU farmers will be essential to reap the opportunities offered by enlargement, including as it could facilitate a gradual integration of candidate countries in the Single Market, while they progress towards full EU membership.

### *Towards a fairer global competition*

The Union approach to a **fairer global level playing field** will consist of two-fold action that must go hand in hand:

#### **(a) Global and bilateral cooperation**

In the current geopolitical context, it is clear that it will become **increasingly difficult to achieve a global consensus** on farming and food standards.

However, the EU will continue working in Team Europe approach with our partners and key International Organisations to strengthen a stricter implementation of internationally agreed commitments and to increase their ambition to achieve global sustainable food systems in line with the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Priority will be given to raising global standards in international standard-setting bodies in areas critical for ensuring fair competition, particularly when it comes to plant protection products and animal welfare. **The Commission will present in 2025 its line of action on deepening reciprocity to the Member States for further elaboration.** Secondly, the Union will work with FAO and our international partners in driving the development of a common approach to allow a comparable and fair assessment of sustainability aspects on food production globally, complementing the EU's work on benchmarking sustainability.

The EU will be more assertive in promoting and defending strategically the **exports of EU products**, making sure that third countries would benefit from the implementation of trade facilitation measures (e.g. prelisting), provided they also apply similar measures to

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<sup>26</sup> With urea imports of 38% from Egypt, 33% from Russia and Belarus, and 19% from Algeria, Source: European Commission, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/data-and-analysis/markets/overviews/market-observatories/fertilisers\\_en](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/data-and-analysis/markets/overviews/market-observatories/fertilisers_en), accessed February 2025.

the EU. We will reinforce our **agri-food economic diplomacy** and dedicated high-level missions.

At **bilateral level**, the existing bilateral agricultural policy dialogues will be reinforced and **new Agrifood policy partnership dialogues** will be established with key bilateral, regional and continental partners. In this context, strategic and comprehensive partnerships with our Southern neighbourhood and the upcoming new Pact for the Mediterranean offer important opportunities. The EU will also use bilateral Free Trade Negotiations and Agreements to their full extent. The interests of European farmers will continue to be protected. The EU will reinforce the implementation and enforcement of Trade and Sustainable Development chapters/provisions, as well as Sustainable Food Systems chapters, with more targeted and operational country specific priorities and actions, including in relation to specific sectors of activity, as appropriate. In our partnership dialogues, we will pay specific attention to the possible impact of EU regulatory policies on local agri-food systems and ensure coherence between EU internal and external policies related to agriculture, environment, climate and health.

#### (b) **The Union framework for a competitive agri-food sector**

At the same time, the Union will ensure domestically that ambitious EU standards do not lead to economic, environmental and social leakages, and that the European agri-food sector is not put at a competitive disadvantage without corresponding reciprocity. To this end, **the EU will coherently implement an SME and competitiveness check in its policies** as stated in the Competitiveness Compass, consistently assessing the impact of Union regulations on EU farmers and agri-food SMEs, on trade and on risks of creating leakages, and thoroughly examine the implications of free trade agreements under negotiations for EU farmers and global sustainability.

To ensure that the EU's concerns about animal welfare and environmental protection are considered, and to uphold EU's moral values in response to societal demand, the Commission will pursue, in line with international rules, **a stronger alignment of production standards applied to imported products, notably on pesticides and animal welfare.**

In that respect, the Commission will establish a principle **that the most hazardous pesticides banned in the EU for health and environmental reasons are not allowed back to the EU through imported products.** To advance on this, the Commission will launch in 2025 the Impact Assessment that will consider the impacts on the EU's competitive position and the international implications and, if appropriate, propose amendments to the applicable legal framework. Similarly, the Commission will also assess the issue of the export of hazardous chemicals, including pesticides, that are banned in the EU<sup>27</sup>.

Another non-negotiable element of the Union's policy towards imports is **food and feed safety, animal and plant health.** The EU product standards are the highest in the world and ensure that all imported agrifood products are safe. The Commission will ensure that relevant food safety legislation is properly implemented and enforced. A **dedicated task force will be established**, pulling expertise and forces from the Commission and

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<sup>27</sup> European Commission (2020), *Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability. Towards a Toxic-Free Environment*, COM(2020) 667 final.

Member States, which will significantly increase the Union's response to further **strengthening the control on imports, including a powerful strengthening of controls on the ground**

In the area of **animal welfare**, the Commission will make sure that future legislative proposals apply the same standards for products produced in the EU and those imported from third countries, also addressing enforcement related issues and concerns expressed by EU citizens. The targeted review of the **animal welfare legislation** will be an opportunity to apply this, in a WTO compliant way and based on an impact assessment.

Where our trade partners resort to unfair competition and unilateral actions that unlawfully target our agri-food sector or that of individual Member States with the aim to divide us as a Union, the EU will use all protective tools at its disposal. The Union will develop (in 2025) an ambitious **Unity Safety Net** for the EU agri-food sector. In cases of economic coercion of the EU or its Member States by non-EU countries, the Union will protect the agri-food sector through all available means, including in the context of the WTO or EU autonomous instruments such as the Anti-Coercion Instrument, where appropriate.

The Commission will also work with the EIB to provide **export credits** that de-risk exports for Union agri-food sector.

In this context, the reserve of 1 billion announced in the context of the EU-Mercosur agreement in the next MFF will play an important role.

In addition, the Commission will work on strengthening the competitiveness and resilience of sensitive sectors such as livestock, present a **simplification package** that will contribute to the competitiveness of European farmers while preserving the contribution to societal objectives, propose an **extension of the country of origin labelling in line with sectoral specificities and Single Market rules** and intensify its **promotion policy**.

### *Preparedness and risk-proofing agri-food sector*

“We must be better prepared, not only to survive, but also to thrive in this new reality”, states the Niinistö report<sup>28</sup>. This new reality has been marked by significant shocks, from the pandemic, the Russian war of aggression and market disturbances to animal/plant diseases and a volatile geopolitical situation. Moreover, extreme weather events, once relatively rare, are becoming more frequent while precipitation patterns are changing.

Farmers are at the forefront of many of these crises. The growing number of risks, threats and uncertainties call for an ambitious **European risk and crisis management approach** which would **review and strengthen the toolbox to better manage risks and crises** at EU level.

Firstly, the incentives for farmers will be reinforced to reduce their vulnerability and exposure to risks through adaptation at the farm level, as well as incentives for farmers to share risks (e.g. via producer organisations or cooperatives). A climate-resilient EU agriculture must rely on **policies tailored to local, regional and national needs**,

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<sup>28</sup> Niinistö, S., *Safer together – Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness*, 2024, p.4.

supporting agricultural practices and interventions that make agricultural local productions fit for future climate conditions.

Building on the experience of the initiatives carried out in the past years<sup>29</sup>, additional steps are needed. The upcoming **European Climate Adaptation Plan**, and the upcoming **Water Resilience Strategy**, will play an important role, in particular in supporting Member States on preparedness and planning, and addressing the risks and impacts of climate change on energy, transport and other infrastructure, water, food and land in cities and rural areas.

The future CAP will support, in a more targeted way, measures and investments that make the agricultural sector more resilient to the changing conditions. More ambitious transformational changes will be needed in places where the current productions are not sustainable for the longer term, through for example new local strategies, research and innovation, including new genomic techniques to produce more climate resilient crops.

Secondly, ambitious action is needed on risk preparedness, insurance and de-risking. In that domain, cooperation with the **European Investment Bank (EIB)**, with banks, insurance and re-insurance companies and with value-chain actors will be crucial. This should lead to a better pooling of risks and an improvement in the availability and affordability of agricultural insurances for farmers.

Thirdly, the Commission and the Member States must ensure **policy coherence between risk and crisis management tools** as well as greater flexibilities. Crisis management tools should encourage farmers to proactively manage risks and Member States to work towards efficient and adapted risk management strategies.

Moreover, the **functioning of the agricultural reserve** should be carefully assessed with a view to refocusing it to specific crises of a significant magnitude, such as major market disturbances and animal/plant health issues. Furthermore, the provision of exceptional support to farmers should be better linked to appropriate risk management and preventive measures.

As a follow-up to the Niinistö report, the EU should step up its level of preparedness on food security across the whole food chain. The activities of the **European Food Security Crisis Mechanism (EFSCM)** should continue, be further developed and linked to overall EU crisis management within a whole-of-government approach. In consistency with the upcoming **Preparedness Union Strategy**, synergies and more coordination should be sought for preparedness. In addition, new agriculture and food specific tools could be explored related to food reserves, joint procurement, and increased transparency in times of crises. Like for other essential sectors such as health, holistic preparedness and response plans should be developed at national and regional level covering all aspects relevant to the whole food supply chain within a wider EU approach to preparedness.

### *Supporting the resilience of agricultural markets*

The geopolitical events resulting in trade distortions, the global competition, the impacts of extreme climatic events and the changing consumption patterns are a source of uncertainty for many commodity markets, from wine, cereals, animal products to olive

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<sup>29</sup> The EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, the Communication on Managing Climate Risks and the CAP.



oil. The Commission closely monitors all markets and rapidly acts when market situation deteriorates.

The specific situation of the wine sector required such a response, and the Commission will advance towards the implementation in 2025 of the recommendations of the High-Level Group on Wine<sup>30</sup>.

The EU livestock sector is particularly vulnerable to different shocks and global competition. High EU standards require EU livestock farmers to be world leaders, but their efforts are not reciprocated globally where they compete on an uneven level playing field. Such standards also come at a cost that the market does not always reward. **Livestock is and will remain an essential part of EU agriculture, competitiveness and cohesion.** Sustainable livestock is crucial for the EU economy, viability of rural areas and preservation of the environment and of rural landscapes. It is a sector in which innovation can thrive and bring tangible benefits.

The **EU livestock sector requires a long-term vision** that respects the diversity and sustainability of livestock production across Europe. Protecting this diversity means that there cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach but rather targeted, territorial solutions for the sector's competitiveness and sustainability. A powerful drive could be given by designing conducive conditions for the development of an "excellence livestock production chain". The Commission will launch a **work stream on livestock** to develop policy pathways that: a) provide a diagnosis of the sector's challenges, including global competition; b) propose appropriate tools to accompany the sector and, where justified, reciprocity measures; c) seek ways to address its climate/environment footprint, including ways to valorise the link between livestock production and maintenance of environment- and climate-valuable grasslands through more extensive livestock systems beneficial to the preservation of biodiversity and landscapes; d) foster investments, technological development and innovation; and e) enhance the development of sustainable production models.

### ***Reducing red tape to foster a competitive agri-food sector***

**Farmers should be entrepreneurs and providers, not carrying unnecessary bureaucratic or regulatory burdens.** As the Draghi report stated, excessive requirements and reporting obligations impede the competitiveness of the EU economy and innovation.

The Commission will deliver an unprecedented simplification effort<sup>31</sup>, including in agriculture. There is no place for the Union to design in such detail the on-farm practices that must be respected. Numerous requests for derogations from these obligations, often justified based on national and regional specificities, have proven that one-size-fits-all approaches are not the most appropriate tool for such a diversified sector.

Additionally, there must be a better burden-sharing when it comes to the implementation of regulations and requirements between farmers and Member States, paired with a stress-test and reality-check of existing and new legislation. Equally, gold plating should be avoided and a cumulative assessment of impacts is essential.

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<sup>30</sup> High-Level Group on Wine Policy, [Policy Recommendations for the Future of the EU Wine Sector](#), December 2024.

<sup>31</sup> European Commission (2025), *A Competitiveness Compass for the EU*, COM(2025) 30 final.

Positive prospects for simplification stem from new technologies. For example, earth observation satellites help reduce on-the-spot controls and reduce reporting obligations by providing real-time and actionable data at farm level. The integration of satellite technology leads to better resource use, reduced input costs, and improved sustainability. Accordingly, continuity and evolution of EU space assets i.e. Copernicus and Galileo will further foster simplification and competitiveness. Furthermore, data-sharing technologies could cut red tape by providing for more streamlined and automated reporting opportunities.

The Commission will propose in Q2 2025 a comprehensive **Simplification package of the current agricultural legislative framework** which will deliver: (i) On-farm simplification and streamlining of requirements that better recognise various situations and farming practices (such as organic farming); (ii) Streamlining support for smaller and medium-sized farms by greater use of simplified payments; (iii) Boosting competitiveness through improved and simplified planning and access to financial instruments available under the current MFF; (iv) Giving greater flexibility to the Member States for the management of strategic plans.

In addition, the Commission will work in 2025 on delivering a **cross-cutting legislative simplification package of measures** that deliver meaningful simplification in other policy areas than the CAP that affect farmers, the food and feed businesses and the related administrations. It will focus on elements that will help farmers and food and feed businesses be more competitive and resilient, also in view of geopolitical shocks and global competition.

### **3.3. Future-proofing the agri-food sector that works hand in hand with nature**

Like no other sector, food production is based on, and inextricably linked to, nature and ecosystems. The ability of farmers to produce food in the long run and be resilient depend on resilient ecosystems, maintenance of soils, fight against pests and diseases, pollination of crops, water quality and availability, clean air and climate conditions. The EU has the objective to be climate neutral by 2050 and fight and reverse environmental degradation. The agri-food sector has an important contribution to make towards this objective and draws benefits from this.

At the same time, the ecological transition must carefully integrate economic and implementation challenges, as well as the need for a just transition in social terms. It must also recognise specificities of farming: on the one hand, agriculture will always have a degree of impact on natural resources, with limitations in terms of mitigation compared to other sectors of the economy. Similarly, situations across regions and territories differ greatly. This naturally calls for well-tailored and targeted solutions, including nature-based solutions.

#### ***Where decarbonisation and competitiveness go hand in hand***

Agricultural activities can remove carbon from the atmosphere into soils and biomass; in most cases, these activities also make food production more resilient to climate-related damage, and therefore contributing to food security. As all sectors need to contribute to the emissions reduction, climate action in the agri-food sector is essential to meet the broader goal of a **climate-neutral and resilient EU by 2050**.

The Commission expects agriculture to achieve the emissions cuts in alignment with the EU climate target for 2030. Building on this, the Commission will consider pathways for the contribution of the agricultural sector to the EU's 2040 climate target, taking into account **the specificities of the sector and focusing on its competitiveness, the need to ensure food security and to strengthen the bioeconomy, and in dialogue with the sector and the Member States**. This approach will be reflected in the review of the relevant legislation regulating GHG emissions and removals from the agriculture and the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry sectors.

With **effective policies that reward good practices and approaches tailored to specific needs**, there is room to further decrease emissions from agriculture faster while enhancing carbon removals in the land sector, in soils and forests. For prevailing emissions from livestock, the recommendations from the livestock work stream will serve as the basis for the further development of a toolbox of tailored measures to support the sector and regions in their efforts to reduce emissions. Technological advancements, including in feeding strategies, will also contribute. Linked to this, the future CAP will assess how to support farmers best in reducing further greenhouse gas emissions from their farming and livestock activities.

The food and drink industry, as well as the retail sector, have also a crucial role to play in contributing to the 2040 climate target and the environment protection. Clear policies and incentives should be put in place to realise the innovation potential in the food system and the bioeconomy at large and to deliver healthy, affordable and sustainable food to EU citizens.

### *Incentivising sustainability*

Environmental sustainability is increasingly a license to produce for farmers. The opportunities from nature and climate protection can provide a **positive agenda** for European agriculture. Working with nature provides resilience for farming for future generations, and it has started its incremental steps to draw in financing from the private sector, which should be further explored as a complementary source of income, in addition to public support. When it comes to carbon removals, carbon farming and carbon storage, these approaches will become more harmonised in the EU thanks to the Carbon Removal and Carbon Farming (CRCF) certification framework. The upcoming harmonised CRCF methodologies and verification rules will bring more clarity in that regard.

However, in recent years European farms have seen a **substantial multiplication of sustainability standards, certifications and reporting requirements**, set by various actors, organisations and institutions, both public and private. These different methodologies and reporting requirements touch on wide range of aspects related to sustainability and are resulting in a fragmented landscape, characterised by inconsistencies between standards, incomparability of initiatives, and misleading signals as to the direction to take. This creates high transaction costs and confusion for farmers and bears the risk of 'greenwashing' practices.

To address this problem, in addition to simplifying and streamlining EU requirements, the Commission will also develop and gradually phase in a **voluntary benchmarking system for on-farm sustainability assessments**, thus allowing simplification and benchmarking to go hand in hand. Similar benchmarking approaches could be developed

together with and extended to the whole agrifood sector, including supporting consumer choices.

#### ***An example of benchmarking: On-farm Sustainability Compass***

The sustainability compass should **act as a one-stop-shop** that **streamlines reporting and reduces administrative burdens** for farmers, allowing them to monitor and record sustainability data only once. Secondly, it will support farmers in gradually adopting more sustainable practices and attracting new sources of financing. It will allow them to better measure and **benchmark their sustainability performance** and **demonstrate their provision of ecosystem services** through easier data sharing. Thirdly, improved measurement and reporting can help design public policies in a **proportionate way**. This voluntary system for on-farm sustainability assessments will be developed based on a **bottom-up, participatory and ‘customer-driven’ approach**.

#### ***Farming and nature***

Ensuring that agriculture and nature go hand in hand requires **better implementation, streamlining and enforcement of existing legislation** and using incentives and new market-based tools to promote change.

Additionally, farmers need a more advanced toolbox to be able to farm in a nature-friendly way and achieve the set objectives. This toolbox requires a well-calibrated mix of a better targeted public support from the future CAP, investments into nature-friendly solutions, more economic incentives, tailored advice drawing on advances in research and innovation, and a more agile regulatory environment.

One such example is the EU ambition to reduce the use of harmful pesticides. This is important both for the long-term resilience of farming, nature and health protection. However, the introduction of alternatives in a form of biological or innovative low-risk plant protection products has not followed with the same pace as the withdrawal of active substances from the EU market. If this trend continues, it can affect the EU’s ability to ensure food production. The Commission will therefore carefully consider any further ban of pesticides if alternatives are not yet available, unless the pesticide in question represents a threat to human health or to the environment that agriculture relies upon for its viability.

Equally, the Commission **will in 2025, as part of the simplification package in Q4, put forward a proposal that accelerates the access for biopesticides** to the EU market. It will provide a definition of biocontrol active substances, introduce the possibility for Member States to grant provisional authorisations for plant protection products containing such biocontrol active substances while their evaluation is still ongoing and create a fast-track procedure for their approval and authorisation.

Furthermore, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) will have to be reinforced with additional resources to speed up risk assessment procedures so that it can continue playing a central role in providing timely, transparent and independent scientific advice. This will facilitate the access to the EU market of innovative plant protection products while ensuring a high level of protection of consumers’ health and the environment.

**Healthy soil** is the basis for farming, today and tomorrow. At the same time, European soils are under strain from factors including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and in some cases unsustainable soil management. To address this, the Commission will incentivise and support farming practices that recover, maintain or improve soil health.

Continuous support for organic farming remains essential, while other integrated approaches could be further encouraged. In this respect, putting in place independent and **reliable advisory services** will be critical to ensure that farmers can draw on best knowledge profiting soil and farming.

Agriculture is heavily **reliant on water**, requiring a steady and safe supply to ensure the health and wellbeing of crops, livestock, and all forms of life. However, water is vulnerable to a number of challenges including agriculture-related abstraction and pollution. The EU is increasingly affected by water stress since **water scarcity** is further exacerbated by climate change. Adverse weather events due to climate change are a key risk to crop production, especially in Southern Europe<sup>32</sup>. The Commission will soon present a **Water Resilience Strategy** that will outline the Commission's response to the pressing need for more efficient water uses, reducing water pollution and addressing challenges related to over-abstraction of water resources.

Special attention needs to be paid to improving **nutrients management at farm level** and increasing nutrients circularity. Priority should be given to addressing nutrient pollution hotspots and promoting integrated territorial approaches. A key aspect of this would be the management and control of nutrients from livestock farming to limit negative externalities, support extensification in regions with high livestock concentrations, and promote circularity which can help reduce the use of synthetic fertilisers. **The evaluation of the Nitrates Directive due at the end of 2025** will provide further evidence to inform the discussion.

#### **3.4. Valuing food and fostering fair living and working conditions in vibrant rural areas**

Food connects people across territories and regions. It connects farmers with consumers and links urban centres with rural dwellers. Farmers, fishers and food production are the glue that keep rural and coastal communities strong and form the basis of further economic activity. Dynamic rural areas foster quality food production which in turn supports their economy. Reinvigorating these connections between food and territory and revitalising rural areas will be essential for the future of farming in Europe.

##### ***Fair living and working conditions across European rural and coastal areas***

Demographic challenges, ageing and depopulation trends in particular, paired with **poor generational renewal**, are leading to a decline in the working age population in most rural and in many coastal areas throughout the Union.

As a result of the geopolitical tensions, the EU's Eastern border regions most affected by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine are rural areas of particular vulnerability and concern and need particular support. Socio-economic decline and increasing depopulation will have additional security implications here, while these mostly rural areas are of strategic importance for the EU's security.

Besides access to land and capital, the availability of better education, quality jobs and career opportunities, better mobility, basic health services, and connectivity are all pre-conditions for the vitality of rural areas and for attracting new workforce in the food sector. Food and feed production in the EU is also dependent on farm workers, which are frequently coming from other EU Member States or from third countries and too often work under precarious conditions. This needs to be, more than before, proactively

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<sup>32</sup> European Environmental Agency, *European Climate Risk Assessment*, 2024.

addressed and considered in public policies. Linked to this, social dialogue and collective bargaining have an important role to play, in line with national law and traditions.

Farming is a rewarding but also a demanding profession, often characterised by lack of work-life balance, and frequent isolation and loneliness, which many times affect **mental health**. Suicide rates among farmers are 20% higher than the national average in certain Member States<sup>33</sup>. The Farm Advisory Services under the CAP can be instrumental in raising awareness on mental health and accidents at work through specific advice to farmers. For example, the Irish Teagasc has been actively supporting farmers' mental health and raising awareness through its numerous activities<sup>34</sup>.

Alongside the CAP, a number of other policies, including Cohesion policy, have a significant impact on rural areas and contribute to social, economic and territorial cohesion in Europe. The contribution of Cohesion Policy to the economic diversification and the provision of infrastructure and associated services can play a greater role to help rural areas to remain attractive places to live for farmers, their families and other rural inhabitants, as well as stimulate tourism. Agritourism in particular can provide farmers with a complementary income.

**Synergies and complementarities must be further enhanced to ensure effective support and tangible impact in rural areas.** A closer coordination of funding instruments with sectorial policies can contribute to the development of rural areas through integrated planning and implementation efforts.

In 2025, the Commission will launch an **updated EU Rural Action Plan** that will be consolidated with projects, initiatives and actions from numerous policies of the EU to respond to the new European policy priorities post-2027. The **rural proofing principle**, including territorial impact assessments, will be further operationalised and sufficiently resourced at EU level. Moreover, the **Rural Pact**<sup>35</sup>, launched in 2021 to provide a framework for cooperation with stakeholders, will be further strengthened as the instrument for dialogue and engagement of civil society and rural communities – both in supporting implementation and policy discussions. The Commission will also take further action to **address the targeted spread of disinformation** in rural areas.

Furthermore, circular economy contains significant potential for the economy of rural areas, in particular through the bioeconomy. In the long-term Vision for rural areas<sup>36</sup>, the Commission estimated that the further development of the bioeconomy will lead to the creation of 400,000 new highly skilled jobs by 2035 and up to 700,000 by 2050, mostly in rural areas.

Participatory local development tools, like **LEADER/community-led local development and other forms of cooperation like Smart villages**, which proved their efficiency, will be further strengthened. The concept of **functional rural areas** will be further developed in view of addressing the gap in the availability and affordability of services for rural citizens, in line with the Commission's commitment to address the need for an effective 'right to stay' for all European citizens. This concerns all rural areas, with relevance for remote areas and those that do not have immediate access to services

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<sup>33</sup> European Commission (2023), *Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health*, COM(2023) 298 final.

<sup>34</sup> Teagasc & Mental Health Ireland, [Sowing Seeds of Support: Positive Mental Health Guidance for the Farming Community](#), 2024.

<sup>35</sup> [Rural Pact Platform homepage | Rural Pact Community Platform](#) .

<sup>36</sup> European Commission (2021), [A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040](#). COM(2021) 345 final.

offered by towns and cities. Here, small and medium-sized towns have an important role in providing access to services and infrastructure.

**Outermost regions** have specificities that require specific and targeted support. The Commission confirms the importance of the POSEI scheme to support farmers in the outermost regions. The results of the ongoing evaluation will feed into the reflection on how to ensure that POSEI can guarantee the long-term future of the agricultural sector in the outermost regions, further contributing to their food security and sovereignty, competitiveness and resilience.

To attract more women to farming and to allow for exchange of experience, the Commission will establish a **Women in Farming platform** that will strengthen women's engagement and equal opportunities in the farming sector thanks to the actions brought about by the Platform members. It will also serve as a forum to discuss and exchange good practices.

### ***Valuing food: reestablishing the essential link between farming, territory and food and harnessing the power of innovation***

Over the past decades, consumers' relationship with food has evolved. Food is more processed, eating habits are changing and supply chains have gotten longer and more complex. At the same time, food affordability remains a major concern, especially for low-income households. While the link between farming, food and territory has weakened, changing societal expectations with regard to food hold opportunities for the sector. **Therefore, going back to the “roots” and re-establishing the link between food, territory, seasonality, cultures and local traditions is very important.**

Consumers have an important role to play in the transition. Farmers and fishers face pressure to improve their environmental performance, while markets fail to reward the progress already made and to incentivise further sustainability practices.

To make informed choices, **consumers need access to trustworthy information.** The Commission will continue to enforce EU consumer protection laws to prevent unfair commercial practices. Clearing out misleading environmental claims and unreliable sustainability labels is a prerequisite for equipping consumers with the information they need to make sustainable choices.

**Food is a crucial part of any discussion on the future of agriculture and food production in Europe.** But it is also **sensitive**, as experience shows, where social and cultural traditions come into play. This chapter identifies areas where **Union action can bring added value**, without encroaching on the national and regional competences in health policy and the freedom to choose.

**Local authorities** are often well placed to lead engagement on how to shape favourable food environments through community-led initiatives, including food councils that foster dialogue on how to enhance the affordability and availability of healthy, high-quality food. The Commission will promote such initiatives at national and regional/local level and facilitate further exchange of good practices across Member States. One aspect where the Union can help is to bring this dialogue and interaction to the EU level.

Therefore, **the Commission will hold every year a Food Dialogue** with the food system's actors, including consumers, primary producers, industry, retailers, public

authorities and civil society. This dialogue would be the forum to address pressing issues such as food reformulation, collection of data on dietary intake and food affordability, just to name a few. To support this dialogue, the Commission will launch a study on the impact of the consumption of the so-called ‘ultra-processed foods’.

In this context, the **Food Dialogue** should also aim to promote the exchange of best practices and monitor the way food poverty is addressed in Member States by the use of EU and national instruments, including social policies, school schemes and food stamps for the most vulnerable households.

Additionally, the Commission will come forward with a legal proposal to strengthen the role of **public procurement**. Public procurement should pursue a “best value” approach to reward quality and sustainability efforts made by European farmers, food industry and services, and should provide opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to participate in such activities. This can provide the right incentives to promote the consumption of local, seasonal products, and food produced with high environmental and social standards, including organic products and food originating from shorter supply chains. Linked to this, the development of **short food supply chains** remains of strategic importance to ensure fairer prices for farmers, fishers and improved access to fresh and seasonal products for consumers.

Furthermore, the Commission will propose a targeted review of a successful **EU school scheme** to strengthen its education dimension, adapted to the local and regional needs and traditions. The EU **promotion policy** will remain a strategic policy tool to be used to enhance consumer awareness about EU agricultural and fishery and aquaculture products and quality schemes, including the EU organic farming label. Linked to this, the Commission will continue working to promote further uptake of **geographical indications (GIs)** which are a powerful tool for European producers in valorising their food and drink products, preserving food heritage across Member States and creating growth and jobs in the rural areas where they are located.

**The contribution of the food industry is essential** to develop business models that strengthen every part of the value chain and look also at the wellbeing of farmers, fishers, sector workers and consumers. In this respect, a comprehensive approach is needed to encourage **investments in the competitiveness, innovation, resilience and sustainability in food processing, distribution and sale to address current gaps and challenges**. The Commission will also continue supporting very actively the uptake and results generated by the implementation of the **EU Code of Conduct on Responsible Food Business and Marketing Practices** and evaluate whether further action is needed if the achievements generated by the Code of Conduct do not meet the expected ambition. Business support organisations should be mobilised to better support food processing SMEs and create virtual innovation hubs.

In this respect, SME networking can be facilitated by the European Cluster Collaboration Platform, as well as by the upcoming agri-food Transition Pathway Platform. This Platform will also facilitate the overall implementation of the Code of Conduct and the transition pathway for the agri-food industrial ecosystem.

As diverse and balanced nutrition can impact positively people’s well-being and health, it is important to advance with Member States the work on monitoring the effects of certain advertising and marketing practices of food. In particular, the impact on the health and well-being of the most vulnerable groups of consumers, such as children, should be investigated.



**Innovative technologies** have emerged, including in the field of food technology, biotechnology and biomanufacturing. Keeping Europe's innovation edge in such new technologies is paramount for the sector to remain competitive and for the EU to remain a world leader in food innovation. At the same time, certain food innovation is sometimes seen as a threat to the traditions and culture across Europe. This calls for an **enhanced dialogue** on this matter and better knowledge, to make sure that these innovations can be assessed in an inclusive way that also considers social, ethical, economic, environmental and cultural aspects of food innovation.

Finally, new societal expectations regarding food are shaping consumer behaviour, in particular when it comes to animal welfare and product origin. If well supported, this can present new opportunities for farmers. To address this, the Commission will closely exchange with farmers, the food chain and civil society and on that basis **present proposals on the revision of the existing animal welfare legislation**, including its commitment to phase out cages. This revision will be based on the latest scientific evidence and take into account the socio-economic impact on farmers and the agri-food chain, providing support and appropriate, species-specific transition periods and pathways. Linked to this, the Commission will consider targeted labelling in relation to **animal welfare** to address societal expectations.

At the same time, continuing efforts to reduce **food loss and food waste** is a key priority for the years to come. Reducing and valuing food losses and food waste will not only benefit EU citizens, farmers and all other actors across the food supply chain but will also increase the sustainability of the EU food system, contributing to more efficient resource use and food security.

#### **4. CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT: PUTTING RESEARCH, INNOVATION, KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS AT THE HEART OF EUROPE'S AGRI-FOOD ECONOMY**

##### *Digitalisation as a driver to further advance the transition*

The digital transition moves at unprecedented speed and can contribute to quickly improving farm economic performance, resilience and sustainability. Advanced digital technologies, including **artificial intelligence**, in combination with data from Internet of Things (IoT) and other sources can significantly enhance operations and drive innovation and revolutionise the way we produce food, taking care of the environment, climate and people. Nonetheless the adoption of digital tools lags behind in agriculture and other parts of the food system. Perceived high costs, lack of digital skills and trust, absence of tailored solutions and connectivity issues are among the main reasons why farmers are not fully tapping into the digitalisation wave.

**The priority will be to ensure connectivity in rural areas**, particularly in remote areas, while also taking advantage of the opportunities provided by alternative connectivity solutions and edge computing. Investing in the enabling environment, such as **lifelong training in digital skills and advice**, is also crucial, as well as **encouraging testing and adoption**, also collectively (e.g. via cooperatives). **Digital systems** need to be further integrated and harmonised, both for the collection of data by farmers, other food system actors and Member States' systems. The Commission will pursue a **'collect once, use multiple times'** principle, reducing reporting burden for farmers under consideration of existing and already evolving EU level initiatives, like the Common European Agricultural Data Space.

To deliver on these challenges **the Commission will launch an EU digital strategy for agriculture** to enable the transition to a digital-ready and future-oriented farming and food sector, while avoiding possible pitfalls<sup>37</sup>.

### ***Knowledge, Research & Innovation as catalysts of change***

New **knowledge and innovations must reach farmers and other food system actors more quickly and at wider scale**, with concrete on-farm and on-site applicability of innovative solutions. And we are not starting from zero. The Horizon Europe Mission Soil supports farmers in their transition to sustainable soil practices through a combination of R&I and on-site testing and experimentation, which should be continued to achieve healthy soils in the EU by 2050.

The innovation is advancing and should be embraced. For example, testing regulatory initiatives, new technologies or business models in **sandboxes** (e.g. for digital tools in agriculture) **before rolling them out, and innovation procurement** will help to remove barriers for more innovation ready to be used by farmers.

To deliver results tailored to farmers' needs, **the co-creation** of knowledge and innovation in local experimentation sites on-farm with farmers, scientists, innovators and business, e.g. in living laboratories, should be scaled up.

Developing a **new EU strategic approach to R&I to improve the competitiveness of agriculture, forestry and rural areas** will be paramount to target investments efficiently, align future priorities with scientific developments and grasp new opportunities.

In this endeavour, further strengthening existing public-public and public-private R&I partnerships and considering new ones will be key to pool resources, talents, and research infrastructures. In this respect, a strengthened cooperation with the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research (SCAR) is key. On the global stage, **reinforcing international partnerships and cooperation with international organisations** like FAO, WOA, CGIAR and OECD will help deliver on innovative solutions to the global challenges and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Plant breeding innovations, including the use of biotechnological tools such as new genomic techniques (NGTs), are key to accelerating the development of climate-change resilient, resource-saving, nutritious and high-yielding varieties, and thereby contribute to the EU's food security and food sovereignty. NGTs can also yield microorganisms with positive impact on agricultural production, e.g. by reducing the need for synthetic fertilisers.

To reap the benefits of these innovations, an enabling regulatory framework in the EU is needed. This also ensures a level-playing field with an increasing number of third countries, which are in the process of adapting their legislation or have done so already. It is therefore particularly important to complete the legislative procedure for the Commission's NGT proposal and to implement the legislation fast. The Commission is committed to working in close cooperation with the Council and the European Parliament to find a forward-looking compromise in the near future.

### ***Strengthen knowledge and innovation systems in agriculture and support for advice***

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<sup>37</sup> Barabanova, Y. and Krzysztofowicz, M., [Digital Transition: Long-term Implications for EU Farmers and Rural Communities](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023, doi:10.2760/286916, JRC134571.

New knowledge and innovations stemming from the EU R&I programmes must be widely accessible and used in practice. The Member States need to put substantial efforts into **strengthening Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS)** and match resources with the broader range of needs faced by the sector, in particular to better support farmers in their transition to sustainability. To this end, the CAP will continue to provide strong support to implement AKIS strategies with the AGRI European Innovation Partnership (EIP) as a cornerstone. It will also promote further actions to strengthen the role of **independent and competent advisors** and develop **attractive training offers** that respond to the need of farmers all along their professional life and are particularly suited to the **evolving skills demand** of the new generation of farmers and their career prospects.

Addressing **skills shortages and mismatches** in the farming sector through anticipation and dedicated investment in high-quality training and advice will be key to attract a new generation of talented farm entrepreneurs, and build a competitive, sustainable and resilient agriculture and food system. The forthcoming **Union of Skills** will provide a new momentum to drive a more strategic approach to inclusive lifelong learning and skills development in agriculture and make the most of the tools at disposal to reposition farming as an attractive and rewarding career choice.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This Communication presents the Commission's reflection on the future of agriculture and food in Europe. The European agri-food sector has many strengths and is a leader when it comes to health, safety, quality, sustainability and innovation in food production. We must build on these strengths. But in the current geopolitical context, the Union **must sharpen its response** to the challenges farmers, fishers, other rural actors and the agri-food sector are facing and prepare for the future with a **more assertive policy response in favour of our strategic autonomy and food sovereignty**, while pursuing its objectives of nature protection and decarbonisation. This policy response is united around a **common vision that will frame the work of the Commission for this entire mandate** across all policy areas that have an impact on agriculture and food.

The delivery of this vision cannot rely on the EU level alone. It requires that new generations of farmers, agrifood operators, informed consumers and rural communities take up the mantle from the current generation as entrepreneurs, custodians of the countryside and agents of change. It requires a strengthened dialogue at all levels of governance, with EU institutions, national, regional and local authorities, and with our international partners.

That is why this Communication launches this dialogue to enrich the Commission's reflections on the way forward around the four priority areas and their enablers. Many of the topics contained therein are sensitive and do not often find easily a consensus in society, in particular aspects related to food, livestock, and the future of the CAP. This is why further strands of work are launched to elaborate these key issues and find solutions in close engagement with relevant stakeholders and policy makers. Experience shows that one-size-fits-all solutions cannot be applied to such a diverse sector and the Strategic Dialogue has rather called for territorial and tailored response.

The Commission invites the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, the social partners and all

stakeholders to actively contribute to the development and delivery of the initiatives in this Communication.