



# Press article: EIP-AGRI Focus Group on Organic Farming

## Innovative Solutions for Organic Farmers in the EU

IMPROVING ORGANIC YIELDS: SUGGESTIONS AND EXAMPLES FROM ACROSS EUROPE

**ICT support systems, increasing soil microbial activity and joint purchase of machinery are just some of the suggestions to improve yields in organic farming which are explained in the new report published by the EIP-AGRI Focus Group on Organic Farming. This report, which aims to contribute to a European agriculture which is both more productive and more sustainable, explores concrete and transferrable solutions to the most common problems affecting organic yields.**

### Analysing the problem

The report identifies the most important factors affecting yields in organic farming (where the definition of yields, or farm performance, includes quantity, quality and eco-system services). These are: soil fertility management, nutrient supply, weed management, pest and disease pressure and variety choice. The report also highlights several general themes which also play a role: the need for a systems approach; the need to enhance knowledge sharing; the development of resilient systems; and the need for a broad cultural shift.

But how can these problems be overcome? Haven't some solutions been developed in neighbouring countries which could be adapted to another context? What innovative projects have already been set up that could be used as inspiration? These are the questions that the report goes on to explore.

### Finding solutions

New and more efficient machinery usually means heavy investment for farmers. Also, many organic farms produce a wider range of crops compared to conventional farms which results in the need for a number of different tools, and often these tools require very specific skills which can only be acquired through training and practice. The time and money needed for this can be a problem. This common issue facing organic farmers can often hinder production. The EIP-AGRI Focus Group on Organic Farming report presents a solution to this issue: the promotion of opportunities for joint purchase and use of machinery known as "machinery rings". Machinery rings are a cooperative way for farmers to share resources. Farmers can exchange machinery (including, if necessary, someone to operate it), saving time and

**The European Innovation Partnership 'Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability' (EIP-AGRI)** was launched by the European Commission in a bid to promote innovation in the agricultural and forestry sectors and bring research and practice closer together.

**The EIP-AGRI Focus Group on organic farming** brought together 20 experts with different backgrounds and experiences (scientists, farmers, advisers...) to make recommendations on transferable innovative solutions on the topic of how to identify the optimal production level of organic systems and how to reduce the yield gap that separates organic from conventional in some crops, and how to enhance the performance of low-yielding organic farms to the level of the best performers.

money and ensuring quality. Machinery rings can be a very effective and innovative solution, and although they may already be common in some regions of Europe (e.g. Scotland, Austria, Germany, Sweden), machinery rings are not used or even known in many other areas.

The EIP-AGRI Focus Group report gives eleven other types of solutions to yield gap issues such as this one with the hope that these innovative ideas can be spread to other organic farmers across Europe.

## Identifying existing projects

In Finland, a solution has been developed to use by-products from the pulp and paper industry in organic farming to manage carbon and nutrients in the soil. Adding slowly decomposable wood fibres to the soil has proven to help restore exhausted soils more easily and quickly, to add water and nutrient holding capacity, to improve microbiological activity, to name just a few of the advantages for the farmer, and then there is the huge environmental benefit of putting waste from the paper industry to good use. Representatives from the pulp and paper industry and farming developed the solution together. Focus Group expert Aira Sevón explains that cooperation between the different parties is essential: "It is important that industrial procedures do not contain chemicals that are dangerous later on in the chain". Farmer, researcher and entrepreneur Juuso Joona, who initiated the project, says: "We saw a significant improvement in the soil quality. This technique gives value to waste products and contributes to putting the carbon back where it belongs!"

*"Practical organic farming looks alike in many parts of EU, and sharing innovations and experiences is very important to improve the performance of organic cropping systems."*  
Maria Wivstad, Focus Group expert.

This example is not a one-off. Farmers across Europe have experimented on their farms for centuries, testing out new, innovative ideas and methods. Many of the solutions they have come up with could be applied in other places in Europe and could help the organic sector to improve its production and to flourish. The Finnish example, as the report tells us, can be transferred to any areas in Europe which have pulp and paper industry nearby. The report by the EIP-AGRI Focus Group on Organic Farming presents this Finnish example and many more.

## Funding for innovative projects

The aim of knowledge-sharing through the examples given in the report is to encourage new people from all over Europe to take inspiration from them and use them to set up new projects. These projects could even be funded under the EU Rural Development policy which can provide support for 'Operational Groups'. Operational Groups are projects involving several partners who come together to work on concrete, practical solutions to a common problem or innovative opportunity. The people involved should be from a similar area but diverse backgrounds (for example: farmers, a scientist, an agri-business and others). This support is managed through the regional or national Rural Development Programmes, contact details are in the EIP-AGRI factsheet on Operational Groups which can be found on the EIP-AGRI website.

## For more information

EIP-AGRI Focus Group on organic farming webpage:

[http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/focus-groups/organic-farming/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/focus-groups/organic-farming/index_en.htm)

EIP-AGRI Focus Group on organic farming recommendations and outputs report:

[http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/focus-groups/organic-farming/201404\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/focus-groups/organic-farming/201404_en.pdf)

EIP-AGRI factsheet on setting up Operational Groups under rural development funding:

[http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/pdf/fact-sheet-operational-groups\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/pdf/fact-sheet-operational-groups_en.pdf)



**The Focus Group experts on a field-visit in the UK**



**The Focus Group experts on a field-visit in Spain**

Photo: Ulrich Schmutz