



# **Report of the 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of the European Rural Networks' Steering Group**

Webinar, 26 May 2020

## Welcome and introduction

9.15 – 10.00

Welcome and  
Introduction

Mario Milouchev,  
DG AGRI

The key objectives of the 13<sup>th</sup> European Rural Networks' Steering Group (SG) meeting were:

- To provide an update on the state of play of the CAP Reform and other relevant EU policy initiatives, including COVID-19 related measures for the agri-food sector and rural areas.
- To discuss the planned and recent activities of the European Rural Networks.
- To exchange on the ideas for ENRD CP activities in the following year.
- To make preliminary proposals for the next SG meeting and Rural Networks' Assembly.

The Chair opened the first virtual SG meeting and welcomed the participants. He stressed the importance of the fact that despite the challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic in which the meeting took place, the Rural Networks and their stakeholders could find effective new ways to keep networking active, at a time when it is more needed than ever.

The Chair also stressed that the Commission remains keen to both build on the current successes of rural networking and to ensure continuity of networking support (regardless of the transitional arrangements). This is important at both EU and MS level in order to accompany the full implementation of the 2014-2020 RDPs and in particular to help support the preparation and launch of the new CAP Strategic Plans. Networking can also support innovation and knowledge sharing as well as the new performance-based delivery mechanism.

In addition to ensuring the continuity of networking support, the Commission is exploring how to ensure continuity of the accompanying governance structures – like the Assembly, its two subgroups (Innovation and LEADER) and the SG - which will help guide and steer rural networks' activities during the transition period. The Commission is actively reflecting on outcomes from previous SG, Subgroup and Assembly meetings on considerations for the design of a governance framework for the future EU CAP network.

Referring to recent Commission policy initiatives, the Chair stressed the forthcoming Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) as being particularly relevant for rural development actors.

The LTVRA Communication will be prepared under the leadership of Commissioner Wojciechowski, working together with Commissioner Ferreira and linking to wider demography initiatives under Vice-President Šuica. The LTVRA aims to enable rural areas to develop their potential and support them

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Update on EU  
Commission  
Activities,  
Silvia Michelini, DG  
AGRI

in dealing with their unique set of issues, from demographic change to connectivity, the risk of poverty and limited access to services. The Chair stressed that rural areas are high on the EU political agenda and that rural communities are not left behind.

The role of rural networks is important in order to make the voice of the rural areas heard. The Communication from the Commission on the LTVRA is expected to be published next year.

SG members were then invited to propose Any other Business (AoB) topics for inclusion in this meeting's agenda.

Silvia Michelini (Director, DG AGRI) presented the ['State of play of European Commission initiatives'](#) relevant to rural stakeholders. A Q&A session followed her presentation. In her intervention, she particularly underlined that COVID-19 actions such as green lanes - ensuring smooth supply for agri-food supply chains, and the introduction of market measures and private storage aid to support rural producers. Flexibility has been introduced in the use of financial instruments to enable support for working capital of up to €200 000 for farmers and rural businesses through loans and guarantees. Advances for payments have been made under both Pillars, and for rural development these can be of up to 85%. Advance payments can be received from mid-October. A temporary framework has been set up for State Aid – up to €100 000 for farmers and €800 000 for food processing and marketing companies. CAP flexibility has extended the application payment window and reduced the number of farm on-the-spot checks.

In the new rural development temporary measure liquidity support is proposed for rural businesses, MS can pay lump sums of up to €5 000 per farm and up to €50 000 per SME. MS have flexibility to define the target groups and beneficiaries.

SG members also heard about the two new Green Deal initiatives: the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies and the key role agriculture and rural development have to play in their delivery. The Farm to Fork Strategy presents a holistic approach to sustainable food production, healthy diets and reducing the environmental and climate footprints through ambitious targets on pesticides, fertilisers, antimicrobial treatments and by increasing organic farming. The Farm to Fork strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy can enable the EU to be a role model at global level, collaborating with third countries and international organisations to promote a global transition. It will be important to link both strategies to CAP Strategic Plans. Rural networks will play a very important role in knowledge transfer under these initiatives.

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For the next steps on the LTVRA there will be wide consultation with rural stakeholders to keep rural high on the agenda. Work also continues on CAP Strategic Plans where feedback to MS is ongoing. There is a continuing discussion on the transition regulation proposals with the European Parliament, with an anticipated agreement by the end of June depending on MFF discussions.

SG members asked about the new temporary EAFRD measure proposed by the European Commission to help MS tackle COVID-19 impacts. SG members heard that discretion covering targeting and intervention levels are included in the proposal up to the maximum levels established. MS with remaining rural development funds can decide which criteria should be used in the selection of beneficiaries, targeting those sectors and beneficiaries who have been most affected. MS should confirm their intentions for adopting this new measure through the provisions of their RDP Programme amendments.

A point was raised requesting an update on environmental ring fencing. It was confirmed that EAFRD ring fencing has been proposed by the European Commission, and that Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) have not been included in this proposal.

In relation to the LTVRA, the support needed through NRNs and ENRD work was re-iterated. ENRD and NRNs are expected to provide their input through networking activities and exchanges and through the public consultation which is envisaged to be launched on the LTVRA. Stakeholder consultations will take place through a public questionnaire process, and a new ENRD thematic group could be dedicated to the LTVRA.

In response to a query on the involvement of the Civil Dialogue Groups in ongoing consultation, the Chair indicated that events including this meeting and future governance meetings of the European Rural Networks will provide opportunities for civil society organisations (including the Civil Dialogue Group for Rural Development) to provide input into the LTVRA process. Consultations involving stakeholders and the networks are planned in the coming months.

### Recent and planned network activities

<p><b>10.00 – 10.40</b> Recent and planned network activities – EIP-AGRI Service Point and Evaluation Helpdesk</p>	<p>Presentations were made on the outcomes from the 16th meeting of the <a href="#">Subgroup on Innovation, concerning EIP governance</a>, and on the recent and planned activities of the <a href="#">EIP-AGRI Service Point</a> and the <a href="#">ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk</a>.</p> <p>A Q&amp;A session followed these presentations. A question was asked about EIP-AGRI and how wider rural development initiatives can be covered under its</p>
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activities. The response noted that the EIP-AGRI work programme is based on suggestions made by members of the Sub-group on Innovation (Sol) or submitted through the EIP-AGRI website. This ensures the Service Point's work programme reflects the priorities of the network's members. It is not limited to agriculture and support for innovation in the food supply chain was cited as an example of a wider remit.

In the European Commission's proposal for the next programming period, EIP-AGRI would contribute to the CAP's nine Specific Objectives. Operational Groups would be able to work on eligible innovative projects which contribute to those Specific Objectives.

A question about capacity building support for LEADER evaluation was raised. It was confirmed that LEADER evaluation will continue to remain within the Rural Evaluation Helpdesk's [scope of activities](#). The Helpdesk reported that support for ex-post evaluation is forecast to increase in prominence. LEADER contributions are also covered in the Thematic Working Group [no.4](#) and [no. 8](#) of the Evaluation Helpdesk this year, and a [link to the video](#) was provided.

### ENRD activities mid 2020/mid 2021

#### 11.10 – 12.10 Recent and planned network activities – ENRD CP

The proposed [ENRD CP activities](#) for the period mid-2020/mid-2021 were outlined, followed by a presentation of [upcoming ENRD activities](#). SG members' feedback on the presentations covered discussions about the topics below.

Networking of ENRD stakeholder experiences of tackling the current pandemic crisis is considered to be useful at EU and MS level. LEADER LAGs were seen as having beneficial roles in supporting community-led solutions. The ENRD website's section featuring '[Rural responses to the COVID-19 crisis](#)' was spotlighted as a positive contribution for raising awareness.

SG members confirmed interest in a proposed seminar on CAP Strategic Plans. Seminar content is still under review and will reflect relevant policy developments. Suggested topics included supporting MSs during their ongoing prioritisation of needs and the design of associated intervention logic in the new delivery model, as well as improving the use of simplified cost options (SCOs).

Linkages between NRNs and AKIS were raised, and this subject will be taken account of in the EIP seminar on AKIS now re-scheduled for September 2020.

Advance notice was presented about a new tool under construction for the ENRD website, providing a 'CAP post-2020' portal. This will contain CAP-related legislative documents and will share presentations from MSs

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concerning their progress with CAP post-2020 programming. Other content in the new portal will include materials from a range of EAFRD stakeholders as well as recent updates on the preparatory process for the CAP post-2020.

Participants requested further detail on how the recently launched Farm to Fork strategy and Biodiversity strategy will fit into the CAP strategic planning process. Support for such integration could form part of the CP's ongoing work with MSs.

A point was raised about subsidiarity and EU/MS inputs for CAP Strategic Plans. Subsidiarity will continue to be a cornerstone alongside the need for safeguarding consistency through a 'level playing field'. Rural networks were seen to provide beneficial roles for sharing related good practices between MSs. There will be a stronger role for networking, as there will be less information and guidance from the EC, and more information on what is going on in different MSs.

In response to a point raised, DG AGRI confirmed their interest in avoiding risks of gaps in networking activity at EU and MS levels throughout the transition period.

SG members were encouraged to participate actively in the Commission's public consultation and ENRD work regarding the LTVRA. More information will be made available about the LTVRA process as and when details are confirmed. Work on stakeholder consultation activity is expected to increase in the autumn and winter with an aim to report the outcomes in spring 2021.

The Chair confirmed the intention that a high-level public conference on the LTVRA presenting the results of the public consultation would be organised by the ENRD and is foreseen for early Spring 2021.

### Outlook

**12.10– 12.30**  
**Outlook**  
**Mario Milouchev**  
**DG AGRI**

SG members were invited to propose ideas for the next SG meeting, planned for 8 October. It will inform the annual Assembly planned for 4 December. Possible topics anticipated for the October SG meeting could include: the CAP reform progress and transitional arrangements, and the future arrangements for the governance of rural networking.

SG members did not raise any AoB matters and members commented on the success of this first virtual SG meeting format. Time and travel savings were considered important by the SG members who encouraged the Networks to use more smart, low-carbon networking tools for future events and which could facilitate wider participation from stakeholders whose participation is currently subject to rotation.

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In concluding remarks, the Chair invited SG members to send any comments on the AWP activities proposed by the ENRD Contact Point within the following 10 days. He highlighted that many new and ongoing tasks lay ahead for the Rural Networks. The success of these will rely on MS involvement and rural networking will continue to be an essential tool for the future of the CAP. He proposed discussing the topic of governance at both the next SG Meeting and in the RN Assembly.

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