

# EU CAP NETWORK FOCUS GROUP RECOVERY OF ABANDONED AGRICULTURAL LANDS

## Securing Stakeholder Involvement in the Recovery of Abandoned Farmland

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July 2023



Funded by  
the European Union

## Introduction

Abandoned farmland can be described as a wicked problem. This means that there are significant differences over its definition, but also disagreement over whether it is a good or a bad thing. This prevents consensus over who or what should deal with the problem, with the attendant absence of reliable information, overlapping of administrative powers and duties and a tendency for policy makers to avoid the issue altogether. However, there are increasing signs of change, both at national and EU level, not least the sharp focus given by a recent Joint Research Centre study predicting that by 2030 as much as 11% of farmland in the EU might be abandoned (Perpiñá Castillo et al., 2018).

The question of farmland abandonment is daunting because its causes and consequences are often very location specific. Although abandoned land tends to be found in remote and mountainous areas, it is also present in less favoured areas where food production has long struggled against climate and terrain. Changes in access to markets, disruptions in supply chains or the depletion in the local population can make the difference between coping and abandoning. The continuing decline in the amount of utilized agricultural area combined with the shrinking number of family farms reflects long term social and economic changes in the EU. In some regions, farmland has not been worked for over a generation; in other areas the problem is much more recent, and in such cases, poses distinct issues for recovery and restoration.

Both the wicked and the local character require effective collaborative decision making, not least over who should be involved, but how stakeholder engagement should be best organised, by which authority, with what preparatory steps, according to what objectives and with the involvement of which stakeholders. This paper identifies a range of issues for those seeking participatory approaches to the problems, detailing the profiles of different stakeholders and the roles they may play in creating new practical options.

The paper is divided into four sections – the first looks at the process of initial mapping, the second and third examine some practical approaches to identifying and engaging with property right holders and the final section looks at how new users can be attracted.

## Initiating consultations

Understanding the causes, the local history and the strengths and weaknesses of an area affected by land abandonment are fundamental for successful rehabilitation of the land. Producing such knowledge requires the active participation of a range of state and non-state bodies, such as regional planning departments, research institutes, farming associations, environmental organisations, and local authorities. The work is



not without significant resource implications and requires strong diplomatic coordination to ensure that all the various perspectives are presented and discussed.

One initial question is who will lead in this early phase. Not all countries affected by land abandonment have systems for collecting up to date information and for those who, responsibility can be divided between official statistical bodies, for example as is the case in Italy to ministries as in Spain where the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is the responsible lead body (Perpina Castillo 2018). In France, a recent change in the rural code placed the responsibility in the hands of the regional department. Article L.112-1-1 provides that

*Every five years, the representative of the State in the department entrusts the departmental commission for the preservation of natural, agricultural and forestry areas with the task of making an inventory of land considered as wasteland that could be rehabilitated for the exercise of an agricultural or forestry activity.*

The exact concrete actions that are required from the department making such an inventory are at present a matter of local discretion. They may involve commissioning research institutes, consulting with representative bodies from farming and forestry, hunting associations, environmental and wildlife groups. Such discussions may be held in public and supplemented by special working groups, leading to technical and advisory reports being produced.

In many cases though, there is no such legal requirement to monitor the problem, and the question of how to initiate public discussions and action will take thus different forms depending on a range of differences. For example, in regions where farmland has been abandoned for significant periods, preliminary steps may require regional or state level authorities to commission maps of soil quality, assessments of water availability, the presence of invasive or otherwise hard to remove vegetation as well as wider assessment of agronomic potential. This was the case in Galicia as part of their recent efforts to restore abandoned land.

Another way to approach this initial phase is to connect land abandonment to land consolidation procedures, which often involve participant-based land committees being established according to the law, and then conducting thematic studies to assess the various economic, environmental, and practical challenges. This is the case in Poland for example where a Council of Consolidation Participants commissions studies, reviews initial draft plans, hears objections, and generally supports the whole length of the consultation process (Krupowicz et al 2020).

In terms of providing valuable information to discussions on recovery and restoration, one final group is an important source of up-to date information, that is those charged with disaster risk management. The Risk Data Hub from the Joint Research Centre, for example, collects GIS data to assess the degree of risk from such land abandoned related threats as wildfire, plant diseases, drought, and floods. In some cases, co-operation is more institutionalized across borders, for example, the European Forest Fire Information System provides harmonized information on forest fires in Europe. Not only do these organisations awareness amongst policy makers and the wider



public, they can also support evidence based plans for action. Then there are those bodies monitoring harmful and invasive species. Such is the toxicity of the plant *Heracleum mantegazzianum*, otherwise known as giant hogweed, for instance, that the French environmental agency ANSES recommended establishing a national monitoring system to chart areas of high risk. Each of these initiatives has the strong potential to contribute to better understanding of the scale of risk of harm, as well as providing useful platforms for cross country learning.

There are clearly many potential contributors to a better understanding of the scale and threat from abandoned land. In the next section we turn to landowners and consider how best they may be involved.

## Identifying legal property right holders

In Europe, the cadastre and land registers together contain accurate descriptions of holdings and property rights. However, in several countries and particular regions affected by abandoned land, the land register often does not reflect actual ownership or use rights, let alone up-to-date information of the plot on the ground. These inaccuracies commonly stem from several generations of informal transactions both within and outside of family groups, they may be outstanding family or hereditary dispute where original disputants are no longer alive; then there are the many cases of out-migration where current heirs have not registered their claims, sometimes to avoid inheritance taxes or simply the cost of notary fees. In some cases, inheritance custom dictates equal division of land between heirs which again can lead to extremely complicated ownership structures. Clearly, the longer that such issues remain unresolved the greater the complexity of the problem and the higher the accompanying transaction costs, which are often more than single individuals can bear.

Where this is the case, the only solution would be for state authorities to have sufficient powers and resources to take the lead in identifying all the relevant legal right holders. They will need to utilise a range of legal, social and communication resources, as well as research existing archives and juridical files, to create an accurate inventory of right holders. This step alone is highly demanding and requires a long-term commitment of the relevant authorities. At the same time, they may also consider how they can persuade owners, once they are identified, to get involved in discussions over future land use<sup>1</sup>.

Producing an accurate inventory of property rights presents both factual and legal problems. Tracking down unregistered owners may need information held by local authorities, oral testimony from neighbours or even public appeals for information. In the case of Lastovo, a Croatian island, local authorities commissioned anthropologists to draw up a comprehensive list of kin who had ownership rights. This was then followed by meetings with lawyers to assist in registering all the legitimate right holders. Even with such assistance, there were still cases where owners could not be found. In these cases, there may be various options to act on behalf of the missing owners, such

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<sup>1</sup> See Mini Paper Three for a more detailed description of why owners might sometimes be reluctant to participate in discussions concerning future land use.



as transferring responsibility to a land bank or similar institution. Such actions are particularly important where restoration is part of a wider spatial plan and where success requires maximum participation, for example, in areas where plot sizes are small and access issues are vital.

Finally, it is important to consult with other holders of use rights whether these are registered or not. Such use rights might be based on long term informal arrangements that facilitate access to land. This is often the case in areas where most landowners are elderly and the parcels relatively small. In such cases, use rights are often unregistered in the official land register, notwithstanding their importance for maintaining land as well as being what the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on Tenure term 'legitimate land users'. By contrast, other use rights might emerge from long term practice concerning jointly owned land, for example, customary grazing rights on communally owned pasture areas, use rights relating to communally owned forest land, agreements to extract water as well as established rights of way (FAO 2022).

## Securing and facilitating the involvement of right holders

As detailed in paper 3 of this series, landowners might not always choose to engage with plans to recover abandoned land. Given the differing motivations behind such attitudes, it is essential that lead bodies can balance the essentially voluntary nature of such programs and the need for legitimate right holders to collaborate over designing local responses.

In addition to divided land ownership and use rights, one common practical reason why land remains abandoned is the high cost of recovery. Before abandoned land can be made available for new use and new users, it needs to be cleaned of unwanted vegetation, access paths restored, fences fixed all of which can cost thousands of euros per hectare. Where this is so, it is important to strike the balance between the rights and responsibilities of the owner and the public interest in seeing land restored to production or otherwise managed use. According to examples from Spain, where a landowner does not have resources to pay for restoration costs, it may be possible to use public funds, for example, under Article 17 of the Rural Development Regulation<sup>2</sup>. Other approaches might share restoration costs between the current landowner and future tenant, for example, by offsetting restoration costs against future rent. In Scotland, for example, the Land Reform Act 2016 provides for a so-called "The Tenants' Amnesty" that is meant to ensure that tenant farmers receive compensation for any improvements they make on a plot.

Sometimes, the question of current and potential market value of the land can be a source of disagreement amongst stakeholders. If abandoned land is in a peri-urban

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<sup>2</sup> EU Regulation No. 1305 from 2013 "On support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, (EAFRD)".



areas, owners may have high expectations as to future value, particularly where neighbouring parcels have changed their land use designation from agricultural to residential. By contrast, where market demand is low and there are few official transactions, it can be equally difficult to establish agreement over land values. In both cases, it is important that lead authorities acknowledge such beliefs and work to create some common ground. In such cases, authorities might consider employing the services of independent land valuers who can offer comparative market information and help create legitimate scales for assessing local land values.

Another common reason for land to be abandoned is its small size, irregular shape, or inconvenient location.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned above, this feature is common in countries with traditions of small family farms where despite legal prohibitions inheritance divisions below a certain size, excessive land fragmentation remains one of the more intractable drivers of land abandonment. Land consolidation offer a proven way to improve parcel size. Improvements in infrastructure such as field roads and irrigation systems are considered in paper 3 in this series (Veršinskas, T. et al 2021).

Finally, when it comes to securing the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, it might be necessary to consider alternative methods of persuasion. Abandoned land not only means a loss of income to the landowner, but it can also cause losses to neighbouring landowners, from the proliferation of weeds and other unwanted vegetation to the increased risk of forest fire. Neglect of access paths and shared irrigation systems will also pass on losses to neighbours. Finally, there is the more intangible damage caused to the local landscape and economy where the sight of derelict buildings, broken walls and fields of weeds convey neglect and deprivation. Increasingly, there are different examples in Europe where landowners may be compelled to act by a mixture of tax-based incentives, for example, the designation of a higher property tax band on land considered abandoned as is the case in Lithuania, or legal obligations following the majority approval of a common plan of action, as is the case in Galicia. Although such measures may be seen as too controversial in some countries, they reflect debates over the economic, social and environmental costs of abandoned land and the rights and responsibilities of private ownership.

## Finding new uses and users

The final section considers how to find new uses and users for abandoned land. For those possessing abandoned land, features such as their age, place of residence, and connection with farming mean that they are often not in the best position to find new users nor develop alternative environmental uses for the land. In the first section, we examined how various state and non-state bodies contributed to examining current land conditions and considering alternatives. In some cases, the task of identifying and attracting new users may be assumed by state bodies dealing with climate, environmental and land use issues. In France, for example, the Space Climate

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<sup>3</sup> See Mini Paper Three for a more detailed discussion on factors aggravating transaction costs.



Observatory maps agricultural wastelands in the Occitania region and provides detailed information to support restoration in these areas.<sup>4</sup>

It is important that those leading efforts to restore abandoned land work closely with local politicians and officials. Although regional level authorities may have the responsibility and resources to investigate and develop plans for combatting abandoned land, local mayors have local knowledge and different network channels. They may be in a better position to identify existing property right holders, but they can also mobilise diverse constituents of potential users, for example, local farming and conservation associations. Such involvement can enable and ensure effective collaboration amongst the differing stakeholder groups, mediating between the different interests and ambitions.

Successful restoration involves multiple parties working through distinct stages. To that end, using a variety of media sources can help advocacy and public relations efforts. In France, for example, the regional authorities produced short films addressing the concerns of landowners; others examined specific environmental questions and placed the question of abandoned land within the wider context of regional and rural development planning. Such films can be useful for other areas affected by abandoned land whether in the country itself or in other EU and European countries. Successful recovery requires a strong commitment from the leading authorities. There are many different parties that need to be involved in the recovery process and that takes considerable effort, skill and trust to ensure a successful outcome. As Rust and colleagues found in his study of information dissemination in rural areas, farmers are more likely to learn from their peers than they are through extension services and research institutes. Uptake of new practices was particularly helped by clear demonstrations of agricultural innovations by trusted farmers, often through postings on social media (Rust et al 2022).

Finding new users may require targeted campaigns<sup>5</sup> and dedicated policy mechanisms, which can be of national or local nature. In the agricultural sector, there can be collaboration with educational institutes for young farmers, with representative bodies such as the local Chamber of Agriculture and the Farmers' Unions, as well as technical engineering offices. Above all, supporting the new entrants in building up a viable business model is a key condition (Eistrup M. et al 2019). Where conservation matters are more to the fore, it is important that lead authorities engage with both the hunting and fishing associations as well as wildlife and nature conservation groups. In some countries, the private real estate sector may be an important sector to engage with. In Bulgaria for example, private real estate brokers working in rural areas help find new users by bundling small parcels into larger packages thereby making them much more attractive for new land users. In other countries, such actions might be carried out by land banks who often can be at the forefront of campaigns to raise awareness and to facilitate new uses.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.spaceclimateobservatory.org/sco-france>

<sup>5</sup> See for example, the EIP-AGRI Focus Group "New entrants into farming: lessons to foster innovation and entrepreneurship" 2016



## Conclusion

Mobilizing stakeholders to find new uses for abandoned land is a complex challenge. There are practical reasons why land remains abandoned and creating viable alternative uses needs resources beyond the means of residents. Local officials can be critical actors to initiate and mobilise external support, but as the forces driving land abandonment remain strong, actions need to be part of a wider development process with the collaboration of many different stakeholders. The Joint Research Centre estimated that by 2030 and without significant intervention, 11% of European farmland or around 20 million hectares will be at high risk of abandonment. The scale of loss and the dangers from forest fires and loss of biodiversity mean that abandoned land goes far beyond the interests of individual landowners. As outlined in this and the other papers, those regions facing significant land loss can learn from the increasing range of alternative productive and conservative uses, and the continued legal and administrative innovations to deal with this shared threat.

### Research needs Suggestions

In countries without up to date or accurate registers of ownership, comparative research can help identify pragmatic and cost-effective mechanisms for identifying all those legitimate right holders who need to be consulted for how to address abandoned land. In Spain for example, local authorities may rely on the self-declaration of land users that they have sufficient rights to occupy and use land. Until proven otherwise, this can be the basis for stakeholder engagement. Applied research which seeks to capture the range of administrative methods for engagement can be a useful resource.

A second theme could be to identify collective arrangements that address the question of extreme fragmentation in property. These may involve the actions of state, hybrid actors and the private sector in accumulating small parcels and rearranging their boundaries to make them more viable for use in both economic as well as environmental terms.

### Ideas for innovative projects

Projects related to the two issues mentioned above





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