

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF FARMERS

Policy briefing



Executive summary

Farmer mental health represents a key challenge for European agriculture. This policy brief, developed through the SafeHabitus project following a January 2024 Policy Seminar with European Union (EU) policymakers and stakeholders, presents 10 evidence-based recommendations to address mental health and well-being among Europe's farmers and farm workers.

- **The challenge:** European farmers and workers face multiple interconnected stressors including financial pressures, climate change impacts, excessive administrative burden, long working hours and social isolation. Research from Ireland shows 13% of livestock farmers experience stress 'often or very often', with research from other Member States suggesting an elevated suicide rate. Women in farming face distinct challenges navigating multiple roles, while traditional masculine norms inhibit help-seeking among male farmers.
- **The gap:** Mental health support remains fragmented across the EU, with responsibility scattered across agriculture, health, employment and social affairs portfolios. Current approaches lack coordinated European action and sustainable funding mechanisms.
- **The solution:** Ten policy recommendations address systemic challenges through: sustainable funding for support services; enhanced capacity of agricultural advisors; simplified policies which reduce administrative workload on farmers; income support mechanisms; climate change mitigation; financial and legal advisory services; extended occupational health protection; work-life balance solutions; high-level cross-government coordination; and comprehensive research programmes.
- **Action required:** EU institutions must prioritise farmer mental health in policy frameworks and funding. Member States must implement national plans with cross-departmental coordination supporting the provision of mental health and well-being services to farmers and farm workers. Agricultural organisations must engage in policy development while providing direct support to their communities. Success requires recognising that farmer mental health challenges stem from complex interactions between individual, community and systemic factors, demanding coordinated action at multiple levels simultaneously.

Introduction

SafeHabitus is a Horizon Europe-funded research project that seeks to enhance the working conditions of farmers and farm workers by improving farm safety and farmer health. In addition to undertaking research, project activities involve the organisation of a series of policy discussions. The first policy discussion was organised on 25 January 2024 in the form of a SafeHabitus Policy Seminar on mental health in farming. It brought together EU policymakers, policy stakeholders and researchers to support the development of this policy brief which contains recommendations

for enhancing the occupational mental health and well-being of farmers. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers shared their knowledge and experience during the seminar, developing a shared understanding of the challenges and identifying potential actions and solutions for supporting farmer mental health. The research, data and practical first-hand experiences presented during the seminar provided an evidence base upon which to discuss a number of key issues. The following aspects were covered: occupational stressors affecting mental health and well-being, barriers to accessing mental health support, the impact of climate change and financial uncertainty, work-life balance challenges, social isolation and stigma, generational renewal and succession planning, and the need for targeted interventions and policy responses.

Methodology

This policy brief is informed by a comprehensive evidence base developed through three complementary research activities undertaken within the SafeHabitus project:

- **Comprehensive scoping review of literature:** A systematic literature review was conducted identifying current occupational stressors affecting farmers and farm workers, published in SafeHabitus Deliverable 4.1 in 2024 (Čerňič Istenič et al., 2024). The review analysed 603 articles, with 31 studies selected for detailed analysis focusing on psychosocial occupational stressors, their impact on mental health and well-being, and farmers' coping mechanisms. The review identified key stressor categories including financial pressures, climate change impacts, regulatory complexity, social isolation, and workload demands.
- **Workshop with young farmers:** In March 2024, five focus groups were conducted with young farmers at a CEJA (European Council of Young Farmers) event to explore their perspectives on well-being, challenges, and potential solutions (Meredith and Shortall, 2024). Rather than beginning from a deficit-based approach focused on mental health problems, participants were asked what was positive about their occupation, what difficulties they faced, and what practical and policy solutions they envisioned. This approach provided insights into both protective factors and stressors from the perspective of the next generation of European farmers.
- **Stakeholder engagement workshop:** A targeted workshop was held on June 20th, 2024 with SafeHabitus partners and external experts to assess gaps in current understanding of farming stressors, identify vulnerable populations, and explore resources needed to prevent and manage psychosocial stressors (Čerňič Istenič et al., 2024). The workshop covered key themes including culture of farming, social protection, stress factors, new technologies in agriculture, and drivers of change.

These research activities provided practical first-hand experiences and formed an evidence base upon which to identify key challenges and develop policy recommendations for supporting farmer mental health across the EU.

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Farmer mental health in the EU

The idyllic vision of farming as a relaxing healthy outdoor life amongst nature is not an accurate representation of contemporary farming. Farmers and farm workers experience significant occupational health and safety risks including psychosocial challenges. These include uncertainty relating to weather conditions and financial viability, long working hours, isolation, concerns regarding succession and generational renewal (Brennan et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2019), and exposure to multiple stressors that can impact mental well-being.

To date, little comparative research into farmer mental health, mental illness or well-being has been conducted across the EU. There is, however, evidence from a variety of national, regional or local cross-sectional studies. This body of research broadly supports the view that farming is an occupation with multiple stressors resulting in farmers experiencing stress at high levels or for prolonged periods (Ristiluoma and Sipilainen, 2003; Brennan et al., 2022). Research undertaken in Ireland with over 800 participants established that 13% of livestock farmers experienced stress 'often or very often' (Van Doorn et al., 2020).

A number of studies have drawn attention to differences in the experiences of farmers with different types of farm enterprise. Research from Ireland, Norway, and Finland indicates that farmers with livestock enterprises, particularly dairy, are more likely to experience stress compared with other enterprise types (Lunner

Kolstrup et al., 2013; Kallioniemi et al., 2016). Stress can impact mental well-being by affecting feelings towards others, decision making, coping mechanisms and concentration. Stress may also lead to increased risks to physical health and farm injury (Mamady et al., 2014).

Some farmers and farm workers experience serious mental health challenges resulting in mental illness including depression and anxiety (Guillien et al., 2017; Rudolphi et al., 2020). There are a small number of studies that indicate that death from suicide is higher amongst farmers (Klingelschmidt et al., 2018; Alicandro et al., 2021; Kennedy et al., 2021) compared to other occupational groups. French data points to a suicide rate among farmers 20% above the average national suicide rate of other professions (Santé Publique France, 2017), with male farmers between 45 and 54 being particularly at risk compared with those under 35. This however, contrasts with Ireland where research has established that there was no significant difference in the level of death from suicide amongst farmers and non-farmers (Cox et al., 2025). So, whilst farmers as a group face mental health challenges, it is important to recognise that experiences differ based on factors including gender, farm size, enterprise type, and geographic location. It is also important to note that whilst some farmers experience significant mental health challenges that negatively impact their health, most do not.

Research increasingly recognises that women in farming face distinct mental health challenges that have been under-researched relative



to their male counterparts. Women farmers experience similar overall rates of anxiety and depression to men farmers, though often with different patterns of severity and stressor profiles. Studies from North America indicate that women farmers who experience high levels of geographic isolation face approximately four times greater odds of experiencing depressive symptoms compared to men in similar circumstances (Rudolphi et al., 2024). Women in farming report particularly high stress related to work-life balance, interpersonal relationships, and the intersection of farm work with domestic and caring responsibilities (Wheeler & Nye, 2024; Nichols et al., 2024). The gendered division of labour within farming households compounds these challenges (Budge & Shortall, 2023).

Key conclusions from the Policy Seminar and Research Evidence

Farmers and farm workers in Europe experience mental health challenges stemming from a complex interaction of stressors that are specific to the agricultural sector. The comprehensive evidence base developed through SafeHabitat research activities reveals that while farming offers many positive aspects that support well-being, the sector presents multiple interconnected stressors that can impact mental health and quality of life. Understanding these challenges is critical because, regardless of individual resilience levels, everyone has limits to what they can manage without appropriate support systems.

Gender dynamics within farming households and the broader agricultural sector add further complexity to mental health challenges. Women in farming often navigate multiple roles simultaneously – as farm operators or partners, off-farm workers, household managers, and primary caregivers for children and elderly relatives. This intersection of farm work with gendered expectations around domestic and care labour creates unique stressors that policy responses must address. Research from Ireland and Scotland demonstrates that during periods of increased stress, additional workload pressures disproportionately fall to women on farms (Budge & Shortall, 2023). Research with male farmers highlights a reluctance to admit to mental health challenges associated with traditional masculine norms (Hammersley et al, 2021). Effective mental health policy must therefore recognise and address the gendered nature of both stressors and help-seeking behaviours within farming populations.

There was general agreement among Policy Seminar participants that the main challenge for improving farmer mental health is the fragmented nature of current support systems and the lack of a coherent policy framework, e.g. connecting between agricultural and social policy. Currently, mental health support for farmers falls under the remit of various national and EU institutions including those responsible for health, agriculture, employment, and social affairs. In many instances, policies and interventions have been developed independently with little consideration of how they interact at the level of the individual farmer or farm enterprise.

Key policy recommendations

Based on the latest policy, practice and research developments, as well as stakeholder consultation during the SafeHabitat Policy Seminar, the following 10 key recommendations address the systemic challenges affecting farmer mental health across the EU. These recommendations recognise that effective mental health support requires coordinated action across multiple policy domains and governance levels.

1. IMPROVE SUPPORT SERVICES FOR FARMERS AND ENSURE THEIR SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

The most effective farmer support programmes operate within countries that have established sustainable funding mechanisms through farmer social security systems, such as in France and Finland. However, current approaches rely heavily on individual Member State initiative rather than coordinated European action. While Ireland has successfully targeted EU Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) funds for farmer mental health programmes and Finland utilised EU LEADER funds to establish national mechanisms, these remain isolated examples rather than systematic approaches.

Policy Seminar participants emphasised the critical need to strengthen specialised advisory and support services for early identification of mental health challenges and provision of support to farmers experiencing distress. Mental health support services must be designed to address the diverse needs of farming populations, recognizing that stressors and help-seeking behaviours vary by gender, farm role, and enterprise type. Successful models highlighted during the seminar include one-to-one counselling services, dedicated helplines, paid leave schemes enabling short work breaks, and sentinel systems where trusted advisors can initiate conversations and provide initial guidance

Recommendations:

- Provide sustainable funding for mental health support services by including eligibility under rural development and sectoral funding in CAP regulations and CAP National Action Plans, European Regional Development Funds (ERDF), ESF+ funds, and national funding sources.
- Publish a dedicated Horizon Europe Call in the 2026 programming period to create a Thematic Network for farmer mental health across the EU, enabling effective sharing of pioneer support service models between Member States.
- Ensure that support services are specifically adapted to farmer and rural needs, recognising that general psychological support services are not normally attuned to the specific requirements of agricultural contexts. Additionally, support services should recognise and address the needs of farm workers, both male and female, seasonal employees, and those in precarious agricultural employment who may face different stressors than farm owners.

Responsible bodies: European Commission (DG AGRI, DG REGIO, DG EMPL, DG RTD), Member States, CAP National Action Plan authorities, ESF+ programming authorities.

2. INCREASE THE CAPACITY OF AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY AND EXTENSION SERVICES IN MENTAL HEALTH EARLY DETECTION

Agricultural advisory and extension services, veterinarians, farmer organisations, and agriculture NGOs represent key “first responders” in early detection of mental health challenges. As integral components of agricultural knowledge and innovation systems (AKIS), these professionals are well-positioned to play sentinel roles. However, most are trained as agronomists or veterinarians and require additional mental health support competences. It should be recognised that expanding this role to advisors is not without its challenges as many existing extension services are already under pressure, while in other Member States, advisory services are underdeveloped.

Recommendations:

- Modify Article 15 on Farm advisory services of the CAP regulation 2021/2115 and adapt CAP National Action Plans to increase funding eligibility for training agricultural advisory services in farmer mental health and well-being challenges.
- Incorporate occupational safety and health (OSH) and mental health issues into curricula of agricultural and veterinary universities and colleges to increase awareness among agri-food sector professionals.
- Develop standardised training programmes that enable agricultural advisors to recognise early warning signs and provide appropriate initial guidance while maintaining clear referral pathways to specialist services.

Responsible bodies: European Commission (DG AGRI, DG EAC), CEDEFOP, Member States, agricultural and veterinary education institutions.

3. SIMPLIFY EU AGRICULTURAL POLICIES AND REDUCE ADMINISTRATIVE WORKLOAD

Excessive and complicated administrative requirements significantly add to job demand, creating frustration and stress as well as impacting farmer productivity. This concern was echoed by EU policymakers, MEPs, and farming organisations during the Policy Seminar. While the European Commission proposed simplification measures between February and May 2024 following farmer protests, these did not specifically address mental health implications.

Recommendations:

- Conduct a quantitative, qualitative and comparative study between Member States examining the administrative workload that different groups of farmers face in daily operations.
- Implement surveys monitoring the impact of administrative and bureaucratic requirements on farmer mental health and well-being.
- Establish farmer mental health impact assessments as standard components of new policy development processes.

Responsible body: European Commission (DG AGRI), public or private food certification bodies, Member States.

4. ESTABLISH SUSTAINABLE INCOME SUPPORT FOR FARMERS AND FARM WORKERS

Economic challenges consistently rank among the primary issues affecting farmer mental health. Low profit margins, limited bargaining power within commodity chains, and economic shocks from global emergencies (such as the Ukraine conflict affecting energy and fertiliser costs, or COVID-19 disrupting labour availability and supply chains) create chronic financial stress that directly impacts mental well-being.

Recommendations:

- Continue implementation of proposals supporting fair, transparent and sustainable farmer income, including the EU agri-food chain Observatory (AFCO), evaluation of the Directive on unfair trading practices, targeted changes to the Regulation establishing a common market organisation of agricultural

products (CMO), and new rules on cross-border enforcement against unfair trading practices.

- Request Eurofound to carry out a comparative study on minimum income levels for both self-employed farmers and farm workers, comparing agriculture to other sectors, with results synthesised for the EU-OECD Agri Outlook publication.
- Develop targeted financial support mechanisms to support smaller farm enterprises and young farmers during establishment phases.

Responsible bodies: European Commission (DG AGRI), Eurofound, OECD, Member States.

5. SUPPORT MITIGATION OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS ON FARMING MENTAL HEALTH

The relationship between climate change impacts and farmer mental health is an emerging area of research with a growing number of studies being published. The available evidence highlights that climate change creates multiple and simultaneous stressors affecting farmer mental health through unpredictable weather conditions, economic losses from extreme weather events, and physical impacts of heat and UV exposure on working conditions.

Recommendations:

- Support environmental and agronomic climate change mitigation measures through CAP and National Action Plans, ensuring these measures are practical and effective while considering farmer implementation capacity. Give particular consideration to supporting the capacity and capabilities of Farm Advisory Services to support farmer adoption of these practices.
- Implement targeted agricultural research on effective environmental and agronomic climate change mitigation measures that enhance resilience and support well-being through Horizon Europe programmes.
- Provide CAP support for agricultural “loss” risk insurance schemes, following models such as the Spanish system, to support farmers in recovering from extreme weather events.
- Develop awareness campaigns, tools and good practices protecting farmers and farm workers from heat stress and excessive sun exposure through EU-OSHA climate change activities (2025-28).
- Include psychological impacts of climate change on farming in EU-OSHA occupational safety and health overviews on climate change.

Responsible bodies: European Commission (DG AGRI, DG RTD), EU-OSHA, Member States.

6. SUPPORT FARMERS IN MANAGING FINANCIAL AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

Financial and governance compliance represent critical stressors identified throughout the research evidence and Policy Seminar discussions. Farmers require regular support and advice for managing financial and governance obligations inherent in farm operations, yet many lack access to appropriate expertise tailored to agricultural contexts.



Recommendations:

- Provide comprehensive support for farmers in managing financial and governance obligations through practical training and advisory services tailored to agricultural contexts.
- Modify Article 15 of the CAP regulation and adapt CAP National Action Plans to increase funding eligibility for training agricultural advisory services in farmer financial and governance competences related to farm operations.
- Establish partnerships between agricultural advisory services and financial/legal professionals to ensure appropriate specialist support is accessible.

Responsible bodies: Member States, European Commission (DG AGRI), agricultural advisory services, financial and legal professional bodies.

7. ENSURE ADEQUATE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING PROTECTION FOR FARMERS

The majority of European farmers operate as self-employed individuals, meaning EU Occupational Safety and Health legislation does not directly apply. However, some countries such as Ireland extend national and EU OSH legislation to self-employed farmers, providing comprehensive legal frameworks governing occupational health and well-being, including psychosocial issues and work-related mental health. The 2003 European Council recommendation called for improved self-employed coverage across all sectors, while EU agriculture social partners recently recommended adopting ILO Convention C184 on agricultural work.

Recommendations:

- Member States to adopt ILO Convention C184 on agricultural work and its optional Recommendation R192 on self-employed workers, transposing relevant national implementation measures.
- Adopt a Council Directive (similar to 2017/159 on fisheries) supporting the joint agreement of EU Agriculture Social Partners on C184 implementation.
- Include specific reference to self-employed farmers in the 2026-2028 EU-OSHA campaign on psychosocial risks and mental health at work for the agriculture sector.

Responsible bodies: Member States, EU Council AGRIFISH, European Commission (DG EMPL), EU-OSHA, EU agriculture social partners.

8. ADDRESS EXCESSIVE WORKING HOURS AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE CHALLENGES

Long working hours significantly impact farmer mental health and well-being compared to other sectors. While regulating working time for self-employed farmers is challenging, as most operate their own businesses, excessive working hours nonetheless pose significant risks to occupational safety and mental health. For farm workers, Directive 2019/1152/ EU on transparent and predictable working conditions establishes minimum rights to working hour limits, rest periods, and annual paid leave and a specific OSH Directive on working time 2003/88EC governs working time for all sectors, even though certain temporary derogations may apply to agriculture for surge of activity and continuity of production. However, no similar measures govern self-employed farmer working time.

Recommendations:

- Eurofound to conduct a comprehensive study on working time in agriculture for both self-employed farmers and workers.
- EU to support national authorities fund, via the CAP, substitution and support schemes, similar to those developed in Finland (26 annual days relief services) and France, enabling farmers to take time off and holidays.
- Member States to develop and pilot programmes testing innovative work-life balance solutions adapted to agricultural seasonality and operational requirements.

Responsible bodies: Eurofound, National authorities, social insurance bodies, agricultural organisations.

9. ENSURE HIGH-LEVEL AND CROSS-SECTOR GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN FARMING

Successful farmer mental health initiatives in Finland, France, Ireland, and Sweden demonstrate the importance of high-level political support facilitating cross-government and cross-departmental coordination. France adopted a national strategic plan supporting a wide range of activities, Finland established a government-funded mental health programme, and Ireland achieved high-level ministerial engagement across multiple departments. Following the SafeHabitus seminar, Flanders published an English version of its “Well-being Action Plan for agriculture and horticulture” with implementation guidance.

Recommendations:

- Create an EU-wide plan on mental health in farming, based on models similar to the French inter-ministerial plan, bringing together all EU policymakers and stakeholders.
- Member States to establish national mental health in farming plans with cross-departmental coordination and sustainable funding mechanisms.
- Establish regular monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess plan implementation effectiveness and outcomes at EU and Member States levels.

Responsible bodies: European Commission (DG AGRI with all relevant DGs), EU social partners, EU agri-food stakeholders, national authorities (agriculture, employment, social affairs, health).

10. IMPLEMENT COMPREHENSIVE RESEARCH PROGRAMMES ADDRESSING EVIDENCE GAPS

Significant knowledge gaps persist regarding farmer mental health, including limited cross-EU comparative research, research on women farmers, insufficient studies in Southern and Eastern European countries, and inadequate evaluation of mental health support interventions. The SafeHabitus literature review identified needs for longitudinal studies clarifying causal relationships between stressors and mental health outcomes, examination of underrepresented populations, and investigation of emerging issues such as climate change and digitalisation impacts on mental health.

Recommendations:

- Future Horizon Europe work programmes to include farmer mental health research addressing identified data gaps, including gender-specific studies, regional variations, and intervention effectiveness evaluations.
- Establish a European research network on farmer mental health

to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaborative research approaches.

- Develop standardised methodologies for farmer mental health assessment and monitoring across Member States to enable comparative analysis and policy evaluation.

Responsible bodies: European Commission (DG AGRI, DG RTD), research institutions, Member States research agencies.

The way forward

The mental health of farmers represents a critical challenge for European agriculture that requires sustained, coordinated, and evidence-based policy responses. The 10 key recommendations presented in this policy brief provide a comprehensive framework for addressing both immediate support needs and underlying structural factors affecting farmer mental health and well-being.

The SafeHabitus project provides a foundation for continued research, policy development, and stakeholder engagement on farmer mental health issues. However, translating evidence into effective policy action requires sustained commitment from EU institutions, Member States, and agricultural stakeholder organisations.

Implementation success will also depend on recognising the substantial diversity in agricultural structures, social protection systems, and mental health service infrastructure across EU Member States. The evidence base and examples presented in this brief draw primarily from Western and Northern European contexts with relatively developed social insurance systems and rural health infrastructure. Member States with different agricultural structures (such as predominance of small-scale or subsistence farming), less developed social protection systems, or limited rural health infrastructure will need to adapt recommendations to local contexts. This may include phased implementation, development of context-specific support models, and investment in foundational infrastructure before implementing more advanced interventions. Regional and cross-border cooperation may enable knowledge exchange and resource sharing, particularly for smaller Member States or regions with limited capacity.

- **EU institutions** must prioritise farmer health within relevant agricultural, social and health policy frameworks, ensure adequate funding mechanisms, and facilitate coordination between different policy domains affecting agriculture and rural communities.
- **Member States** must adapt and implement EU-level frameworks within their national contexts, ensuring that support services are accessible and appropriate for their agricultural sectors and rural communities.
- **Agricultural stakeholder** organisations must continue engaging in policy development while also taking direct action to support farmer mental health and well-being within their communities and membership.

By working together to implement these recommendations, European policymakers and stakeholders can create a comprehensive support system that enhances farmer mental health and well-being while contributing to the broader goals of sustainable agriculture, rural vitality, and food security. The evidence is clear that farmer mental health represents both a significant challenge and an opportunity to strengthen European agriculture for the future. The time for action is now.

Learn more, find the annexes here:

https://bit.ly/SH_Mental-Health-Policy-Brief_Annex



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