



Mental health policy for EU farmers



POLICY INSIGHTS

The understanding of some of the specific mental health care needs for farmers is increasing across the EU, and clear advantages can derive from tailor-made policy approaches to protect the agricultural community's well-being. EU funding policies can help improve the social fabric of rural Europe by building the capacity for specific support services that foster the mental health of farmers and farming communities.

Mental health problems affect **1 in 6 people** across the EU, and appropriate **policy responses** are needed to help alleviate their significant negative impacts. Everyone deserves the best care possible, and this requires designing dedicated support adapted to specific mental health challenges - as well as addressing specific causes.

Issues including occupational safety, health, stress and anxiety remain serious and common problems for European farmers and farming communities, and can affect their mental health. Factors affecting their well-being are becoming more widely understood, **documented** and **discussed at EU level**. **Mental health among EU farmers** can be impacted over time by long working hours, combined with other factors such as financial uncertainty, climate challenges and geographical or social isolation. More recently these challenges include the increased public scrutiny of farming professions. Farmers are exposed to higher risks of mental health problems, according to the **European Agency for Safety and Health at Work**, which underscores the higher rates of accidents and fatalities in the farming sector compared to other professional sectors.

However, the actual outreach of mental health care services available on the ground in farming communities remains an evolving process, and gaps in adequate mental health support still exist in too many rural areas. This drives initiatives, such as **Safe Habitus** and **Embrace Farm**, that are highlighting ways of providing better care services for the well-being of the agricultural community.

The recent EU CAP Network Thematic Group (TG) on **Supporting the Mental Health of Farmers and Farming Communities** capitalised on the extensive experience of its diverse group of members (including farmers, advisors, researchers and policymakers) to identify 'key ingredients' for successful mental health support initiatives and conditions for their replicability.

Expert insights

David Meredith (**Teagasc**, Ireland), the Safe Habitus project coordinator and member of the EU CAP Network's Thematic Group, reflects on the Community of Practice enabled by the project, and highlights the "difference that could be made from [creating] an EU-level framework within health, rural and agricultural policies". Such a framework covering all Member States could be useful to provide an impetus at each country's national level for accurate recognition of the relative risks and practical needs on the ground.

Options for policymakers promoted by Safe Habitus include "agricultural services that can help farmers reduce specific worries about technical or business stressors. Early-warning services to detect well-being changes are also priorities for high-risk communities such as the agricultural sector. Mechanisms helping farmers to 'take time off' periodically and 'have a life beyond the farm' are another useful support service. This may often be influenced by the **health literacy** of individual farmers."

Cost-effective benefits have been shown in the Community of Practice enabled by Safe Habitus (see the Slovenian example on the next page), where agricultural advisors can help blend both these technical and early-warning well-being roles, through a smart multi-functional approach to advisory services. Opportunities from EU funds include the flexibility provided by **subsidiarity**, i.e. taking decisions at the lowest level, or closest to where they will have an effect, to ensure coordinated national, regional and local approaches to funding diversified advisory services.





Member State **AKIS systems** and **Operational Groups**, as well as **LEADER LAGs** and other **CAP cooperation arrangements** for co-financing, offer useful possibilities for addressing gaps in well-being services throughout rural Europe. Policy priorities promoting the social sustainability of farming can be harnessed to help.

Tailor-made approaches can be developed across EU countries by leveraging existing networks of farm support services. Farm visitors such as veterinarians or business consultants can be trained to detect agricultural workers at risk, in addition to offering initial basic advice to farming families. For example, veterinarians can detect changes in animal welfare that can be warning signals of a farmer's mental health issues. Other farm advisors and sales visitors can also receive similar training to be able to signpost farmers to available support options.

Such a multi-purpose, joined-up approach to policy provision can lead to cost savings. It can be developed to help allow new and dedicated carer services for farmers to operate via shared overhead costs, for instance with CAP-funded agricultural advisors.

Dedicated approaches designed to fit with the specificities of local circumstances are encouraged by members of the EU CAP Network **Thematic Group**, based on their local, national and EU-level expertise and experience. Such tailor-made approaches, alongside continuous embedded commitments from health, rural and agricultural policies, can improve the sector's resilience more than time-bound, often short-lived, project-based approaches. Each country knows its own needs best, and a network of new services can evolve to expand localised care services.

Redressing stress for Slovenian farmers

Advisory service staff at Slovenia's Institute of Agricultural and Forestry are involved with promoting holistic approaches to well-being and stress reduction for clients as part of appropriate work-life balance business advice.

Maja Križnar, a member of the EU CAP Network TG on **Supporting the Mental Health of Farmers and Farming Communities**, is a farm advisor at the Institute and an advocate of this inclusive thinking within business development techniques. She encourages advisory services to show how to reduce stressors linked to unhealthy competitiveness or jealousy by building farmer confidence in working together with others through cooperation.

"Fostering more trust can be a vital development tool for the future of Slovenia's farm businesses. We also want our farmers to properly understand the full value of their products, to help them appreciate their potential as farmers and reduce worries about uncertainties. We know that it is possible for advisory services to translate personal development thinking and well-being techniques into language and communication channels that the agricultural audience accepts".

For further insights on mental health policy for farmers across the EU, see all the useful work by the EU CAP Network Thematic Group on **Supporting the Mental Health of Farmers and Farming Communities**.

