



Report of the 16th meeting of the European Rural Networks' Steering Group

Webinar, 19 October 2021

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Introduction

9.00 – 09.10

Introduction

Mario Milouchev,
DG AGRI

The Chair opened the Steering Group (SG) meeting by welcoming participants with a summary of the agenda and goals. He invited SG members for their input throughout the sessions. Key objectives were:

- Update on the state of play on CAP reform and Horizon Europe
- Update on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas
- Update on CAP networking
- Ideas for the governance of the EU CAP Network
- Recent and planned Network activities of the ENRD Contact Point, the EIP-AGRI Support Facility and ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk
- Outlook - Proposals for the 8th RNs' Assembly.

The Chair signalled that the former Chair and Vice-Chairs from the rural development Civil Dialogue Group (CDG) were exceptionally present as observers at this SG meeting to help maintain coordination between rural networking and the CDG, following the recent transfer of the Chairmanship of all CDGs to the Commission. He requested, and received, the SG members agreement for their participation, and indicated that the Commission would explore means to maintain this linkage also for future meetings.

The Chair shared considerations on two points to aid the framing of SG discussions. Firstly, that the new EU CAP network is part of the CAP reform, so it can only be established once the new legislative package enters into force and other technical elements are in place. The launch of the EU CAP Network is expected during 2022. In the interim period, support to networking would be ensured under the 'label' of the current EU Rural Networks (i.e. the ENRD and EIP-AGRI networks). His second point referred to the governance of the future EU CAP Network, the organisational structure of which will be set out in an implementing act. The text for this act will take regard of SG discussions. It is expected to be finalised following other secondary legislation needed to implement the CAP reform and support managing authorities in preparing the CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs).

Update on EU policies, DG AGRI

9.10 – 10.00

State of play on
CAP reform

Gaëlle Marion, DG
AGRI

Gaëlle Marion made a presentation on the [state of play on the CAP reform with a focus on rural development matters](#). She informed the SG that the final details for the new CSP Regulation were being agreed and this would lead to the upcoming adoption of the basic act, as well as preparation of the related delegated and implementing acts.

New or enhanced aspects of the political agreement were highlighted. These clarified the CSP Regulation's anticipated content concerning: redistribution of payments and optional capping; green architecture including eco-scheme

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flexibilities; the strategic approach to addressing generational renewal challenges including investments; and the new CAP's social dimension such as compliance with workers' rights.

A series of new elements, adjustments and clarifications were then presented in relation to Pillar 2 dealing with a wide range of topics including management commitments; ANC payments and Natura/WFD. There was a clarification that there are no maximum rates for IACS interventions

Further updates were presented clarifying the maximum investment support rates and 'negative list' eligibility. The new separate article dedicated for irrigation was outlined including the reference to the new Regulation on minimum requirements for water reuse. Other elements include the clarification of start-up aid for new farmers and business start-up including non-agricultural activities if related to LEADER local development strategies.

Risk management has been updated and now has stand-alone working capital possible for farmers who do not participate in a risk management tool, while cooperation now makes specific reference to Smart Villages. Knowledge exchange and information support can be up to 100%, and support for advisory services is aligned with FAS.

There are changes to financial management and transfer options with a single co-financing rate at national or regional level. Ring-fencing has a minimum 35% rate for Green ring-fencing, 3% minimum Young farmer ring-fencing, 5% minimum for Leader and 4% maximum Technical Assistance. The performance model's main features confirm the reserve will be based on a set of 20 result indicators.

An update on preparations for secondary legislation described the adoption procedure for these acts and underlined a priority to finalise texts needed by managing authorities for submitting CSPs.

This presentation to the SG provided an [update on Horizon Europe's Cluster 6 on food, bioeconomy, natural resources, agriculture and environment](#). It was highlighted that we need to increase research and innovation efforts to support farmers, foresters and rural communities in achieving the Green Deal targets and objectives.

To this end, the Commission has launched recently the first Horizon Europe work programme 2021-2022 with R&I funding opportunities of around €1.9 billion for Cluster 6. Funds are still available from this envelope for the 2022 calls, with deadline for submission of proposals in February. Information was provided about relevant topics under the intervention areas on agriculture,

Horizon Europe
Cluster 6 latest
updates, Nicola
Britta Holsten, DG
AGRI

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<p>Agricultural State Aid Guidelines update, Kai Heikkila, DG AGRI</p>	<p>forestry and rural areas. The Commission started to prepare the next Cluster 6 work programme 2023-2024 to further support R&I activities in agriculture, forestry and rural areas supporting European Green Deal initiatives, including the Farm to Fork, Biodiversity, and Forestry strategies, as well as Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA).</p> <p>Another new development with Horizon relates to the launch in September of the Soil Deal for Europe research mission. There will be a specific work programme for this mission, to be published before the end of 2021. It goes beyond the Cluster 6 support and shall also nurture bottom-up best practices in research and innovation.</p> <p>In reply to a question submitted from a forestry stakeholder, CEPF, Mr Heikkila made a short presentation updating SG members on recent state aid matters concerning agriculture and rural development. He explained that the new State Aid Framework 2022 for agriculture is in preparation and needs to be adapted to the upcoming CAP legislation to facilitate the CSPs. The present rules are prolonged until the end of 2022.</p> <p>Recent revisions to the General Block Exemption Regulation were considered useful, particularly for EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and LEADER LAGs. Guidelines on State Aid for climate, environmental protection and energy are being drafted; these may also be relevant for support which is not covered by other Guidelines or Exemption Regulations.</p> <p>More details about the State Aid Framework for agriculture would be published in 2022.</p>
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Update on the next steps arising from the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas

<p>10.00 – 10.30 Update on the next steps arising from the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas Maria Gafo, DG AGRI</p>	<p>SG members received a presentation from Maria Gafo providing an update on the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), further to the adoption of the Communication in June 2021. Ms. Gafo highlighted the main elements of the Communication including the Rural Action Plan’s flagship initiatives.</p> <p>One of the flagships is a Rural Revitalisation Platform where it is envisaged to share information and best practices on tools and strategies (particularly targeted to ‘areas lagging behind’). It is also envisaged to promote instruments and practices from all EU Funds.</p> <p>The LTVRA also includes transversal actions: Rural proofing, an EU Rural Observatory and a Toolkit on the combination and use of EU funds. Finally, a Rural Pact, a framework to promote a strengthened governance for rural</p>
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areas, by improving cooperation of authorities and rural stakeholders at the EU, national, regional and local levels, is proposed.

The Rural Pact is due to be launched by the end of 2021. Later, in mid-2023, there will be a stock-taking of the 2021-2027 programming period to assess what actions have been carried out and programmed in support schemes for rural areas financed by the EU and Member States and will highlight gaps where necessary. This will help to inform a reflection period about the policy framework for 2028-2034.

Discussions between the Commission and the other EU institutions on the Communication are ongoing and the Commission looks forward to receiving their opinions in the coming months.

A Q&A session clarified that the Rural Pact aims to foster dialogue with all levels of governance and will be the subject of an event during the French presidency early next year. An active contribution from Rural Networks will be welcome, but roles are still to be defined.

A question about CAP resourcing for the LTVRA was answered with confirmation that many actions in rural areas can be supported by different EU funds as well as national funds. The toolkit on the combination of EU funding is acknowledged as being a key success factor for realisation of the rural vision.

Rural proofing was the subject of another SG question. The aim is to put in place a mechanism to assess the anticipated impact of major EU initiatives on rural areas. The Commission also invites Member States to consider implementing the rural proofing principle at the national, regional and local level. Rural networking may also support rural proofing activity at national, regional and local levels.

Update on CAP networking

10.30 – 10.50
Update on CAP
networking
Helen Williams, DG
AGRI

The SG meeting's [update on CAP networking](#) was presented by Helen Williams. She explained that no interruption in networking activities at EU level will occur and three technical support contracts have been signed in July 2021 to help provide Member States and stakeholders with ongoing networking support. These three contracts cover the following Lots from the single public procurement procedure:

- Lot 1, supporting networking concerning the design and implementation of CSPs, was awarded to RURANET EEIG.

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- Lot 2, supporting networking activities focusing on innovation and knowledge exchange-EIP-AGRI, was awarded to CAP EUROPE Innovation Consortium.
- Lot 4, providing logistical and communication support for networking activities, was awarded to CommUnity For Europe EEIG.
[The contract under Lot 3, concerning the European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP, is expected to be awarded later in 2021.]

Lots 1, 2, and 4 are now operational and are supporting the current ENRD and EIP-AGRI Networks, and the transition to the future EU CAP Network and its subsequent delivery. The current contract for the European Evaluation Helpdesk continues until the end of 2021. A new common office will be set up for the EU CAP Network.

Responding to a question from the French Ministry of Agriculture about what NRNs can expect from the final CAP legal framework, Ms. Williams confirmed that no substantive changes are expected in the final legal texts concerning networking as compared to the initial Commission proposal. The CAP networks at EU and national levels will have seven broad objectives. There will be nine tasks with eight of these being common for EU and national levels, including monitoring and evaluation aspects as well as CAP communication for the general public. Information and further details on the final legal provisions for networking are envisaged to be presented at the Assembly in December.

The implementing act on the content of the CSPs will also contain provisions setting out what Member States should describe in their CSP as regards the new national CAP networks. Another implementing act will set out the organizational structure and operation for the EU level CAP network and its governance.

Short presentations then introduced the personnel from the companies delivering [Lot 1](#), [Lot 2](#), and [Lot 4](#).

Ideas for the governance of the EU CAP Network

11.20 – 12.05
Ideas for the governance of the EU CAP Network
Tatjana Borbas, DG AGRI

The Chair reminded SG members that reflections on the future governance need to take account of the new approach to EU networking proposed in the CAP reform. In particular, these elements include: one EU level network replaces two current Rural Networks (ENRD and EIP-AGRI); the enlarged scope of the network’s activities, covering the whole CAP, Pillar I and Pillar II and sectoral interventions included in the CSP and helping support the transition to a performance-based delivery model; and the reinforced and

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cross-cutting role of innovation and knowledge sharing in the new CAP, including the AKIS.

This agenda item aimed to discuss the overall structure of future governance arrangements. Details concerning the meeting formats, working methods, and membership details of governance bodies would be discussed later. Membership is expected to complement ongoing developments connected to the Civil Dialogue Groups.

An update on [ideas for the future governance of CAP networking was then presented by Tatjana Borbas](#). This drew on stakeholder suggestions from previous consultations on the topic which highlighted the possibility for an adapted version of the current EU Rural Networks' governance structure. A new structure would be a single network with wider scope. An EU CAP Network Assembly should be enlarged to involve representatives of all relevant stakeholders. It could build on the current Rural Networks' Assembly responsibilities providing an over-arching strategic framework and guidance on EU CAP Network activities. It would meet annually and could include networking opportunities.

Two options for the Steering Group were discussed. A balanced membership of stakeholders would be ensured in both options. Rotating membership of the Steering Group could bring more dynamism and engage more stakeholders. One option retains much of the current approach with an expanded membership to reflect a wider Assembly. Members could be proposed by expressions of interest to the Assembly. A second option as a new approach could involve a smaller operational and coordination body, comprising members from Subgroups and the Expert Group for Monitoring and Evaluating the CAP (GREXE).

Permanent Subgroups, composed via expressions of interest to the Assembly, could continue focusing on thematic work such as innovation and AKIS and Leader/CLLD, and a new Subgroup on CSPs could be established. GREXE would continue to be the equivalent of the permanent subgroup for evaluation.

A Q&A session included a request for a clear distinction between the Steering Group and Assembly. More information was sought about how a rotating membership option could operate. Clarity was also sought about how members would be selected and the benefits from continuity of membership were stated. A model from a Finnish steering group was reported which has one member from each thematic focus group.

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A [virtual flipchart was used to collate](#) feedback on this agenda item during the SG meeting and additional comments were invited to be sent to agri-networks-steering@ec.europa.eu by 2 November 2021.

Recent and Planned Network Activities

12.05 – 12.35
Recent and planned network activities –
Jorge Ramirez
Puerto, ENRD CP

An update was given by the EU Rural Networks' support units, starting with a presentation of ENRD Contact Point activities.

Jorge Ramirez summarised [recent and future activity under Lot 1](#) noting a continuation of networking actions that facilitate a transition from ENRD-labelled roles to support to the EU CAP Network. Content for an Annual Work Programme (AWP) is being agreed and this is proposed to be built around and to reflect the future CAP's three general objectives. Food supply chains, environment, the LTVRA, and LEADER/CLLD are expected to feature as themes for Lot 1's first AWP. Networking events, analysis, publications, and good practices are also envisaged.

Willemine
Brinkman, EIP-AGRI

Willemine Brinkman presented a review of upcoming Lot 2 activities from the [Support Facility on innovation and knowledge exchange](#). This described EIP-AGRI networking events in the pipeline on Forestry and Farm data. Fruit tree pests and diseases, digital tools for sustainable nutrient management and nature-based solutions for water management under climate change conditions are anticipated for upcoming Focus Groups. Lot 2 already works closely with Lot 4 to coordinate respective roles within the context of these activities.

Hannes Wimmer,
ENRD Evaluation
Helpdesk

Hannes Wimmer presented [recent and planned network activities of the ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk](#). This drew attention to annual capacity building events, the importance of better data for CAP evaluation, and support for ex-post evaluations of the 2014-2020 period. Other points referred to new publications and the final set of events in the current Helpdesk contract during Q4 of 2021.

Outlook

12.35– 13.00
Outlook
Mario Milouchev,
DG AGRI

The Chair invited SG inputs to suggest agenda items for the upcoming Assembly meeting which is scheduled as a virtual event for 7 December 2021. DG AGRI saw the importance of keeping the Assembly updated on CAP reform developments including the preparation of CSPs and secondary legislation, and on other initiatives such as the LTVRA. Further discussion is also foreseen on the governance of the EU CAP Network. Agenda suggestions could also be sent to agri-networks-steering@ec.europa.eu.

No other topics were raised by meeting participants. The SG meeting concluded with statements from members raising awareness about a

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	European Rural Parliament mid-term event in October and an ongoing study from France on the pandemic's impact in rural areas.
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