There is a solid body of evidence that climate change is happening and that it will influence, among other, conditions for agriculture and rural areas in Europe. European and internal efforts in climate protection are in process, but some degree of change is already inevitable because of past levels of greenhouse gas emissions.

Some of the projected climate change impacts could be beneficial in certain European regions, but most impacts will be adverse and occur in regions already under pressure due to socio-economic and environmental factors. The International Climate Panel has assessed that even small amounts of global warming can reduce crop yields and trigger higher yield variability. An increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, such as heat waves, droughts, floods and storms can be expected already in the medium term. A decrease in average annual rainfall will be a serious problem in particular in the most vulnerable southern regions.

EU forest areas will also be affected by changing climatic conditions. Warming is likely to intensify the risk of forests fires and pests; in the longer term it may affect tree species composition and timber production capacity, and jeopardize the capacity of our forests to provide economic, social and ecological services.

The impacts of climate change in different parts of Europe will vary, and this uneven effect is expected to amplify regional differences in agricultural conditions, increasing the risk of regional marginalisation in some parts of the EU and economic disparities between European rural regions.

The EU is in the front line of the international battle against climate change. So far, EU climate policy has emphasised mitigation. The EU agricultural sector has made significant progress in reducing its greenhouse gas emissions. It is necessary that we maintain our efforts in emission reductions, but at the same time we need to enhance adaptation to the changes that are already inevitable. Adaptation measures should work towards reducing the vulnerability of the agricultural and forestry sectors and increase the resilience of rural areas from an environmental and economic perspective.

Rural development policy provides opportunities to offset the adverse effects that climate change may have for farmers and rural economies. Community strategic guidelines set climate change as one of the priorities for the period 2007–2013. A range of relevant actions have already been included in the newly adopted programmes.

The workshop will examine the likely impacts of climate change on agriculture and forestry in Europe, focusing on the regional differences in the projected changes, their likely time scale and consequences to different rural areas. It will discuss the possibilities to cope with the projected changes in climate conditions and analyse measures that can be taken on different levels (farm, region, Member State, EU) to enhance adaptation. It will also reflect on how EU policies dealing with rural areas can best contribute to effective adaptation.

Main questions for discussion:

- What adaptation actions are needed for the near future in agriculture and forestry? What should be our priorities, according to the current assessment of impacts and vulnerabilities?
- What is the role of policy in adaptation strategies? What is the right mix between mandatory regulation and voluntary action based on incentives? What kind of supporting measures?
- Is there scope for a common EU-level adaptation strategy in agriculture and forestry? How would this relate to the current rural development architecture? What new instruments, if any?
- How to improve synergies with other policy areas (biodiversity, bioenergy, water)?