European network to promote grazing and to support grazing-based farms on their economic and ecologic performances as well as on animal welfare

www.grazing4agroecology.eu

FROM PASTURE TO POLICY
Policy pathways for sustainable grazing and agroecology

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Disclaimer	This document represents the views and opinions of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Table of Abbreviations

Definition/Abbreviation	Meaning
AECMs	Agri-Environment-Climate Measures
AKIS	Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
GAECs	Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions
MS	Member State
NUE	Nitrogen Use Efficiency
SMRs	Statutory Management Requirements

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Our vision of a stimulating policy for grazing-based farming

Grazing-based farming systems are key components of European agriculture, with grasslands covering more than 35% of the European Agricultural Area[1]. Grazing is the most natural way to manage these areas, supporting food production, rural jobs, and vibrant landscapes.

However, the value of grazing goes far beyond economics[2,3,4]. Well-managed grazing systems help tackle climate change, protect biodiversity, improve soils, and safeguard water. They also provide cultural and recreational benefits to communities. At the same time, poor management can lead to feed shortages or higher nutrient losses, which are challenges that require smart solutions rather than abandoning grazing altogether. As grazing has declined in recent decades[5], Europe now needs a renewed effort to maintain and strengthen it.

For a truly effective policy, we propose using the planetary boundaries framework[6] to set clear goals. Important domains of these boundaries are climate change, biosphere integrity, land system change, freshwater change, and biochemical flows (nitrogen and phosphorus). The framework reminds us that key environmental limits have already been exceeded. It also clarifies the direction and scale of change needed to bring agriculture back within safe operating limits.

Agroecology provides the pathway for sustainable grazing-based livestock production systems. It encourages farming designs that work with nature rather than against it, reducing the need for external inputs like fertilisers, pesticides, antibiotics, and heavy machinery. By making better use of natural processes, we can cut costs, reduce pollution, and build resilience.

To unlock the full potential of grasslands, Europe must support a shift to regenerative, pasture-based livestock systems. This shift is not without challenges: poorly managed grazing can harm ecosystems, and climate change increases year-to-year variability. But when done well, grazing delivers multiple ecosystem services, such as biodiversity, cleaner water, and stronger rural communities. Policies need to recognise that solutions depend on local conditions, not one-size-fits-all rules.

The EU Member States (MS) and regions all have a role to play, from promoting digital tools to supporting integrated grazing. Policies have to support farmers directly, whether individually or in groups, through instruments such as the CAP. They must also engage the wider food chain. Rewarding sustainable grazing requires clear standards, market incentives, and reliable information for consumers.

The path to agroecological grazing begins on the pasture, but it can only succeed with strong, coherent, and forward-looking policies.

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Methodology

The development of this policy paper followed a bottom-up, participatory approach that actively involved farmers and AKIS members across Europe. The process involved two consortium-wide discussions within Grazing4AgroEcology to define the core message and objectives of the paper. Following these discussions, Grazing4AgroEcology partners provided detailed input on existing policy measures and suggestions for adaptations related to the five pillars of Grazing4Agroecology, using a structured template. To enrich this input, each project country organised an AKIS meeting where current policies and suggestions for change were discussed.

Given the breadth of information collected, a prioritisation exercise was conducted using Mentimeter. This involved 69 respondents, including consortium members, AKIS representatives, and Grazing4AgroEcology pilot farmers from all Grazing4AgroEcology participating European countries, who ranked policy recommendations according to their importance. In parallel, the consortium identified and elaborated on success stories from each country, highlighting best practices and innovative approaches relevant to the policy paper.

Finally, the core Grazing4AgroEcology Policy Paper Team synthesised all inputs into this final document and produced a concise one-pager summarising the key messages and recommendations.

Policy recommendations

3.1 Align policies with the five Grazing4AgroEcology pillars

The EU project Grazing4AgroEcology promotes grazing as a strategic pathway towards agroecological transition. This policy paper outlines the need to support grazing-based farms through targeted measures that align with the five principles of agroecology that are particularly applicable to livestock systems:

1. **Adopt management practices that aim to improve animal health**
   Grazing systems allow natural behaviour of ruminants.
2. **Reduce the inputs required for production**
   By maximising local forage and minimising external feed and chemical inputs, grazing systems enhance resource efficiency and reduce dependency on global supply chains.
3. **Reduce pollution by optimising the biogeochemical functioning of farming systems**
   Well-managed grazing improves soil structure, enhances nutrient cycling, and reduces runoff and emissions, contributing to cleaner air and water.
4. **Enhance diversity within animal production systems to strengthen their resilience**
   Diverse grazing systems, incorporating multiple species, breeds, and pasture types—are better equipped to adapt to climate variability, market changes, and disease pressures.
5. **Preserve biodiversity in agro-ecosystems by adapting management practices**
   Grazing supports a mosaic of habitats, from grasslands to wetlands, fostering rich biodiversity and ecosystem services that benefit both agriculture and society.

By aligning policy with these principles, the EU can unlock the full potential of grazing-based farming to contribute to climate goals, food sovereignty, and rural vitality at European, national, and regional levels, while helping to bring agriculture back within planetary boundaries.

3.2 Recommendations for policy measures

Current policy instruments provide significant flexibility for Member States (MS) to adapt measures to their national contexts. However, this flexibility often results in uneven implementation, as many effective options are not adopted due to competing internal priorities. To address this gap, we recommend narrowing the range of options available to MS, to ensure that measures supporting grazing systems are more consistently and effectively applied across Europe.

Farmers, as entrepreneurs, need long-term security and stability. Policies should be sustainable and avoid frequent changes, especially if their impact is expected in the long term. Consequently, when developing new measures, it is essential to consider trade-offs and long-term impacts for farmers as these decisions may shape their businesses for years to come. Financial measures based on fixed maximum total amounts and varying single payments based on the number of applicants also discourage farmers from participating in the measure. In addition, the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) for

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grazing remains underdeveloped compared to other sectors. Strengthening AKIS networks, research, and advisory services is essential to support innovation and knowledge transfer. Strong support to Operational Groups that include all grazing AKIS actors could serve this purpose in future policies, but their time horizon should be longer than two years to effectively impact innovation adoption by farmers.

Particular attention should be given to marginal regions where grazing plays a critical role in supporting biodiversity. In these areas, advisory services are often absent, especially when grazing is less profitable. To overcome this barrier, high-quality advisory support should be provided, free of charge or to easily affordable costs, depending on the socio-economic context. This would ensure equitable access to expertise and help foster sustainable grazing practices.

Clear methods for achieving these objectives are outlined in the sections that follow.

3.2.1. Financial incentives

Support low-input, biodiversity-rich systems
Enhance the use of CAP-linked agri-environmental measures for grazing and the support of permanent and species-rich pastures, and their adaptation to climate change.
→ These systems reduce dependency on external inputs (e.g. imported concentrates, synthetic fertilisers), lower environmental impacts (GHG emissions, nutrient runoff), and improve soil health and biodiversity. They also align with agroecological principles and promote long-term farm resilience.

Support sustainability and efficiency in nutrient management practices
Incentivise nutrient-efficient practices (e.g. multispecies swards, use of manure and organic fertilisers, reduction and better application of mineral fertilisers) and promoting a more balanced regional distribution of livestock across Europe to reduce nutrient surpluses and restore grazing where it requires rejuvenation.
→ These practices address the structural nutrient surpluses in livestock-dense regions, reduce nitrogen losses, and enhance the circularity and sustainability of nutrient flows within farming systems.

Increase reliance on locally produced feed sources
Reward farms using 100% local forage diets, offering grants to improve farm pastures and forage conservation techniques (e.g. precision tools; barns).
→ Local feed systems reduce reliance on volatile global markets and imported feed. Improved conservation reduces feed losses and preserves nutritional quality of forage.

Promote robust breeds and grazing infrastructure
Promote the use of local breeds and the improvement of basic infrastructure to improve animal welfare and health
→ Grazing infrastructure (e.g. roadways/fencing, water stations, shade) supports animal welfare by reducing stress and injury in grazing animals and improves grazing efficiency. Native breeds are better adapted to local conditions, require fewer inputs, and contribute to genetic diversity and cultural heritage.

Conserve and promote better use for the semi-natural grasslands
Continue rewarding farmers for maintaining and managing semi-natural grasslands sustainably (e.g. precision grassland management, extensive grazing, late mowing, reduced use of fertilisers).
→ Improve understanding of the adaptive management of semi-natural grasslands.

Encourage multifunctional landscapes
Fund landscape features that contribute to a multifunctional landscape such as agroforestry integration, ecological corridors, hedgerows, stone walls, ponds, wetland restoration and other local landscape features to enhance biodiversity and carbon sequestration.
→ These features support ecosystem services such as pollination, water regulation, and carbon storage. They also improve landscape connectivity and resilience against climate change and land degradation.

Boost farm diversification
Provide support for direct sales, on-farm processing, renewable energy, and other income-stabilising activities linked to sustainable grazing (tourism, education activities etc.).
→ Diversification reduces economic vulnerability, adds value to grassland-based products, and strengthens rural economies. It also encourages multifunctional land use and supports agroecological transitions.

Support traditional grazing systems in marginal areas
Better use of targeted payments for farmers maintaining biodiversity and landscape quality in less productive, mountainous or internal regions.
→ Grazing in marginal areas prevents land abandonment and reduces wildfire risk, supports biodiversity through low-intensity management, maintains traditional landscapes and the vitality of rural areas while delivering high-quality products. These farmers, sometimes without land property (shepherds), often operate under economic pressure and need tailored financial support for the ecosystem services they provide.

Mitigate the existing conflicts between grasslands farming and wildlife
Better reward farmers for adopting wildlife-friendly practices and improving habitat quality.
→ In pastures and grasslands, delayed mowing, low stocking densities, rotational grazing and the creation of refuge strips for wildlife protect grassland nesting birds and positively impact pollinators. An integrated approach to protect livestock against wild carnivores and ruminants consisting in preventive actions (electric fencing, livestock-guarding dogs, deterrent devices), and simplified procedures to ensure timely compensation payments for damages caused by wild species would encourage grazing and conflict management in shared habitats.

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3.2.2. Training and advisory services

Support training and knowledge exchange on:

- **Pasture and nutrient management**: *legume incorporation, multispecies swards, rotational grazing, integrated pest control, efficient manure use.*
  → These practices improve nitrogen use efficiency (NUE), reduce reliance on chemical inputs, reduce feed losses and enhance soil health. Training ensures farmers can implement them effectively and safely.
- **Practices to increase on-farm sustainability**: *agroecology, biodiversity, animal welfare, organic farming and climate adaptation*.
  → These topics are foundational for transitioning away from input-intensive models. Training helps farmers adopt nature-based solutions, reduce environmental impacts, and builds resilience to climate change.
- **Adapting grazing systems to extreme weather conditions:**
  → Climate adaptation (e.g. shade provision, water access) is essential for animal welfare and productivity under increasing weather variability.
- **Landscape and breed diversity**: *agroforestry, restoration of landscape features like hedgerows, and traditional breeds.*
  → These elements contribute to biodiversity, cultural heritage, and ecological resilience. Training helps preserve and integrate them into modern grazing systems.

Promote knowledge exchange about grazing
Support peer-to-peer learning networks and EU platforms to share best practices in grazing, herd management, and biodiversity planning.
→ Farmer-led innovation and shared experience accelerate adoption of sustainable practices. Peer networks foster trust, local relevance, and continuous improvement. There is the need to enhance collaboration between advisory services, research, and end-users in all MS.

3.2.3. Research and Innovation support

Advance agroecological and climate-resilient grazing systems
Fund studies and pilot programmes on species-rich pastures, legumes, and agroforestry to boost biodiversity, natural pest control, and climate resilience. Prioritise on resilience of grazing systems under extreme weather, including breed selection, shade provision, and behavioural monitoring.
→ These systems cut input needs and environmental pressures while improving productivity and resilience. Targeted research is essential to validate and scale practices that are currently underused or unevenly applied across MS.

Improve nitrogen efficiency in livestock and forage systems
Invest in ruminant and plant breeding for high NUE and support technologies for manure processing and forage conservation to reduce nutrient losses and environmental impacts.
→ Current nitrogen losses exceed planetary boundaries. Improving NUE through animal and plant genetics, and closing nutrient cycles through manure and forage innovations, is essential for environmental sustainability and lower production costs.

Enhance access to precision grazing technologies
Support cooperatives and regional hubs in developing, harmonising and sharing farmer-friendly technologies, such as precision grazing systems.

→ Precision tools support better decision-making and improve input efficiency and animal welfare, but adoption is low on small- and medium-sized farms due to cost and complexity. Regional hubs, open-source solutions and harmonised approaches can bridge this gap and can reduce administrative burdens for single farmers and broaden access to grazing technologies.

Expand agroecological research across Europe
Ensure research includes underrepresented regions to improve equity and applicability across all MS.
→ Agroecological research is currently concentrated in Western Europe. Expand agroecological research to all MS ensures that policies and innovations address the full diversity of farming systems and challenges across Europe.

Understand famers' needs to support sustainable practices
Support research into the needs and motivations of farmers to identify what they require to be willing and able to successfully adopt more sustainable practices and align their management with environmental goals.
→ Understanding farmers' perspectives, barriers, and incentives is essential to design policies, advisory services, and technologies that are practical, acceptable, and effective. Tailored support to cater for farmers' needs will increase the adoption of sustainable practices and promote long-term environmental stewardship.

3.2.4. Regulatory Frameworks

Adapt grazing management to climate variability with flexible guidelines
Introduce flexible grazing guidelines and require shelter provisions during extreme weather to safeguard animal welfare.
→ Climate change increases the frequency of heatwaves, droughts, and storms. Adaptive regulations ensure grazing remains viable and animal-friendly under changing conditions.

From farm to landscape thresholds
Shift from farm-level limits to landscape-scale thresholds to ensure regional nutrient balance and reduce pollution, aligning CAP with planetary nitrogen boundaries.
→ Assessing performance at landscape level allows for better nutrient cycling, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. It also supports collaboration among neighbouring farms and avoids isolated or conflicting practices.

Integrate grazing requirements into animal welfare legislation
Recognise grazing as a welfare-enhancing practice in EU directives for ruminants.
→ Grazing supports natural behaviour, social interaction, and health in ruminants. Including it explicitly in legislation reinforces its role in meeting animal welfare standards and encourages its adoption across MS.

1.1.2 Certification and labelling

Strengthen market recognition for sustainable grazing-based products
Support the labelling and promotion of products (e.g. cheeses, meats, herbs) linked to sustainable grazing and grazing-certified farms.
→ Improved market visibility strengthens rural economies, builds consumer trust, and rewards farmers for adopting environmentally sustainable practices.

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Integrate grazing into sustainability certification schemes
Ensure that sustainability certification and labelling schemes explicitly recognise grazing as a core criterion, alongside biodiversity-friendly management, nutrient-efficient systems, and high animal-welfare standards.
→ This strengthens consumer recognition of environmentally responsible farms and provides clear incentives for farmers to adopt and maintain sustainable grazing practices.

Simplify labelling for consumers and farmers
Labelling schemes should be clear, simple, and easy for consumers to understand and farmers to implement.
→ Clear and straightforward labels support consumer decision-making, build trust in sustainable products, and make it easier for farmers to apply and communicate environmentally responsible practices effectively.

3.2.5. Monitoring and evaluation

Improve CAP schemes with measurable indicators
Design CAP schemes with measurable outcomes and indicators, embedding targets in GAECs and SMRs.
→ Moving beyond compliance-based schemes to results-based indicators (rewarding farmers for actual livestock management and land stewardship) ensures public funding delivers tangible environmental and welfare benefits. This should also support locally tailored, flexible approaches that foster innovation and continuous improvement.

Develop accessible monitoring metrics
Create clear, farmer-friendly metrics to evaluate biodiversity, animal welfare, eco-scheme performance, socio-economic well-being, workload balance, and promote on-farm trials to validate innovative practices.
→ Simple, easy-to-use indicators empower farmers to track progress and improve outcomes, while on-farm trials ensure practical relevance, applicability and uptake.

Strengthen performance tracking with robust monitoring systems
Develop robust systems to monitor input use, nutrient flows, biodiversity, animal welfare, and climate-related risks across grazing systems.
→ Reliable monitoring is essential for assessing the effectiveness of CAP and other measures, identifying areas for improvement, ensuring accountability, and supporting adaptive management, while providing solid evidence to inform policy refinement.

Ensure relevant and inclusive monitoring
Ensure that new measures complement existing traditional practices and reflect broader public benefits such as fire prevention and cultural landscape preservation.
→ Many traditional grazing systems already provide ecological and social value. Recognising and building on these practices ensures that policies are culturally appropriate, locally accepted, and reinforce existing strengths rather than replacing them.

4. Success stories of policy measures

This chapter highlights successful policy measures from across the European Union related to grazing and agroecology. The examples showcase a variety of approaches, contexts, and scales, illustrating how effective policies can support farmers, rural communities, and ecosystems.

4.1 Financial incentives - Portugal

The pilot project "Results-Based Montado", developed by the University of Évora, was implemented in two emblematic Montado regions: Monfurado and the Guadiana Valley. In this initiative, farmers receive financial incentives based on the results they achieve in four key objectives: soil improvement, increasing Montado tree density through natural regeneration, enhancing biodiversity, and improving watercourses within their farms. The project demonstrates that results-based payment schemes can effectively encourage more sustainable practices adapted to the specific characteristics of each territory. Considering the positive outcomes from this project, this type of incentives should be scaled up and implemented at the national level, to ensure the long-term conservation of the Montado and strengthen the environmental and economic sustainability of agricultural systems.

4.2 Training and advisory services - Ireland

In Ireland, Teagasc has a unique integration of research, advisory and training services. This facilitates immediate transfer of research knowledge to advisory and training services and shortens the length of time for key innovations to reach farmers. The advisory service is independent and confidential and is present in every region across the country. This provides a strong model for farmer education on sustainability and competitiveness. Also, within the advisory programme, knowledge transfer is facilitated by advisors in local farmer discussion groups which supports peer to peer learning. Farmer education is further provided through targeted programmes such as the Teagasc Grass10 programme (https://teagasc.ie/crops/grassland/grass10/). This programme aims to promote sustainable grassland excellence for Irish livestock systems. The programme hosts a variety of farm walks across the year, for example 'Spring grazing walks' which over 1,000 farmers attending in 2025. Alongside this, it hosts grassland training groups across the country, sends out a weekly newsletter with relevant and timely grazing management tips, and hosts a Grassland Farmer of the year competition. A similar programme was also adopted to help Ireland tackle its climate and sustainability targets for 2030 called the Signpost Programme which also hosts farm walks that are centred around demonstration farms. These programmes focus on improving Irelands grazing system.

4.3 Research and Innovation support - Sweden

Support to research is given by private financiers, national councils, and the EU. Innovations are financed by national councils and the EIP Agri. During the last decades, Swedish research related to grazing has mainly dealt with conservation of biodiversity, livestock production, and techniques for monitoring. Research often combines objectives such as nature conservation grazing together with producing market-ready carcasses that meet standards for weight, shape, and fatness. Often several aspects have been studied simultaneously, such as production and meat characteristics, production economy and environmental impact. Monetary support for a single project often comes from more than one financier. Monitoring techniques for grazing livestock aim to save labour time by replacing

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the compulsory daily manual surveillance of animal welfare with remote sensing of animals, fences and water.

4.4 Regulatory Frameworks - Sweden

In Sweden, all ruminants except bulls must graze during the grazing period to a greater or lesser extent depending on the production system and the type of animal (SJVFS 2019:18; 2019:21). The grazing period is stipulated to be at least 120 days in the south, 90 days in central Sweden, and 60 days in the north. Cattle for beef production must graze, or at least be outdoors, for 24 hours/day during the grazing period, whilst lactating dairy cows must be under productive grazing for at least six hours/day during the grazing period. The compulsory grazing for dairy cows has been debated in the last years. Recently, the government decided to keep the required grazing and compensate the farmers for extra costs.

4.5 Certification and labelling - the Netherlands

Since 2012, dairy companies have offered grazing premiums to encourage pasture-based farming. Most of the pasture-based dairy products in the Netherlands are marketed under the label 'Weidemelk' (www.weidemelk.nl/en). The Weidemelk logo provides a trustworthy guarantee that dairy products originate from milk from cows that have grazed a minimum of 720 hours annually. Milk from farms practicing grazing is collected separately and processed within a dedicated production chain, ensuring that fresh dairy products, such as milk, buttermilk, custard, and yoghurt, as well as cheese and other dairy products retain their authentic pasture-based qualities. Independent and qualified certifying bodies inspect both the dairy farms and the entire processing chain to maintain these standards.

4.6 Monitoring and evaluation - France

CAP strategic plans include biodiversity and climate resilience indicators. Since 2012 and even more in the present CAP 2023 – 2027, important plans are dedicated to i) adaptation to climate change of various production sectors, including herbivores, ii) preservation of biodiversity and iii) preservation of peculiar ecosystems, such as wet areas. For these three items, grasslands and their management are essential. In regional plans, for each objective and target group which can be either individual or collective entities, a list of actions with the corresponding indicators and the level of financial support are precisely defined. As an example, in the Pays de Loire Region, in the measure for biodiversity protection through the creation of grasslands, there are four specific objectives (creating and preserving the swards, location of the swards, botanical composition, minimum area), each objective being documented by precise indicators such as the list of plant species that may be used for sowing and which must show a benefit for the flora and fauna biodiversity and for preserving water quality. The fulfilment of these objectives leads to a reward of 325 €/ha.

FROM PASTURE TO POLICY: Policy pathways for sustainable grazing and agroecology

Why grazing matters?

- Grasslands cover 35% of EU agricultural land; grazing is the most natural way to manage them.
- Benefits go beyond economics: climate mitigation, biodiversity, soil health, water protection, animal welfare and cultural value.
- Declining grazing threatens these benefits—Europe needs renewed support.

➔ **Grazing for agro ecology is the pathway: farming with nature, reducing external inputs, boosting resilience.**

Policy Recommendations from the project Grazing4AgroEcology

Financial incentives	Support low-input, biodiversity-rich systems
	Support sustainability and efficiency in nutrient management practices
	Increase reliance on locally produced feed sources
	Promote robust breeds and grazing infrastructure
Training and advisory services	Support training and knowledge on pasture and nutrient management and practices to increase on-farm sustainability
	Promote knowledge exchange about grazing
Research and innovation support	Advance agroecological and climate-resilient grazing systems
	Improve nitrogen efficiency in livestock and forage systems
	Enhance access to precision grazing technologies
	Expand agroecological research across Europe
Regulatory Frameworks	Adapt grazing management to climate variability with flexible guidelines
	From farm to landscape thresholds
	Integrate grazing requirements into animal welfare legislation
Certification and labelling	Strengthen market recognition for sustainable grazing-based products
	Integrate grazing into sustainability certification schemes
	Simplify labelling for consumers and farmers
Monitoring and Evaluation	Improve CAP schemes with measurable indicators
	Develop accessible monitoring metrics
	Strengthen performance tracking with robust monitoring systems
	Ensure relevant and inclusive monitoring

Read the full Policy Paper of Grazing4AgroEcology here: [LINK]

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