

One-Year Stock-Take on the European Commission's Vision for Agriculture and Food

May 2026

It has been one year since the European Commission published *A Vision for Agriculture and Food* (COM/2025/75) in February 2025, marking an incredible step towards a sustainable and competitive agri-food sector. One year has also passed since the founding of the European Science Alliance for Agriculture and Food (ESAAF) in May 2025. The Vision emerged from a Strategic Dialogue between agri-food system actors, seeking to reconcile economic viability, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. It outlined commitments to climate adaptation, biodiversity restoration, rural revitalisation, fair incomes for farmers, better AKIS organisation, and simplified regulatory frameworks—all aimed at making European agriculture more attractive, competitive, and resilient.

Today, it is time to implement the goals of the Vision through upcoming sectoral policies outlined such as the Protein Strategy and the Livestock Strategy. ESAAF, bringing together the most excellent scientific and policy-impactful research institutions in agri-food across Europe, is perfectly positioned to help here. We do this through a food system perspective, which is the key for the Vision to achieve its goals.

This stock-take examines five key areas where the Vision provides a strong foundation for implementation: integrating environmental sustainability with socio-economic viability through a systemic food system approach; building on fair competition foundations to ensure benefits are distributed more evenly across diverse supply chains; establishing clear metrics and performance-based financing through the CAP to reward genuine environmental outcomes; developing robust carbon-farming programmes with proper accreditation and monitoring; and moving beyond on-farm data to include landscape-level indicators for comprehensive sustainability tracking. Through these five pillars, ESAAF stands ready to work with the European Commission, the European Parliament, and Member States to refine these proposals and provide the necessary evidence base as Europe moves toward 2040.

Considering all these factors, ESAAF reflects in this document on some specific elements outlined in the Vision, backing its insight with research works.

First, building on the Strategic Dialogue and the Vision (van Zanten et al., 2025)¹, we want to highlight the importance of integrating environmental sustainability with socio-economic viability through a **systemic food system approach**. A foresight exercise by the European Parliamentary Research Service (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2025)² highlighted the opportunity for stronger policy coherence and coordination to address complex challenges facing the agricultural and food sector. A disconnection between institutional ambition and holistic strategy may threaten the achievement of long-term EU climate and sustainability goals. This may also create contradictory effects, as increasing production in non-sustainable systems can degrade soil or water and be harmful for biodiversity; certain agricultural policies can harm nutrition, with the result that food systems fail to achieve their objectives (food security, nutrition, sustainability) (FAO, 2025^[3]).

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-025-01189-w>

² https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/system/files/generated/document/en/Future-proofing-Agri_FINAL.pdf

³ <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd6071en>

By connecting primary production with the rest of the value chain—processing, distribution, consumption, and waste streams—we can better address systemic trade-offs (Neve *et al.*, 2021^[4]). A truly resilient system must be designed with policies that acknowledge and manage these feedback loops. Luckily, solutions on governance already exist, for example the FoodPaths⁵ project made 5 recommendations to accelerate the transition of agrifood systems: inclusive governance based on multiple actors; improved cooperation between actors; appropriate funding; better science-policy link; and development of knowledge hubs to connect "Food System labs."

Second, the Vision provides a foundation for addressing market dynamics in the processing, retail, and distribution segments of the agri-food chain. By promoting fair living and working conditions, the Commission has set important groundwork for ensuring that benefits of a competitive sector are distributed more evenly. Further needs to be done to address the concentration of power that characterises the processing, retail and distribution segments of the agri-food chain. Empirical studies show that high levels of market concentration diminish farmers' bargaining power and erode the fairness promised by the Vision. Mechanisms will need to be proposed to counterbalance the dominance of a few large actors. As climate change affects agricultural prices, trade patterns shift, and land use changes, these market adjustments can profoundly alter who wins and who loses in global agriculture (see e.g., Prefalim project, policy brief^[6]). This can also allow more diverse types of supply chains to make the cut in an otherwise nearly oligopolistic market, letting innovations and business models in alternative retail as well as direct and local supply chains mature to competitiveness. This contributes to more resilience through diversity but can also contribute to safeguarding a stable supply in uncertain times.

Third, the Vision establishes a framework for environmental sustainability and green transition. Building on this foundation, ESAAF recommends developing explicit, legally binding metrics. Evaluation should also consider the hidden costs of unsustainable resource use (FAO, 2023^[7]), which aligns with the paper's recommendation to explore taxing negative externalities and using revenues to finance activities with positive externalities. This is also what the Agroecology SCAR working group^[8] is working on. Linking these metrics to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) would create a performance-based financing model that rewards genuine environmental outcomes rather than continuing area-based payments. As Van Zanten *et al.*; 2025 note, basic hectare-based payments need to be phased out and public services rewarded. Clear environmental targets also contribute to making more environmentally friendly production more competitive, allowing more sustainable end-consumer products to be more available, accessible, and affordable. Scientists have a critical role in identifying, qualifying, and quantifying the impact of these policy measures to ensure CAP delivers on social, economic, and environmental objectives within a wider food system and bioeconomy perspective.

⁴ https://researchcentres.citystgeorges.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/595318/Understanding-Lived-Experience-FINAL-v3-updated.pdf

⁵ <https://www.foodpaths.eu/>

⁶ <https://www.pepr-faircarbon.fr/content/download/1095/12299?version=2>

⁷ <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7724en>

⁸ <https://scar-europe.org/scar-working-groups/scar-agroecology>

Finally, monitoring under the current proposal includes an "on-farm sustainability compass." Scientific evidence demonstrates that farm-level data alone cannot capture the cumulative impacts on landscapes, watersheds or regional economies, due to unexpected cause-and-effect relationships within or across spatial and temporal scales and a limited ability to account for multiple factors and their relationships (Pereponova et al., 2023)⁹. ESAAF suggests that future monitoring schemes should also include the level of landscapes (e.g., crop heterogeneity, presence of ecological infrastructures) and integrate a more systemic vision of economic linkages between different scales. Aligning and integrating sustainability efforts across the value chain will strengthen sustainability reporting for companies and broaden scope both upstream and downstream.

To conclude, a systems perspective entails considering both 'push and pull' factors (e.g., policies directed at changing supply but also demand) as well as the collaborations, interactions, and feedback effects with other sectors (for example, energy and water), society (for example, rural communities), and natural ecosystems (e.g., climate change adaptation).

Considering all these elements, ESAAF reiterates its willingness to work with all agri-food system stakeholders particularly with the European Commission, the European Parliament, and Member States to refine these proposals and provide the necessary evidence base as Europe moves toward 2040. Through our food system perspective and the expertise of our member institutions, we are committed to supporting the implementation of the Vision.

⁹ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e21215>