



Supporting the health and well-being of Europe's agricultural workforce



POLICY INSIGHTS

Good health is vital to the roles that agricultural workers play in sustaining our food supplies, caring for our environment, and safeguarding the social fabric of rural communities. EU policies, including the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), can be coordinated to help improve the overall well-being of our agricultural work force, as well as the wider rural population.

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. **The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work** has highlighted that occupational safety and health risks in Europe's agriculture and forestry sector threaten its long-term viability. Members of the European Parliament's agriculture committee are also aware of **healthcare challenges**, including both physical and mental health conditions, faced by the people working in the sector. Mental health is a priority for the European Commission and a Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health is expected to be adopted in June 2023.

Farming is considered amongst the most dangerous jobs in Europe. The EU-funded Horizon research project focused on **Strengthening the farm health and safety knowledge and innovation systems in Europe** reports that: "European statistics show fatality rates in farming as 233% higher than other industries and the accident rate is 18% higher".

Such concerns are reflected in the work of another Horizon project aiming to help improve farmers' mental, physical, and social well-being in the **Farmwell** initiative. This network gathers practitioners from different Member States and has mapped farmer health matters across **Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland** and **Romania** to gain better insights for policy makers and other stakeholders.

A synthesis of Farmwell findings identifies the following four "vulnerabilities" affecting EU farmers: ageing; low farm income/poverty; gender imbalances; and farm labourers working in undocumented or insecure circumstances. Barriers to social services, farm succession stress, workload worries, as well as alienation or lack of respect by the public are observed as outcomes of these vulnerabilities resulting in risks to physical, social, and mental well-being.

Mental health threats are acknowledged by **Irish public sector bodies** helping agricultural workers cope with the **pressures of farming**. In Ireland and also **elsewhere in the EU**, these include financial stresses, farm labour challenges, inherent stress from animal mortality, poor work-life balance, and geographic isolation. Recent **research revealed** the sad fact that suicide among Irish farmers had become a more prevalent cause of death than farm accidents. This was associated with increased job-related distress but, more positively, with improved farm safety practices reducing incidences of accidental fatalities.



Policy synergies

Female and male farmers both remain at risk from these types of health threats throughout rural Europe. Such problems can be tackled best by joined-up action channelled through a variety of stakeholders. Member States' **CAP Strategic Plans** (CSPs) can play a role in this with financing for modernisation actions that facilitate or fund increased safety in the agri-food sector and reduce rural health risks.

More uptake of the CAP's new **social conditionality** opportunities can help improve occupational safety and health conditions on farms. Austria, France, Luxembourg, and Italy will implement social conditionality in 2023 and they will be followed by Spain and Portugal in 2024, all other MS will launch in 2025. Networking of good practices emerging in this new CAP field will help raise awareness about the possibilities and practicalities involved.

CSP funding for EIP-Agri Operational Groups like **Farmers4Safety** can also be used in all Member States to take advantage of networking's potential for identifying, analysing, and sharing success stories. For example, the **EU countries' CSPs** can co-fund agricultural equipment, rural skills, farm buildings, and other infrastructure as measures to address health or safety issues faced by the agri-food sector.

In addition, CSP assistance is available for rural development via **thousands of LEADER Local Action Groups** and **Smart Village** projects which can attract CSP funding for other rural citizens who are not involved in agriculture. **EU Cohesion policy funds** combined with the broader European portfolio of **demography policy support systems** can offer considerably more well-being opportunities for the many rural residents who are not engaged in farming. Insights from such policies underline how integrated development policies and EU funds are crucial to help improve the overall well-being of Europe's agricultural work force as an integral part of the wider population in rural regions.

Responsibilities here fall within the scope of the EU's **Rural Pact**. Its operational framework is perfectly placed to coordinate rural health policy synergies attainable through the Pact's evolving national implementation apparatus, which includes the **National Networks** and can be facilitated through their **regional cluster** meetings and other activities supported by the **EU CAP Network**.

