Call for expression of interest for experts participating in Focus Groups of the European Innovation Partnership on 'Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability'

The European Commission is launching a call for experts such as farmers, foresters, advisers, scientists and other relevant actors for three new EIP-AGRI Focus Groups. The Focus Groups will start working in February 2022 and are expected to present their results and recommendations by October 2022. 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 attend the Focus Group meeting on these dates.*** *If selected experts fail to confirm their availability on these dates within one week of receiving the selection message, 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 others[1] are invited to apply for participation in Focus Groups on the following topics, noting that these Focus Groups will complement the work of previous Focus Groups:

44: Sustainable ways to reduce the use of pesticides in pome and stone fruit production
More information

45: Digital tools for sustainable nutrient management
More information

46: Water: Nature-Based Solutions for water management under climate change
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 one year, and to meet, as far as the COVID pandemic situation allows, face-to-face / online at least twice. For more information on the Focus Groups, please see the Focus Group brochure and 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 these 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 (see example of outline in Annex 1) and feed into the EIP-AGRI 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 for 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 44: Sustainable ways to reduce the use of pesticides in pome and stone fruit production

First meeting: 23-24 March 2022

Fruit growers face many challenges. To produce a competitive yield with desired quality, many growers rely on pesticides. Compared to other crops, fruit production uses a significantly higher quantity of pesticides to control pest and diseases, weeds and to regulate growth (e.g. apples are treated with various pesticides 20-30 times a year). Pesticides are also applied to meet consumer demand in terms of aesthetics, while maintaining nutritional value and hygiene standards[2].

These pesticides affect the environment (soil, water, air, biodiversity), non-target organisms, animals and human health. It is estimated that only about 10% of the pesticides used are actually effective against target-organisms, about 90% end up on non-target organisms[3].

Therefore, EU and Member State policies seek to reduce the reliance on pesticides in agriculture by designing and implementing more integrated and sustainable approaches, while at the same time safeguarding the competitiveness of EU agriculture. To reduce the risks and impact of chemical synthetic pesticides on human health and the environment, one of the concrete targets of the Farm to Fork strategy is to reduce pesticide use by 50% by 2030 at European Union level[4].

Developing and/or promoting non-chemical practices could contribute to achieving this aim and to reducing the risks linked to the use of these chemicals. Sustainable techniques will range from preventive to curative strategies (e.g. breeding of resistant or tolerant varieties, use of beneficial insects, pheromones, plant strengthening agents) and could include agro-ecological principles, practice from organic agriculture and even 'forgotten practices' that could be adapted in an innovative way. Also, monitoring combined with decision support tools could help to rationalise and limit the use of pesticides.

Although a great variety of different fruits are cultivated, apples are the dominant fruit crop in the EU. This Focus Group will concentrate on two important fruit groups: pome (apple and pear) and stone fruits (peach, cherries, plum, apricot). These fruits are present in all climate zones, under high pressure of pests and diseases, which impact quantity and quality and represent a significant part of the fruit area in the EU.

Question: How can alternative methods reduce the use of pesticides in pome and stone fruits and support the productivity of the sector in a sustainable way?

[2] https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/sites/default/files/medien/479/publikationen/texte_72-2020_umwelt-_und_klimarelevante_qualitaetsstandards_des_leh_fin.pdf

[3] Zaller, J. (2018): Unser täglich Gift. Pestizide die unterschätzte Gefahr. Deuticke im Paul Zsolnay Verlag Wien.

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/food/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en

The Focus Group will carry out the following main tasks:

- **Identify good practices to deal with pests and diseases in pome and stone fruits which may be adapted to different conditions,** including prevention practices, early detection, diagnostics and monitoring.
- **Take stock of preventive agro-ecological strategies and solutions** including current and forgotten methods as well as strategies of organic agriculture (indirect and direct measures) to further minimise the use of pesticides in pome and stone fruit production.
- **Make an inventory of IPM (Integrated Pest Management) strategies** (including biological control) to combat pests and diseases in pome and stone fruits.
- **Compare** these different management practices and strategies (agro-ecological practices and IPM), consider existing problems and opportunities, also bearing in mind practicability and costs.
- **Compile examples of 'good practice'**, i.e. a number of case studies, from farm level in particular, across different regions in Europe.
- **Identify needs from practice (farming sector) and possible gaps in knowledge** on particular issues concerning the management of pests and diseases in pome and stone fruit production which may be solved by further research.
- **Propose priorities for relevant innovative actions / projects** including practical ideas for EIP-AGRI Operational Groups.

Focus Group 45: Digital tools for sustainable nutrient management
First meeting: 15-16 March 2022

An efficient resource management will enhance both economic and environmental farm performance. Better knowledge and understanding of natural processes affected by farming operations is a key aspect for improving efficiency. Digital solutions can support farmers in generating that knowledge as well as in taking better farm management decisions (for instance related to plant nutrition and health, irrigation, animal feeding, etc.).

Advisory systems within the future CAP framework[5] will be requested to use digital application(s) to provide on-farm decision support on plant nutrition management, with focus on nitrogen and phosphate (such as the European Commission`s Farm Sustainability Tool – or FaST). These applications are expected to provide relevant information on nutrient balance and soil at field scale, as well as relevant IACS data and legal requirements on nutrients. In this regard the European Commission aims to develop a modular platform[6]for the generation and re-use of solutions for farmers, based on machine-learning applied to image recognition, as well as the use and reuse of IoT data, various public sector data (e.g. space data), and user-generated data for sustainable and competitive agriculture.

These developments provide an opportunity to speed up farmers' uptake of digital solutions going beyond the sphere of nutrient management, adding and connecting to other potential functionalities. For instance, campaign management with import of IACS/GSAA farmer data, planning crop operations based on weather/climate data, Earth Observation applications for precision application of water, pest management, assessment of GHG emissions and removals (ie. Carbon Farming), among others.

Therefore, FaST and other related digital tools will provide solutions for sustainable and competitive agriculture helping farmers, Member State Paying Agencies, farm advisers, and developers and service providers of digital solutions to improve their respective capabilities across agricultural, environmental, and sustainability-focused activities.

Question: Which are the key conditions, functions and technical requirements to develop, promote and facilitate the use of digital applications for farm nutrient management?

The Focus Group will carry out the following main tasks:

- Providing and assessing good examples of digital farm tools that are already in place for nutrient management
- Assessing the uptake level and usability of the tools by farmers
- Exploring other technical and environmental aspects to be addressed by these or similar tools
- Proposing potential innovative actions and ideas for Operational Groups
- Identifying needs from practice and possible gaps in knowledge

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[5] Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the Common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans) and financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Regulation (EU) No 1307/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council

[6] For further info, please see: http://www.fastplatform.eu

Focus Group 46: Water: Nature-Based Solutions for water management under climate change

First meeting: 22-23 March 2022

Interactions between climate change, water and agriculture are numerous, complex and region-specific. Climate change can affect water resources through several dimensions: changes in the amount and patterns of precipitation, impact on water quality through changes in runoff, river flows, retention and thus loading of nutrients and through extreme events such as floods and droughts. These changes in the water cycle can deeply affect agricultural production in all regions of Europe.

The European Commission defines nature-based solutions (NBS) as "Solutions that are inspired and supported by nature, which are cost-effective, simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits and help build resilience. Such solutions bring more, and more diverse, nature and natural features and processes into cities, landscapes and seascapes, through locally adapted, resource-efficient and systemic interventions."

Nature-based solutions for water management implemented at small scale - farm level - tackle the issues of water quantity and/or quality in small agricultural catchments supporting agricultural production and resilience, mitigating climate change and enhancing nature and biodiversity. These small-scale nature-based solutions for water management at farm or local level can be applied for soil health, soil moisture, carbon mitigation (through soil and forestry), downstream water quality protection, biodiversity benefits etc. in order to achieve net-zero environmental impacts while achieving food and water security[7].

This Focus Group aims to promote a better understanding of the practical application of nature-based solutions at farm level and to facilitate knowledge and innovation exchange between farmers, farm advisors, researchers, other relevant actors in the field at local, regional and national levels. The identification of existing nature-based solutions in different farming systems under different European pedo-climatic regions will contribute to understanding and quantifying the socio-economic and environmental benefits of these measures and by combining these strategies at a higher scale, additional needs for river basin/regional strategies will be highlighted.

The Focus Group will focus on identifying, analysing and, if possible valuing NBS at farm level, estimating the benefits in water management in terms of optimisation of water availability and resilience to climate change impacts, considering both quantity and quality, at a given point in time.

Question: How nature-based solutions could have an impact on water management and water availability at farm level and contribute to sustainable farming under climate change?

[7] Miralles-Wilhelm, F. 2021. Nature-based solutions in agriculture – Sustainable management and conservation of land, water, and biodiversity. Virginia. FAO and The Nature Conservancy. https://doi.org/10.4060/cb3140en

The Focus Group will carry out the following main tasks:

- Collect and highlight good practices and inspiring success stories, approaches and methodologies in applying nature-based solutions at farm level in different farming systems and small water catchments.
- Analyse, and if possible value the benefits or potential drawbacks of nature-based solutions, including water availability in terms of quantity and quality, both at farm level and at small water catchment level.
- Identify challenges and opportunities for applying nature-based solutions in different European pedo-climatic regions.
- Identify capacity building experiences and socio-economic needs for implementation of proposed approach.
- Suggest innovative models to foster links between farmers, small watershed managers, advisors and applied research.
- Identify further research and knowledge needs from practice, possible gaps in technical solutions.
- Suggest innovative solutions and provide ideas for EIP-AGRI Operational Groups and other innovative projects.

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 January 2022 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 14 February 2022**. 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 themself 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 attend, and if the COVID situation allows, travel (within Europe) to the meetings of the Focus Group (the dates for the first meeting of each Focus Group are indicated under each respective call).
- 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 his/her name along with their professional capacity (e.g. adviser, scientist, etc.), country of residence and email address on the EIP-AGRI website. The applicants also agree to register to the EIP-AGRI website to facilitate the Focus Group work. NB. Once registered to the website, it will not be necessary to publish the email address, as participants can be contacted through the website.

You can start your application by **clicking here**.

Background:

The European Innovation Partnership 'Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability' (EIP-AGRI) connects innovation actors, including farmers, advisers, agri-business, civil society, and researchers, working at EU, national and regional level. The partnership aims to catalyse innovation-related actions to foster enhanced productivity and sustainable resource management across the whole value chain. In line with this, the European Commission, Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development, requested the EIP-AGRI Support Facility to set up Focus Groups on specific agricultural topics to facilitate innovative actions in the field and better connect science and practice.

For previous EIP-AGRI Focus Groups, please see the EIP-AGRI Focus Group pages. Please note that the calls for the previous Focus Groups are now closed, and it is not possible to join them.

Annex 1: Draft Table of Contents for Focus Group reports

Table of contents (indicative number of pages between brackets)

1. Executive summary (1 page)
2. Introduction (0.5 p)
3. Brief description of the process (0.5 p)
4. State of play (7 p)
    a. Framing key issues
    b. Good practices
    c. Success and fail factors
5. What can we do? Recommendations: [*most elaborated part and heart of the report*] (7 p)
    a. Ideas for Operational Groups
    b. Research needs from practice
    c. Other recommendations, including improving take up
6. Annexes
    a. Good practices and case studies
    b. Members of the Focus Group
    c. List of mini-papers
    d. Relevant research projects

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