



Report of the 15th meeting of the European Rural Networks' Steering Group

Webinar, 25 May 2021

Introduction

9.00 – 09.10

Introduction

Mario Milouchev,
DG AGRI

The key objectives of the 15th European Rural Networks' Steering Group (SG) meeting were:

- To update on the state of play of the CAP Reform, the post-Covid recovery instruments relevant for rural areas, Horizon Europe and future CAP networking arrangements.
- To update on the preparation of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, including stakeholder messages from Rural Vision Week.
- To report from the EU Rural Networks' Assembly Subgroups.
- To update and exchange on future CAP networking needs.
- To discuss the planned and recent activities of the European Rural Networks.
- To discuss and propose ideas for the 8th Rural Networks Assembly and 16th SG.

The Chair opened the SG meeting by welcoming participants with an overview of the agenda and aims for the day. He outlined the meeting's topics and encouraged active participation by SG members before briefly giving an update on the state of play on the CAP reform and the process of setting-up the governance structure for the future European CAP Network. The transitional period is an opportunity for continued reflections on future networking arrangements and DG AGRI intends to share a first outline proposal with SG members in October which will take account of stakeholder inputs. The Commission attaches great importance to the continuity of networking support at EU and national levels. Rural networking will continue throughout the transition period and the procurement procedure for new support service contracts for EU-level networking is ongoing.

Update on EU policies, DG AGRI

9.10 – 10.00

State of play on
CAP reform

Gregorio Dávila, DG
AGRI

Discussions on CAP reform were ongoing with final agreements being sought through trilogues. Consensus on many reform details was now generally established, leading to the upcoming finalisation of the basic and subsequent preparation of delegated and implementing acts.

Key elements of the new performance framework proposal, such as indicators, targets and milestones, were known and this information allows Member States to advance with content in preparing for their CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs).

Addressing regional considerations in the CSPs have been clarified and progress continues with finalising the coordination of CSP green architecture across both CAP Pillars. Confirmation is still required for some reform matters including 'ring-fencing' obligations and social conditionality.

Note: Presentations, documents and event summaries can be accessed and directly downloaded by clicking on the links provided

Horizon Europe
Cluster 6 latest
updates, Kerstin
Rosenow, DG AGRI

A Q&A session followed this presentation. DG AGRI replied to a query about social conditionality noting the intention to achieve an accord between co-legislators.

A question about evaluating performance was answered with reference to the new possibilities for both CAP Pillars to help achieve CSP targets and the use of a robust monitoring system to coherently manage CSP implementation.

In response to a question covering LEADER/CLLD developments, DG AGRI confirmed that there is no intention to make significant new changes to the arrangements already proposed regarding complementarity between the EAFRD and other EU funds.

In this part of the SG meeting DG AGRI explained how [Cluster 6 of Horizon Europe](#) can be used to support research and innovation (R&I) related to food, bioeconomy, natural resources, agriculture and environment.

R&I are key sources of new knowledge and solutions enabling and accelerating the progress required to achieve challenging targets set by the European Green Deal and to transform the way farmers manage land, produce food and respond to changing consumer preferences.

European Green Deal initiatives, in particular the Farm to Fork Strategy, Biodiversity Strategy, Forestry Strategy, Zero Pollution Ambition, Climate Action, as well as the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas are covered by Horizon Europe Cluster 6, including topics that aim to foster networking, innovative governance and methodologies.

Coordination with AKIS will be key and policy contributions concerning the EU's green and digital transition, as well as recovery and resilience, will be among core foci for the R&I 'destinations'. Expected impacts outlined in the Strategic Plan 2021-2024 are translated into the Work Programme 2021-2022 and will also guide the Work Programme 2023-2024, and accordingly future R&I activities. Mention was made of Horizon funding opportunities related to rural and coastal areas in relation to the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies and the SDGs. Further information will be provided during Cluster 6 Info Days planned for June and July (#RiDaysEU).

A Q&A session confirmed that LAGs can fulfil beneficial roles as multi-actor bodies in Horizon and that outcomes from Horizon projects should aim to be able to demonstrate practical benefits on the ground for EU citizens.

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Update on rural networking, Neda Skakelj, DG AGRI

Agriculture will remain a central feature of AKIS and the AKIS remit has expanded to cover other rural development subject areas.

The situation regarding the legal aspects for future rural networking is not expected to change in any substantial way compared to what is already foreseen under Article 113. Amendments proposed are considered technical. The key principle for the Commission is to ensure continuity in provisions of networking support. This is foreseen both at the level of the legal framework (where transitional provisions will allow current EU Rural Networks to continue both support their current tasks linked to RDPs and preparation of the CAP Strategic Plans) and at the level of technical support the Commission is providing to networking through service contracts. The future National CAP Networks have to be set up in principle by the end of 2023.

There is still a strong need for networking to continue to support the implementation of RD policy and rural areas during the transition period, as well as in implementing different activities linked with policy initiatives such as the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, Farm to Fork Strategy, etc. Additional funding allocated by Member States for their NRNs in RDP amendments covering the transitional period is very welcome.

Current rural networks' governance structures remain operational and in place until the ones for the new EU CAP Network are established. Proposals regarding new EU CAP Network governance structures will be discussed by SG members during their next meeting in October. DG AGRI is reflecting internally and is taking into consideration the results of previous exchanges with the Assembly, Steering Group and Sub-groups.

Clarity was provided that Member States' new national CAP networks need to cover the full CAP (as foreseen in Article 113, with the extended tasks and goals) and this does not affect their naming.

Update on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas

10.00 – 10.45
Update on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas
Maria Gafo, DG AGRI

The Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) is a political priority for the European Commission. A [Vision for Rural Areas](#) presentation updated SG members on progress with LTVRA developments.

A Commission Communication is expected to be published in June to elaborate the LTVRA and associated actions. The Vision is built on three work streams: a deep analytical work, a foresight exercise and a large public consultation. It will reflect findings from, among others, the foresight exercise, public consultation including two Eurobarometers, Civil Dialogue Group, ENRD Thematic Group, workshops organised using the stakeholder

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Report on Rural
Vision Week John
Grieve, ENRD
Contact Point

engagement package “Welcome to our rural” and Rural Vision Week. Participation in public consultation and engagement has been strong.

Work on the LTVRA to date has confirmed that more than half of those surveyed in remote parts of rural Europe felt ‘left behind’, yet this feeling was less acute in less remote rural areas. The most urgent needs identified have been infrastructure, access to services and facilities, economic needs and digital connectivity. Agriculture and agri-food, retail and tourism are seen as important sectors in ensuring the economic sustainability of rural areas.

Examples of where EU strategic action was considered useful included financial support, empowerment of local communities (including LEADER), rural proofing, achieving climate, energy and biodiversity targets, addressing demographic challenges and ensuring access to sustainable food.

SG members were encouraged to be ambassadors for the LTVRA by disseminating this initiative in their countries and regions and continuing to support next steps following the publication of the Communication. This will be accompanied by a synopsis report on the public consultation and by a Staff Working Document with detailed information about the situation of EU rural areas and relevant EU policies.

[Rural Vision Week](#) took place from March 22-26. It involved high level presentations and discussions, a marketplace, workshops and ‘fringe’ activities where the event participants worked together to contribute to the preparation of the Communication for the LTVRA.

A [highlights video](#) of the week-long event, which included the 2021 Rural Inspiration Awards, was screened to SG members. Over 550 stakeholders participated directly during Rural Vision Week and its online outreach connected with thousands more through social media.

Feedback on Rural Vision Week was provided to the SG by Marine Gaudron – Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Martin Leitner – Austrian Ministry of Agriculture, and Efi Snow – Cyprus Rural Network. They reported on the event’s benefits in terms of involving stakeholders, knowledge sharing and informing plans for future rural development activity. Judith Conrad from the German Managing Authority indicated that she hoped the LTVRA outcomes would support the simplification of rural policy.

The Chair informed the SG that Vice President Šuica intends to strongly support the implementation and realisation of the LTVRA involving all Commission services, including through the Conference on the Future of Europe.

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Recent and Planned Network Activities

<p>11.15 – 12.30 Recent and planned network activities – John Grieve, ENRD CP</p>	<p>An update was given by the EU rural networks' support units, starting with a presentation of ENRD Contact Point activities. This highlighted the events that had taken place since the previous SG meeting including meetings of ENRD Thematic Groups, National Rural Networks, and CAP programming authorities. Performance details of cross-cutting activities were reported as well as a review of forthcoming activities (workshop on the social economy, LEADER programming and added value, CSP operational design and the 20th NRN meeting). The current Contact Point team's activities close in mid-July.</p>
<p>Recent and planned network activities Magdalena Mach, DG AGRI</p>	<p>SG members received a presentation summarising recent and planned activities of the EIP-AGRI Network. These included events promoting carbon neutral agriculture and healthy soils as well as the March meeting of the Subgroup on Innovation for agricultural productivity and sustainability. Webinars planned for June would be focused on the role of innovation networking in the Member States' CSPs.</p>
<p>Recent and planned network activities Hannes Wimmer, ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk</p>	<p>An update from the ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk explained their main priorities in 2021. These involve supporting ex-post evaluations of the 2014-2020 programming period, advising on ex-ante evaluations for CSPs, promoting better data for evaluating the CAP, good practice in planning evaluation activities, as well as analysing RDP achievements and impacts. The Helpdesk contract will continue through 2021 to December.</p>
<p>CAP Networking David Lamb, Flavio Conti and Susan Grieve, ENRD Contact Point Magdalena Mach, DG AGRI</p>	<p>A presentation featuring future networking needs provided insights into needs identified for managing authorities, NRNs and LAGs in relation to preparing CSPs and the transition period. This was complemented by a presentation on needs in relation to innovation captured from the Innovation Subgroup. SG members then provided further input of their own needs, captured in a virtual whiteboard.</p> <p>Managing Authorities' communication with the ENRD Contact Point indicates interest in practical information about completing the CSP template and examples of CSP intervention types. Peer-to-peer networking is considered useful, and dialogue is welcomed on issues covered by DG AGRI recommendations to Member States. An intervention from Lithuania's Managing Authority confirmed that their networking needs were similar to the above points and noted their interest in developing a digital forum for CAP experts to share experiences.</p> <p>NRN needs identified from an annual ENRD survey include sharing experience in managing activities during the transition period, improving links with Pillar 1 and AKIS, maintaining the involvement of regional partners such as</p>

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networks and other stakeholder representatives, and further enhancement of communication and networking knowhow. An intervention from Finland's NRN observed the mutual benefits from rural networking for EU and national organisations which included outcomes from thematic working groups and AKIS projects. Close and coordinated working relations between the new European CAP Network units was promoted by NRNs.

LAG needs for the future have emerged from LEADER/CLLD meetings and workshops and comprise capacity building support for use of Simplified Cost Options, transnational cooperation, LEADER's role in the CSPs and demonstrating the added value of LEADER. An intervention from the Dutch LEADER network made observations about the advantages from aligning EU funding and support systems at local level and using LAGs as a channel for both disseminating and informing EU policies.

Then [future networking needs for innovation](#) were presented. These were identified by the Subgroup on Innovation basing on the results of the survey on the priority topics for networking activities in the next programming period, conducted last year. The ideas collected in the survey were organised into 4 clusters: Cluster 1: AKIS and digitalisation; Cluster 2: Sustainable management of natural resources; Cluster 3: Value chains and bioeconomy, Cluster 4: Other ideas.

Members of the Subgroup at the 17th meeting in December 2020 prioritised Cluster 1&2 at the same time indicating within each cluster those ideas which they considered to be of greatest importance.

SG members were invited to provide feedback on future networking needs through the email AGRI-NETWORKS-STEERING@ec.europa.eu.

Outlook

12.30– 13.00
Outlook
Neda Skakelja, DG
AGRI

In preparation of the next SG meeting in October, DG AGRI informed participants about possible topics to be included in the agenda. These could include: CAP reform updates, next steps for the LTVRA, and a preliminary review of governance options for the European CAP Network. Members of the SG were invited to provide suggestions or additional topics they wish to discuss. No AOB items were requested. Euromontana invited SG members to participate in their June 14 conference on pastoralism, while Marion Eckart of ELARD provided a link to their event '[Promoting Regional Funding](#)'. Kim Smedslund also promoted the EESC-ERP event on [rural-urban development](#). The SG meeting concluded with thanks from DG AGRI to the SG members and all the ENRD team.

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