



Meeting the challenge of generational renewal in mountain farming

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Euromontana's position paper on the European
Commission Strategy on Agricultural Renewal

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Agriculture is a mainstay of mountain areas. Yet our agricultural sectors are struggling to attract young people to take up or start farming activities. Beyond the demographic trends driving this phenomenon, the issue of the attractiveness of agricultural professions is not sufficiently acknowledged or addressed in a positive light. In fact, the public image of agricultural jobs is often negative, such as the difficult working conditions with little time off or leisure time, the increased exposure to weather hazards, the higher impact of animal health issues, or the low profitability.

This is despite the fact that these jobs are tangible, essential to food security, and carry high societal and environmental value.

Land abandonment in mountain areas exposes mountain communities and Europe as a whole to socio-economic, environmental and cultural risks.

Therefore, Euromontana welcomes the European Commission's intention to develop a strategy for generational renewal. In this context, we call for strong schemes to be integrated into the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy and for further cooperation with the Member States and regions to work together on other mechanisms that could improve access to land, credit, knowledge and rural services, as well as generally improving the living and working conditions of the farmers who feed us.

Land abandonment risk is 3 times higher in mountain areas

The risk of land abandonment is three times higher in mountain areas than in non-mountain areas¹.

While the extent of this risk varies across Europe's mountain massifs, with higher vulnerability observed in the Alps and Mediterranean island ranges for instance², it is estimated that overall, the EU's mountains face a high risk of land abandonment³. Generally speaking, it should be noted that the higher the proportion of mountains in a given region, the greater the risk of agricultural land abandonment⁴.

Grasslands, which are one of the main land covers in the mountains along with the forests, are the most threatened by land abandonment. It is estimated that **1.2 million hectares of pastoral land are threatened with abandonment by 2030**, behind arable land, for which abandonment risk reaches 4 million hectares⁵.

At the root of this trend lies a critical structural yet well-known issue: ageing and the lack of generational renewal in mountain agriculture. Mountain areas are facing a global trend towards an ageing local population⁶. While there is no clear data on the average age of mountain farmers, general

¹ Dax, T. *et al.* (2021) "Land abandonment in mountain areas of the EU: An inevitable side effect of farming modernization and neglected threat to sustainable land use," *Land*, 10(6), p. 591. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/land10060591>.

² Ibid

³ Schuh, B. *et al* (2022) "Research for AGRI Committee - The Future of the European Farming Model: Socio economic and territorial implications of the decline in the number of farms and farmers in the EU," *European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies*.

⁴ Schuh, B. *et al* (2020) "Research for AGRI Committee - The challenge of land abandonment after 2020 and options for mitigating measures" *European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies*.

⁵ Castillo, C.P. (2015) "Agricultural Land Abandonment in the EU within 2015–2030," *JRC Policy Insight*.

⁶ Euromontana (2021), "Ageing in mountain areas – Contributions of Euromontana for the Green Paper on Ageing", *position paper*.

statistics show that only 6.5% of farmers in the EU are below 35 years old in 2020 and 11.9% below 40⁷.

Impacts of land abandonment on ecosystem services

The decline in generational renewal and the resulting abandonment of agricultural land are endangering the traditional, family-based farming model that has sustained mountain territories for centuries. This model also delivers a wide range of vital ecosystem services that benefit society as a whole.

The lack of generational renewal is threatening the provision of services, in particular the provision of local, high-quality, sustainable food. With mountain farming accounting for 18% of the EU's farms⁸, **a decline in agricultural production would directly undermine the EU's food security and sovereignty.**

Mountain farming also delivers essential **supporting and regulating ecosystem services**. These include water retention in soils, carbon sequestration in grasslands, and wildfire prevention among many others⁹. Yet, land abandonment, and in particular the abandonment of grazing practices, is having a major impact on the provision of these key services. For example, the abandonment of entire plots of grassland can lead to overgrowth and the gradual disappearance of grassland, increasing the risk of wildfire. The economic evaluation of these ecosystem risks remains incomplete.

Moreover, mountain agriculture plays a crucial role in providing **cultural services**. Livestock farming and pastoralism in particular shape the iconic landscapes of Europe's mountains, underpinning their cultural identity and supporting rural tourism. The loss of agricultural activity thus risks eroding these landscapes, diminishing the aesthetic and cultural value of mountain regions.

A complex web of agricultural and territorial challenges

Despite the wide-ranging benefits it provides, **mountain farming remains among the most vulnerable and sensitive sectors in terms of generational renewal**. A combination of agricultural and territorial factors explains this trend.

On the agricultural side, **natural constraints** make farming in mountain areas more difficult and affects productivity. Consequently, mountain farmers' incomes are around 20% lower than their lowland counterparts¹⁰, creating a further disincentive to young people setting up in farming. In addition, these natural constraints make access to land and investment in mountain areas even more difficult or expensive. **Climate change** adds an additional layer of complexity as its effects are felt more acutely in mountain areas, requiring farmers to adapt more rapidly to shifting environmental conditions and reduced natural resources¹¹.

Beyond agriculture, broader socio-economic dynamics also hinder generational renewal. Many mountain areas face **demographic decline and shrinking communities**, triggering a vicious cycle where

⁷ Eurostat (2022), "Farmers and the agricultural labour force – statistics".

⁸ European Commission (2009), "Peak Performance: New Insights into Mountain Farming in the European Union", *Commission Staff Working Document, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development*.

⁹ LIFE Oreka Mendian (2021), "An overview of sustainable practices for the management of mountain grasslands in Europe", *policy report*.

¹⁰ European Commission (2023), "Areas with Natural Constraints", *Analytical Brief N°1*.

¹¹ Euromontana (2025), "For a water resilient Europe – Proposals for sustainable water management in the mountains and beyond", *position paper*.

reduced public and private investment leads to poorer services and quality of life, making these areas less attractive to newcomers. This phenomenon contributes to a lack of attractiveness of the region for would-be farmers who - whether for themselves or their families - need and want access to services of general interest and to live in vibrant local communities. While agriculture alone is not the key to successful rural development, **the decline in generational renewal is both a symptom and a contributor to the shrinking vitality of mountain territories.**

Operating within shared spaces of general interest also leads to more complex stakeholder dynamics, particularly regarding land-related issues (accessibility, conflicting uses, securing leases) and the long-term sustainability of agricultural use.

Recommendations for greater generational renewal in mountain areas

In this context, Euromontana calls on the European Commission to take strong measures to boost the sector's attractiveness and support generational renewal, both within and outside the Common Agricultural Policy. Alongside the 4-axis approach based on access to land, credit, knowledge and rural services, **Euromontana advocates for a targeted approach focusing on priority territories, target profiles and working and living conditions.**

Focusing on priority territories

Generational renewal is a challenge for all of Europe. However, given the high risk of land abandonment and the specific difficulties encountered in our territories, Euromontana is urging the European Commission to propose **measures specifically tailored to mountain areas**. Such an approach would align with **articles 174 and 175 of the European treaties**, which state that special attention must be given to mountain areas, including in the implementation of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

Focusing on target profiles

Aspiring farmers have diverse profiles and therefore require differentiated support mechanisms. For this reason, Euromontana is calling on the European Commission to adapt its proposals to address the particular needs **of young farmers, new entrants, and women.**

Although there are no Europe-wide figures on the proportion of new entrants to mountain farming, experience on the ground shows an important trend in our territories. These are often people undergoing professional reconversion, that bring new practices, are attracted by land-based professions and a by strong connection with nature in the mountains. However, not being from farming families, they require greater support, particularly in terms of access to land and investment. In this regard, Euromontana wants to highlight that, while the current CAP requires each Member State to define 'young farmer' and 'new farmer' in their CSP, **little specific attention is currently given to new farmers**. So far, only Italy, France, Spain and Bulgaria seem to have planned measures that address indicator 0.26, 'Number of new farmers receiving setting-up support'.

Women in agriculture also need to be better recognised and supported. In many mountain areas, farming is based on family farm models and diversified activities, in which **women play a crucial role**—often in small livestock husbandry or by managing complementary activities such as agritourism. Many women enter the farming sector later in life, often as part of a career change, typically beyond the age

of 40. As a result, they are excluded from young farmer support measures, creating a structural disadvantage despite their essential contribution to sustaining rural economies and revitalising mountain farming. It is therefore vital to promote the implementation of targeted support measures and incentives tailored to their specific needs.

Focusing on these target profiles also requires **supporting retiring farmers**—particularly in the context of family farm succession—as a key component of the generational renewal process. It is essential that they are able to plan for their retirement, undertake any necessary restructuring of the farm, and transfer both assets and know-how to a successor, whether a family member or not, under well-prepared conditions. This support helps ensure a smooth transition, access to land, safeguards the continuity of farm operations, and contributes to the successful establishment of the next generation.

Focus on living and working conditions

Although access to land, credit, knowledge and rural services is essential, it cannot ensure a real improvement in farmers' living and working conditions alone. Measures are required to **support day-to-day working conditions**. This could include better **replacement services** that do not only rely on solidarity among the farming community, improved **guarding conditions for shepherds** or facilitated access to **innovation** and digital technology which, if deployed properly, can facilitate farm work especially in livestock farming. More broadly, such a strategy must focus on creating fair and attractive living conditions with decent incomes and vibrant communities.

To make sustainable long-term commitments, young farm successors must have access to **robust social protection systems**. An EU-wide strategy on social security in agriculture is needed to ensure consistent and adequate coverage across Member States. This should include minimum standards for pension contributions, as well as accessible health and accident insurance schemes tailored to the realities of agricultural work, including seasonal and part-time employment. In many rural areas, combined forms of employment—such as farming alongside tourism, crafts, or local services—are essential to economic viability. These multi-activity models must be recognised, enabled, and supported in EU frameworks, ensuring that farmers engaging in diversified livelihoods are not penalised but rather integrated into social protection systems in a coherent and fair way.

Addressing generational renewal within the CAP

While the CAP alone cannot provide all the solutions to the considerable challenge of generational renewal in agriculture, it remains the EU's most structuring policy for the sector and must contribute through robust measures. A European strategy for generational renewal cannot be successful without common mechanisms and a clearly dedicated envelope defined at EU level under the post-2027 CAP nor without a strong policy supported by an ambitious budget.

We call for:

- **earmarking 15% of the post-2027 CAP budget for Areas with Natural Constraints.** Given the specific challenges of mountain farming and the increased risk of land abandonment in future, strong political and budgetary support for mountain farming would send a positive message to aspiring farmers.
- **increasing support to the generational renewal envelope in the post-2027 CAP.** Until now, resources have not been sufficient to achieve the ambitions set out and meet the challenge of

generational renewal. Euromontana also support the CEJA demand for further measures to tackle renewal beyond direct payment and installation aid only, as described below.

- **increasing support for the Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers, installation aid and investment aid, with a top up for those established in areas with natural constraints.** This provides an additional incentive for aspiring farmers, while also sending a positive signal to banks and investors, who are more inclined to support these installation projects when they have strong public backing.
- **enhancing access to advisory services** devoted to facilitating the installation of young farmers and the access to land.
- enhancing support for **agricultural test spaces** that provide targeted access and training opportunities for young farmers, enabling them to gain practical experience and reduce risks before fully establishing their own farms.
- **strengthening support measures for retiring farmers** to facilitate successful generational renewal and farm succession.
- encouraging the adaptation of measures to the mountain context. Euromontana particularly welcomes those Member States and regions that **top up support for farmers in mountain areas** and calls on more authorities to use this mechanism.
- encouraging the use of **cooperation** measures that can help boost economic resilience and innovation, such as the support to producer organisations and groups.
- **designing differentiated measures to facilitate the installation of young farmers, new farmers and women** is important, as each profile requires adapted support (such as different support bonus, more tailored advisory services and more advanced lifelong learning programmes for new entrants).
- **better promoting and encouraging the use the instruments available**, including towards potential new entrants.

Tackling generational renewal outside the CAP

Generational renewal is a multifaceted challenge that cannot be addressed by the CAP alone. This is why Euromontana is calling on the European Commission, Member States and regions to coordinate policies that boost the attractiveness of farming as a profession.

We call for:

- **earmarking at least 25% of the European Structural and Investment Funds for Article 174 territories, including 10% for mountain areas.** This objective should be achieved at European level, with Member States and regions having the flexibility to adapt their contribution to these targets according to their own territorial context. This, among other objectives, should help improve access to services and infrastructure that enable farming activities, such as internet access, housing.
- **maintaining ambitious and stable cohesion policy** instruments in future to counter shrinkage trends, maintain access to services of general interest, and ultimately ensure thriving rural

areas. In this respect, territorial cohesion in the EU must be a long-term ambition that is not sacrificed for short-term objectives.

- **strengthening the use of rural proofing at European, national and regional levels** for policies that impact rural and mountain areas. In particular, Euromontana calls on the European Commission to systematically rural proof social policies to ensure that they do not harm rural vitality and rural youth.
- **guaranteeing transparent access to more data on land** in the European Union to support evidence-based policies. In this respect, Euromontana welcomes ongoing efforts to **set up an EU Land Observatory** and calls for the establishment of a constructive dialogue with the Member States and stakeholders on the impact of the various policies on land access and management.
- **investing in education policies that promote farming occupations** among all young people, support lifelong learning, facilitate the establishment of new farmers and promote specific schools, such as shepherding schools, which play a key role in the continuation of sustainable pastoral practices. In this respect, Euromontana calls on the European Commission to provide clear recommendations to the Member States and the necessary resources for mutual learning.
- establishing, in parallel, a **dedicated programme for mobility and internships between mountain areas** across Member States, enabling young and aspiring farmers to gain practical experience, exchange knowledge, and build strong peer networks. These measures would help revitalise rural communities, ensure knowledge transfer, and support the next generation of mountain farmers
- **deploying strategies to improve society's image of agricultural occupations and encourage a change in the narrative** on career development, especially at national and regional level and in coordination with education, food and environmental policies.