

Call for expression of interest for experts participating in Focus Groups of the European CAP Network

The European Commission is launching a call for experts such as farmers, foresters, advisers, scientists and other relevant actors for three new [EU CAP Network Focus Groups](#) (Focus Groups). The Focus Groups will start working in October 2023 and are expected to present their results and recommendations by September 2024. Candidates for each of the Focus Groups below are invited to apply in accordance to the rules set out in this notice for the purpose specified.

*Please note that the dates for the first meetings of the Focus Groups are indicated below for each Focus Group. **All applicants must be available to travel to the Focus Group meeting on these dates.** If selected experts fail to confirm their availability on these dates within one week of receiving the message saying they have been selected, they may be replaced. Focus Group participants will also be requested to do some preparatory work before and in between the first and second meetings.*

You will find the link to the application form after the calls below. Please read the entire call text carefully before applying.

Focus Group themes:

For the current call, farmers, foresters, advisers, scientists and others¹ are invited to apply for participation in Focus Groups on the following topics, noting that these Focus Groups will complement the work of previous ones. Topics in the current call:

50: Regenerative agriculture for soil health

[More information](#)

51: Crop associations including Milpa and protein crops

[More information](#)

52: Competitive and resilient mountain areas

[More information](#)

What is a Focus Group?

The purpose of a Focus Group is to explore practical innovative solutions to problems or opportunities and to draw on and share experience gained from relevant innovative projects. The group discusses and documents research results and implications for further research activities that will help to solve practical issues in the sector. Such issues may be related to organisational questions, production, processing, consumption, logistics or other areas. The group is asked to focus on practical knowledge, dissemination to the sector as well as developing project ideas for Operational Groups.

¹ See p. 2 section 'Who can apply'

Focus Groups are expected to work for around 12 months, and to meet face-to-face twice. For more information on the Focus Groups, please see the [Focus Group charter](#).

What is the outcome of a Focus Group?

The specific questions and tasks per Focus Group for the current calls are listed below. Candidates should carefully study these questions and refer to them in their applications, indicating how their experience is relevant to answering the questions.

All Focus Groups will be required to:

- ✓ **make a summary description of the issue**
- ✓ **take stock of the state of play of practice in the field of its activity, listing problems and opportunities**
- ✓ **take stock of the state of play of research in its field, summarising possible solutions to the problems listed**
- ✓ **identify needs from practice and possible directions for further research**
- ✓ **propose priorities for innovative actions by suggesting ideas for Operational Groups or other project formats to test solutions and opportunities and ways to exchange the practical knowledge gathered beyond the Focus Group**

The outcome of the Focus Group will be presented in a report and feed into the EU CAP Network, which will share the knowledge and practical experience with the wider public as well as with relevant programming authorities.

Who can apply?

The composition of the Focus Groups will be based on the following profiles, while taking into account the different characteristics of the specific challenge/objective at stake and a good balance in the composition of the group (area of expertise, professional capacity and experience, geographical balance, etc.):

- Experts such as farmers, foresters, advisers, with relevant practical experience and technical knowledge on the topic, who can contribute with practical solutions to problems or opportunities in the field.
- Experts with a good understanding and experience of the relevant economic situation related to the topic concerned, including market prospects, production costs, supply, manufacturing, and socio-economic impact for farmers and the forest sector.
- Experts with experience in practical research and innovation actions related to the topic.

Detailed Description of the Focus Groups

Focus Group 50: Regenerative agriculture for soil health

First meeting: 28-29 November 2023

Soil is vital for sustaining life on Earth. It serves as the foundation of our food systems and provides clean water and habitats for biodiversity while contributing to climate resilience. Despite remarkable improvements in efficiency and reduction of some negative impacts in recent decades, the pressure on natural resources caused by crop production remains at an unsustainable level. Agriculture itself is also increasingly affected by the reduced availability of healthy soils and varying water availability as a consequence of unsustainable practices and climate change.

Europe needs more sustainable agriculture to restore and protect soil health, to maintain agricultural productivity and to enhance the resilience of our food production. Innovation can help farmers to make their production more sustainable.

Regenerative agriculture is an approach to farming and land management that focuses on restoring and enhancing the health of ecosystems while promoting sustainable food production. The [soil-centric approach of regenerative agriculture](#) focuses on obtaining an optimum yield sustained on a long-term basis and with minimal dependence on agrochemicals.

*The Focus Group on Regenerative agriculture for soil health aims to promote innovative, sustainable practices that restore or improve soil health and productivity in agricultural soils. It will focus on existing and potential new innovative regenerative **farming practices**, their benefits and possible challenges for adoption in different geographical regions. The Focus Group will create an opportunity for experts to share their knowledge, expertise and experiences, discuss and propose (innovative) farming practices that tackle soil health improvement and productivity challenges.*

Question: How can regenerative agriculture practices help farmers to restore, protect and improve soil health and productivity?

Tasks:

- Take stock of the state of the art in regenerative agricultural practices, highlight their benefits, challenges and opportunities from environmental, economic and societal points of view.
- Discuss and identify potential solutions to the identified challenges and propose potential innovative solutions.
- Collect and present success stories of regenerative agriculture practices in different regions and cropping systems across Europe.
- Identify and collect practitioners' needs for technical knowledge and advice for the successful implementation of regenerative agricultural practices.
- Collect and identify innovative ways for knowledge exchange and dissemination related to regenerative agriculture.
- Identify research needs from practice and possible knowledge gaps on regenerative agriculture and propose directions for further research.
- Suggest innovative ideas for EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and other innovative projects.

Focus Group 51: Crop associations including Milpa and protein crops

First meeting: 28-29 November 2023

Crop associations increase diversity at the landscape scale and have the potential to boost agricultural production with fewer inputs. But how do they work for individual farmers? Do they increase resource efficiency and farm resilience while providing a farm income?

Current European farm landscapes are mostly characterised by monocultures which results in the loss of biodiversity and soil fertility, increased risk of soil erosion and loss of productivity. It also increases the risk of pest and disease which results in the higher use of pesticides and development of resistance. The increasing dependency on external inputs of cropping systems under monoculture is also reflected in the need of higher fertiliser inputs to maintain soil fertility so as to ensure yields.

The introduction of different crops and different associations of crops within fields can make an important contribution to soil fertility, sustainability of crop production and biodiversity. Increasing crop diversity can be achieved by different practices such as strip cropping, mixed cropping, intercropping, nurse crops, multiple cropping (like Milpa) or more complex agroforestry systems. The incorporation of, especially, protein crops in these systems is beneficial not only to the environment (improving biodiversity, soil health, fixing Nitrogen, closing nutrients cycles, etc.) but also due to their contribution to food security. Having these systems diversified would have a positive impact on crop productivity, crop quality and as a result, farm income and resilience. The different crop cycles present in a diversified crop association allows for a wealth of environmental advantages. Crop associations can help to maintain a balance of soil nutrients and reduce the risks associated to insect pests, weeds and crop diseases. They have the potential to reduce requirement of (synthetic) pesticides and artificial fertilisers, supporting farmers' incomes. The whole crop system becomes more climate resilient. However, there are also some challenges linked to these mixed cropping systems, such as more demanding and labour-intensive monitoring, mechanisation and maintenance.

Question: How to integrate crop associations into existing cropping systems and farm landscapes to increase farm resilience and efficient use of natural resources while reducing the dependency on external inputs?

Tasks:

- Identify, describe and classify with adequate examples, existing or new plant associations, adapted to each farming system within their landscapes and local/regional conditions.
- Analyse the impact of the most promising crop associations on the environment, on the farmers' productivity, profitability and resilience to climate change.
- Identify their success and fail factors and barriers for implementation and adaptation in different regions.
- Explore the role of innovation and knowledge exchange in addressing the challenges identified such as crop selection, crop rotation management, machinery, and product end use.
- Propose potential innovative actions and ideas for Operational Groups to stimulate the use and improvement of crop associations at farm level considering the impact on the landscape.
- Identify needs from practice and possible gaps in knowledge related to crop associations which may be solved by further research.

Focus Group 52: Competitive and resilient mountain areas

First meeting: 21-22 November 2023

Mountain areas cover approximately 30% of the EU territory and where 18% of farm households are found. Mountain areas are very rich in natural resources, beautiful landscapes, biodiversity, culture and traditions, but they face major environmental, societal, economic and migratory challenges that make them both ecologically and socially vulnerable and fragile. Agriculture and forests in mountain areas often form the backbone of the local economy and are closely linked to other sectors such as the food industry and tourism.

Mountain areas are at the forefront of climate change impacts since they are particularly vulnerable to changes in weather patterns and affected by extreme weather events. Warmer temperatures, a lack of snow in winter, loss of glacier masses and drought in summer are increasingly affecting European mountain areas, and may lead to biodiversity loss, forest fires and soil erosion due to heavy rains. These, and other challenges such as recurrent conflicts between farming activities and the presence of large carnivores (such as wolves or bears) do not only impact ecosystems, but also the socio-economic basis of the mountain areas, on which the agricultural, forestry and bioeconomy sectors rely. Furthermore, challenges associated with remoteness, isolation or limited access to services, markets and resources make mountainous areas susceptible to demographic changes, such as population ageing and decline resulting in land abandonment. Equally, loss of traditional knowledge and expertise may occur. Therefore, mountain areas and their inhabitants need to embrace these new realities and look for innovative ways to be competitive and resilient in long term.

On the other hand, the unique resources such as high-quality agricultural and forest products, natural resources, landscapes and biodiversity, richness in culture and traditions represent vast opportunities that can enable a sustainable future of European mountain areas. Moreover, changing working patterns like remote working, may offer opportunities to well-connected mountain areas and attract new inhabitants from urban areas.

This Focus Group will explore which innovations related to agriculture, food processing and value chains, forests and more widely the bioeconomy, can help strengthen the competitiveness and resilience of mountain areas. The Focus Group will also look into access to the knowledge and skills, necessary to respond to the challenges they face. The Focus Group will take into account the diversity of the mountain areas across Europe.

Question: Which innovative approaches and innovations linked to agriculture, forestry and bio-economy can foster the competitiveness and the socio-economic and environmental resilience of mountain areas and their communities?

Tasks:

- Collect and highlight innovative approaches and inspiring success stories on new ways of capitalising agri-food, forestry products and other bioeconomy products, including ways to cope with challenges posed by climate change, land abandonment, improve the coexistence between farming and large carnivores and take advantage of new opportunities such as social farming or health-based agritourism.
- Identify challenges and opportunities to strengthen the competitiveness and resilience of mountain areas. These can be, for example, related to business models, markets and value chains, access to traditional and local knowledge and capacity building, new technologies and digital solutions.

- Explore the role of social innovation and ways to increase social resilience and reinforce social communities in mountain areas, for example attracting and engaging new citizens in the agricultural, forestry or bioeconomy sectors.
- Identify the needs to support innovation in mountain areas.
- Propose ideas for potential Operational Groups and other innovative projects.
- Identify research needs coming from practice and possible gaps in knowledge.

Selection Process and Terms of Agreement

Each Focus Group consists of up to 20 experts: farmers, advisers, scientists and, where appropriate, representatives from industry, civil society or other relevant actors.

Experts will be chosen according to their qualifications, based on proven expertise to support the progress of the Focus Group (relevant information to be submitted via the application form). The European Commission, Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development, will nominate the group experts.

Please note:

There will be no translation, it is essential that group members are able to express themselves in English.

Selected experts will need to be available to participate in both meetings; the date for the first meeting is mentioned in this text for each new Focus Group.

Selected experts will be requested to prepare for the first meeting and do some work in between meetings and they should be able to reserve some time for this.

Results produced within the Focus Group are always attributed to the group as a whole, not to individuals and conflicting views should be included in the final report.

Selection criteria (individual)

Technical and professional capacity – evidence of the technical and professional capacity of experts based on:

- Proven professional experience that is relevant for the Focus Group: examples linking experience to the specific questions for the Focus Group – detailed above – should be given;
- Motivation, reasoning why the expert should be a member of the Focus Group;
- Potential contribution to the Focus Group by the expert – the candidates should clearly state how and what they can contribute to the Focus Group;
- **Relevant** educational and professional qualifications – this includes practical experience – clearly linked to the specific questions for the Focus Group listed above.

Balancing criteria:

The Focus Group will be composed taking into account a balance in the areas of expertise, professional capacity and experience and geographical balance.

Application procedure:

Candidates need to complete the online application form and **submit it by 11 September 2023 23:59 hrs CET** (Brussels time).

The system will notify candidates upon successful submission of the application. Please, be aware that if this notification is not displayed, the submission of your application was not successful and you will have to start again.

Applicants will be informed whether or not they have been selected **before 4 October 2023**. All selected experts will need to confirm their attendance at the first meeting within one week of receiving the selection message. If they fail to do so, they may be replaced.

Terms of agreement

By submitting an application, the applicant agrees on the following and confirms that:

- The applicant can easily express themselves in English (as this will be the working language in meetings, documents and in all means of communication) in both oral and written form;
 - In case of a nomination, the applicant is willing and able to share information, knowledge and experience and to contribute actively to work documents, to achieve the Focus Group objectives;
 - Attendance at the meetings: in case of a nomination, the applicant is willing and available to travel (within Europe) to attend meetings of the Focus Group (the dates for the first meeting of each Focus Group are indicated in each respective section of this document).
 - Availability: in case of a nomination, the expert will be available to attend the first meeting on the dates specified in the call; should this, for whatever reason, not be the case, the nominated expert will inform the EIP-AGRI Support Facility as soon as possible, to allow for the selection of another expert to replace him or her.
 - Transparency: in case of a nomination, the applicant agrees to publish their name along with their professional capacity (e.g. adviser, scientist, etc.), country of residence and email address on the EU CAP Network website.
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[You can start your application by clicking here](#)

Background:

EU CAP Network Focus Groups connect innovation actors, including farmers, advisers, agri-business, civil society, and researchers, working at EU, national and regional level.

For information about previous Focus Groups, please see the [EU CAP Network Focus Group pages](#). Please note that the calls for the previous Focus Groups are now closed, and it is not possible to join them.