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AGRICULTURE & INNOVATION



EIP-AGRI Focus Group

Mixed farming systems: livestock/cash crops

MINIPAPER 1: How farmers deal with complexity and take decisions to achieve the benefits of mixed farming systems.

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1. Mixed farming and complexity: State of play

Mixed farming systems are complex and require a high level of skill to run profitably. A more complex farming system has a large number of components (including human, technical, economic, financial, risk, institutional and social as well as the biological production systems themselves) and the interactions between these components whilst providing greater system resilience and long term sustainability of a farming system, can be difficult to understand and manage. With any system, the whole is more than the sum of the individual parts. By shifting focus from the parts to the whole, we can better grasp the connections between the different elements. In systems, the relationships between individual parts may be more important than the parts. If managed well, a mixed farming system can provide a number of benefits including increased self-sufficiency of feed, more efficient nutrient cycling, greater provision of ecosystems services such as biodiversity and conservation of non-renewable resources (e.g. fossil fuels for fertiliser manufacture). By identifying and addressing farmers concerns related to management complexity and mixed farming, the benefits of mixed farming systems could be maximised.

The more complex the farming system (e.g. a mixed farming systems with livestock and cropping activities), the more understanding and management skill is required. Identifying business and farming family goals, making decisions regarding resource allocation and understanding the interactions between enterprises to maximise benefits (environmental, economic or social) are all key aspects for discussion in this paper.

2. How does complexity put farmers off mixed systems?: Innovation process and fail factors

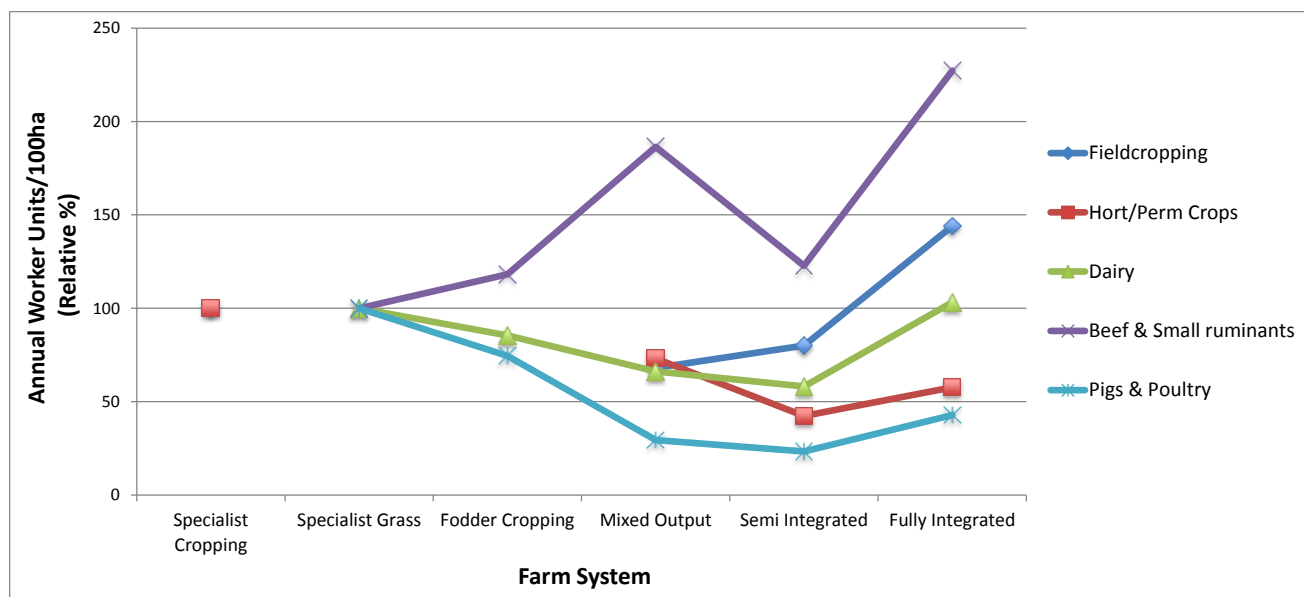
Findings of The Cantotogether¹ Project (Deliverables 1.2 and 5.3 specifically) indicated that some farmers are put off mixed farming because of the perceived increased farmer labour requirements, intensive management skill requirements, systems understanding needed and the risk associated with trying to juggle multiple enterprises and their associated inputs and outputs and whether the environmental and economic benefits make mixed farming worthwhile.

Labour Issues

The Cantotogether projects economic analysis of mixed and specialised farms in Europe using Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN) data (Deliverable 5.1) showed that in terms of labour requirements, whilst some samples did not highlight differences between systems, Figure 1. below (showing the relative percentage differences in labour use per 100 hectares, with Specialised Cropping (SC) as 100% for cropping farm types and Specialised Grassland (SG) as 100% for livestock farm types), appears to indicate that overall mixed and integrated farms required greater labour input and therefore have higher associated costs.

¹ The FP7 Funded CANTOGETHER (Crops and Animals Together) project (<http://fp7cantogether.eu/>) designed, evaluated (environmental, economic and social) and promoted new mixed crop-livestock systems at farm, district, and landscape levels to optimise energy, carbon and nutrient flows that conserve natural resources and maximise production. Full reports from the recently completed project can be found on the project website.

Figure 1. Relative % of Annual Worker Units/100ha by farm type and system- EU & Switzerland



However, when analysed at national or regional level the economic and labour results did not always follow the same pattern; and despite lower output, the fully integrated (FI) systems achieved similar profitability to the more intensive systems e.g. dairying in mid-Sweden, beef & small ruminants in central France showed no statistical difference in farm net income between the systems regardless of whether they were specialised, mixed or integrated.

Mixed beef, sheep and cropping farmers in Wales - All the farmers present in a workshop discussion agreed that one problem with mixed farming systems in Wales is finding qualified labour to run the various enterprises. After lengthy discussion amongst the group, it came to light that all those with mixed farms around the table, and all the mixed farms that they knew of, were family run farms with 1, 2 or even more of the children working on the farm and being responsible for different aspects of the mixed system. The farmers jokingly said that the way to increase the number of mixed farms in Wales was to encourage farmers to have more children! Joking aside, this raised interesting issues regarding the optimum farm size to be able to financially support different generations of the farming family. All the farms described were large (800-1000 acres), had multiple enterprises and a level of profitability high enough to be able support the family working on the farm.

If family labour is not available, hired skilled labour is needed to be able to manage multiple enterprises. Increased reliance on hired labour (including casual labour for periods of high demand e.g. harvest or lambing) adds to the costs of labour search, training and supervision or leads some farmers to adopt an enterprise mix less dependent on labour, which generally results in greater specialisation.

Management Skills and System Understanding

A sustainable farm requires the management of biological, financial and social resources for the short, medium to longer-term so that enterprises survive and future generations are not compromised.

*An approach taken to dealing with a very complex farming systems is demonstrated on **Bryn Farm, Wales**. The farm has a complex mix of sheep, beef and turkey fattening enterprises linked integrally with some arable grain and forage root production, grassland and direct marketing of lamb to consumers via farmers markets. The farmer has two sons working with him; one manages the livestock on a day to day basis and the other the cropping side of the farms activities. Delegating this management to specialist staff (in this case the farmers sons) enable the farmer to step back from day to day farming activities and take a more strategic overview of the whole farm and the integration between the livestock, cropping and marketing sides of the farm business. In order for this approach to work excellent communication skills are required along with a shared vision for the businesses objectives – something that may be easier on a family farm than when staff are employed to fulfil the enterprise management roles.*

Associating enterprises can also be envisaged when starting farming activities. In France an association for agricultural development (Collectif pour le Développement de l'Agroécologie) started in 2013 consultancy missions to organize interactions between crop and livestock farms. The president of the association runs an organic cereal farm with cereals and oilseed crops processed as flour and oil on farm. He became associated with a young farmer who wanted to settle in livestock production. The enlarged farm counts grasslands for beef production. Hens are kept for egg production, using milling residues as feed. Oilseed cakes, by-products of oil processing, are also used for beef and soon for pig production. Direct sales are developed on farm, made possible by the complementary work of the two associates for on-farm presence and shop management. The use of animal manure for crop fertilization allows great self-sufficiency at the farm level. Each farmer is responsible for the decision making for its own enterprise but work can be shared.

Farmers are also farming in a context that is increasingly influenced by outside forces such as global markets and their influence on input and output prices, environmental and animal welfare legislation, quality assurance programmes etc. This adds a further layer of complexity to a mixed farming system and requires the farmer to not only have a good understanding of the farming system but also the regional, national and global context in which their farming business exists.

In a workshop held in Wales in 2012 as part of the Cantogather workshops aimed at developing existing mixed farming systems, all the farmers participating agreed that mixed farming systems are very complex and those farmers that had mixed farming systems (even very established mixed farming systems) were looking for ways to simplify their systems. One mixed farmer in particular mentioned simplifying their rotation and dropping out of agri-environmental schemes that imposed restrictions on cropping practices and crop locations.

Managing complexity is a question of being able to think in terms of the whole system and if the farming system is properly designed it should be easier to manage complexity. In order to be able to design a new system or adapt and evolve an existing system (as is the case for the farm choosing to go out of an agri-environment scheme) specific time for strategic management or "clean hand days" to think, is a necessity. An approach to facilitate the design or evolution process could be for the farmer to envisage the farming system they would like to have in 5 to 10 years' time and subsequently design plan or pathway to achieving this goal.

Mixed farm in Cornwall, UK - *Farming a wide variety of soil types in close proximity brings many challenges which mixed farming can help overcome. Given the wet maritime Cornish climate, grassland combined with livestock production are key to make use of the geographic comparative advantages sustainably for future success. Grazed fodder beet now is being used now as an entry for spring reseed, allocating low producing leys identified by weekly measurement. This previously had been planted with combinable crops, some winter some spring sown, of which were undersown with a new ley. All farms want a better quality of life in the long term which has seen the farmer simplify the system. Looking for synergies between enterprises to reduce workload rather than fill the year with work as it has been done previously. The realisation that it's ok to have time off is important if future generations farming is to be kept. All male dairy calves for rose veal are fattened making use of secondary products from the primary dairy enterprises for an additional and different income stream. Cropping is now carried out by contractors allowing more time for strategy and management decisions.*

The need for continuing development of higher level management skills among farmers to produce food, fibre and fuel more efficiently from ever decreasing and, or more expensive resources is obvious for all farming systems, but especially for those with mixed farming systems that have multiple enterprises. As identified in Mini Paper 3, managing multiple enterprises is difficult for some farmers, especially if they have been practising specialised farming. Specialised farmers have specialised expertise as well: they are educated as a crop or livestock farmer and have experience with either crops or livestock. Even if they believe a MFS is attractive for their situation, they will often feel unable to start and run a new activity successfully. Moreover, specialised farmers are often supported by specialised advisors as well. If a farmer is starting a new activity, these advisors have similar lack of necessary knowledge and education to support the farmer. How to prioritise enterprises in term of which labour and resources to allocate for the best returns and how that impact on other activities on the farm would require complicated optimising mathematical models to solve. Whilst some farmers might be capable of doing this with good decision support tools, other farmers need to take a more pragmatic approach and use their implicit knowledge of their farming system (perhaps with the input of an advisor) to make a decision, which could be optimal but equally might not be. To a certain extent in this situation trial and error may be an essential part of the development of the whole farm system. Past experiences are very important for making decisions and developing a farming system to better achieve the goals of the farmer/farming family.

Traditional mixed farm in Slovenia *where having multiple crop and livestock enterprises provides stability and resilience to the farm – The farm has 51 ha of land of which 15 ha is used for cropping and 36 ha is pasture. In the farmers view the only sustainable way of farming is when cereals are used or sold for human consumption (food) and other crops like grass are used on the farm for animal food. Being mixed provides a lot of stability because the farmer sells cereals and other crops when the market is good and there is enough feed on the farm for livestock but can also adjust the livestock numbers and put additional crops onto the market if there is a strong market demand. On this farm they try to give to the animals only crops that do not have good market value. When managing this mixed farm, the farmer always looks for the optimal solutions across the farm rather than within each enterprise – this means that the individual performance of the enterprises is worse than specialised systems but overall at the farm scale, economic performance can easily be as good as specialised. The farmers stated "The key is out of the box thinking and the right combination of crops and animals". To move the farm forward the farmer is currently looking at starting direct sowing of grassland to improve quality and produce more organic cereal crops – this will better utilise the full potential of the land.*

Whilst decision support systems (DSS) might in theory be useful for supporting farmers in complex decision making there are a number of factors which have been identified (DEFRA funded Sustainable Intensification Platform project in the UK, <http://www.siplatform.org.uk>) as restricting their usefulness including: many DSS systems focus only on one type of enterprise (e.g. arable or dairy) due to the programming difficulties and limited predictive capabilities associated with a "whole farm" model; farmers seem to prefer paper-based guidance; age/habit are particularly important modifying factors for uptake of software systems and finally the

cost of system is a greater concern for some types of farmers (e.g. beef/sheep farmers, especially in UK uplands).

3. Approaches for dealing with complexity in mixed farming systems.

Social investigations found that, typically, three sorts of decisions are encountered on mixed farms: simple, complicated and complex. These are all solved in different ways, and identifying the type of decision at the outset can help in selecting the best way of approaching it.

Simple decisions:

- Few variables
- One right answer
- Are assisted by accurate information
- Can delegate the decision to someone else

San Giuliano Case Study, *Northern Italy (Cantogether)* – *Lowland potato growers do not have enough land to both crop the area they would like to maximise yields as well as respecting the minimum period of time between two potato crops to reduce the incidence of crop disease (6 years). Renting land from a neighbour to grow potato crops and enable periods in the home farm rotation for growing break crops is an example of a simple decision.*

Complicated decisions:

- Many variables
- One right answer
- Can be assisted by advice (can delegate the decision)

San Giuliano Case Study (*Cantogether*) – *building on this example, an alternative and slightly more complicated solution to the problem could be to establish an exchange of land between dairy farmers and potato growers to allow farmers to grow potatoes in dairy fields where they had not been before and dairy farmers to graze (or conserve) new, high yielding grass break crops on potato farms. Whilst the outcome would be the same for the potato farmer, there are additional factors to consider such as which land to exchange, what type of agreement would be needed with the dairy farmers, what happens if there is a crop failure etc. etc.*

Complex decisions:

- Many variables (often non-comparable)
- Many 'right' answers (depending on personal preferences, values, and context, environment)
- Many simple and complicated parts (some of which can be delegated and interacted)
- Decision making is intuitive as well as rational
- Can be assisted by hearing and telling similar stories about decision making
- Ultimate decision rests with farming family (can't delegate a complex decision)

San Giuliano Case Study (*Cantogether*) – *again building on this case study, a more complex solution to the potato growers problem might be to introduce livestock onto their own farm and develop a mixed farming rotation including potatoes, grassland for grazing animals and perhaps other cash and forage crops. This would be a major change for the farming system and how resources should be allocated between multiple cropping and livestock enterprises would need to be decided. More labour may also need to be hired to manage the livestock. Another consideration would be the economic implications of making such a radical change to the farm system – would they simply be better implementing one of the more simple options as described above.*

McGuckian & Rickards (2008) indicated that the theory on decision-making suggests we can improve decision making when the decisions are complex by "story telling". This is what farmers often do when they chat

with their neighbours or advisors to discuss options. Farming is for many farmers a quite isolated occupation and therefore the value of discussion groups (or similar) can play a vital role for some in decision making when it comes to complex issues.

Forums for farmers discussion - *The concept of discussions groups and monitor or demonstration farms is common place in countries like New Zealand and Australia for all types of farming and for dairy farms in Europe (UK, Denmark, Netherlands, France). For other farm types (e.g. mixed farming systems) these types of groups are less common, perhaps due to the wide diversity of mixed farming system and being able to provide a common focus for group members. An opportunity provided recently by the Cantogether project enable mixed farmers from Wales to sit down around a table and really discuss in quite some detail about their farming systems and why they have made the decisions they have. The non-confrontational environment of the discussion led to sharing of experiences and a great deal of co-learning amongst the farmers. Farmer feedback at the end of the meeting said that whilst they felt a bit shy at the start of the meeting (not knowing the other farmers) it was a really valuable opportunity to share their own stories and learn from others.*

In decision making a set of principles or boundaries are established by the farmer (and his or her family in many cases) and decisions are made within these boundaries in an ongoing way. The boundaries might reflect economic ambitions (e.g. do not want to have more than X amount of debt, or do not want to rely on support payments for the business being profitable, I don't want to "put all my eggs in one basket") or environmental (e.g. habitat protection meaning certain areas of land are not available to be farmed) or social (e.g. want to be able to support the farming family entirely from the farm enterprises, I want my children to be able to continue farming once I have retired. The boundaries might change or move overtime to adapt to changing circumstances (e.g. investment required in new equipment/building required).

All the aspects described above tend to result in complex decisions being conservative. Being conservative can be interpreted as a good thing in terms of reducing the risk of implementing a decision but could also a bad solution because it is at the expense of diminishing the development or positive evolution the farm business.

Based on this theory, there are a number of statements for farmers to think about when making decisions in a complex system:

1. Be clear on your goals: what is the objective of one or other practice? What is the place of the practice in the general strategy of the farm?
2. Be objective where possible with separate parts of the decision: what are the good reason for doing / not doing this?
3. Trust gut feelings in making overall, complex decisions once advantages and disadvantages of each option is clearly stated.
4. Do not delay in making decisions more than needed
5. Simple and smart, but keep synergy (simplify your system as much as possible in order to maximise synergies between different elements)
6. Story Telling' is Helpful: farmer may wonder what he wants on his farm as ideal image in ten years, to help structuring its objectives and designing the right pathway to get there.

To facilitate the process of identifying and prioritising goals and directing farmers to appropriate sources of information to support informed decision making, the DEFRA (UK) funded Sustainable Intensification Platform² is developing a decisions support framework that can be adapted by researchers and advisors to address any number of different needs. The framework takes the form of a matrix with a range of desired goals or outcomes across columns (in this case goals related to sustainable intensification e.g. increased profitability, improved soil management and quality, improved productivity etc.) and an extensive range of integrated farming practices down the rows (400 farming practices in this case related to management of livestock, crops, soils, energy resources etc.). In the cell where the desired goal and a farm practice intersect, the farmer/advisor can see whether that farm practice has a positive, negative or neutral influence of the desire goal, they can also look across the row to see how it might influence other goals. The user can also click on the cell to be linked to further advisory information. The framework is designed for advisors and farmers to visually see how an individual farming practice impacts on a range of business goals – the idea being that it encourages greater systems thinking and more strategic implementation of farming practices to achieve specific goals.

Landscape level mixed farming as a solution?

A solution proposed in the Cantotogether project to achieve the environmental and economic benefits of mixed farming without the management complexity and need for more labour on farm, is to develop local co-operation between specialised farms. This comes with its own difficulties such as being able to work cooperatively with other farmers; however, there are examples where this type of local mixed farming is being conducted successfully.

Swiss Mountain and Lowland collaboration case study (Cantotogether) – focusses on dairy cattle production in the mountains and lowlands of Switzerland. Cattle production in both regions is mainly based on grasslands. The mountain and marginal areas are not suitable for crop production. The aim of the case study is to analyse supra-regional collaboration between mountain and lowland farmers.

Dairy and crop production in the mountains is very challenging. This region is, compared to the lowlands, disadvantaged due to climatic and topographic conditions which results in mountain farms being less productive, therefore intensive production systems such as dairy farming depend on concentrate imports, farm income is low in the mountains compare to the lowlands and many mountain farmers depend on off farm jobs to be able to stay farming.

The innovative local mixed farming approach - Dairy farmers from the lowlands collaborate with mountain farmers. They sell their weaned female pure bred dairy calves to mountain farmers. The mountain farmers raise the heifers and sell them back to the lowland farmer when they are pregnant and close to calving. Standardized contract exists, where prices for calves and pregnant heifers are specified.

The main advantage of such a system for the lowland farmers are: (1) they can use the land and time formerly used for the raising of heifers for other activities that are more viable from an economic point of view (e.g. crop production, increased milk production) (2) good genetics from their herds are kept (in comparison to a system where animals are bought from the cattle market) (3) animals raised in the mountains are said to be more robust and therefore have less health problems and an increased longevity.

The main advantages of the system for the mountain farmers are: (1) less market risks, as prices for calves and heifers are set by the contract and they have a guaranteed demand for the heifers (2) optimal use of the feed resources (grazed grass, hay, grass silage) from the mountain farm, which is not very suitable for intensive production systems.

²<http://www.siplatform.org.uk/>

4. Conclusions

Mixed farming systems tend to have a large number of components (including human, technical, economic, financial, risk, institutional and social as well as the biological production systems themselves) and the interactions between these components whilst providing greater system resilience and long term sustainability of a farming system, can be difficult to understand and manage. The availability and skill of farm labour and management skill and systems understanding are all barriers to developing mixed farming. There are approaches to dealing with these problems including breaking the decision making process down and prioritising into those decisions that are relatively simple and can be delegated, those that are complex and require help from an advisor for example and those that are complex and require dedicated “thinking” time by the farmer. Discussion groups and sharing experiences through story telling can help farmers work through their own complex decision making processes. Another way is to reduce farmers’ anxiety about the complexity of mixed farming systems, and still deliver the environmental benefits that can be derived from mixed farming is to consider collaboration and cooperation between specialised farming to develop mixed farming at the landscape level.

In addition to these proposed approaches there are a number of other areas for development that might encourage more farmers into mixed farming and the resulting delivery of environmental benefits. These are outlined in the sections below.

5. Needs for research

Demonstrate the benefits of MFS to farmers

Demonstrate the potential environmental, economic and social performance of different types of mixed farming systems would enable farmers to make more informed decisions about a) whether they could viably practice mixed farming and b) which type of mixed farming (e.g. farm level or landscape level) might suit their farm, skills and resource base.

How to value the non-product outputs of mixed farming?

One of the main policy outcomes of the Cantotogether project was that in order to develop mixed farming, addressing potential compensation for economic losses at the farm level by placing a monetary value on the reduced or increased externalities (commoditisation) is needed. In order to do this, metrics need to be developed to evaluate public goods delivered and policy mechanisms need to be developed to value these.

How to develop mixed farming at the landscape level?

One way of achieving the environmental and economic benefits of mixed farming without the management complexity and need for more labour on farm, is to develop local co-operation between specialised farms. This comes with its own difficulties such as being able to work cooperatively with other farmers and the facilitation of the conditions for cooperation between farms across a territory is needed.

How to cope with the risk of multiple enterprises and establish effective advantage, balancing the need of time and organization to manage complexity?

This research need could be addressed through qualifying what the risks are (environmental, economic +social) in a complex mixed farming system and identifying the skills needed to manage diversity of risks. Lessons could also be learned from other sectors of the economy that manage similar complexity (e.g. construction) to develop different models and approaches for management in farming. Identifying how best to mentor risk management and complexity in mixed farms would also be essential.

How to manage the high level of labour and complex decision making and organisation needed in MFS?

It is clear that more complex farming systems require more management input to perform effectively and sustainably. In farming however, it is often difficult for the farmer/farm manager to step back from day to day farming activities and prioritise time for strategic thinking and decision making about the farm system. There is a need to quantify farmer time spent on management in reality and if this is low, identify ways to encourage farmers to value strategic thinking time (e.g. by valuing different activities on the farm in terms of

the economic return they might generate). Identifying and adapting tools for the analysis of labour requirements throughout the year would also be valuable to help farmers better manage the often higher and more complex labour requirements of MFS.

6. Recommendations for how to ensure a broader take up

Adapting models for complexity management from other sectors

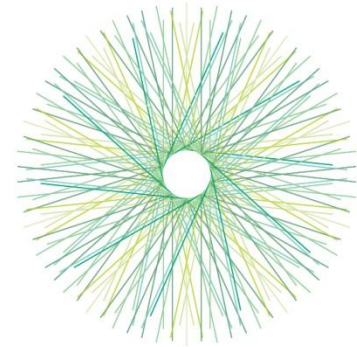
There is a need to identify existing sources of information, models and tools (e.g. web based management tools) to deal with complexity from other sectors and then adapt these to farm management in practice using case studies in a range of different agro-ecological environments across Europe and for a range of mixed farming variants. The use of case studies would be instrumental in transferring that knowledge, models and tools adapted to the broader agricultural sector.

Valuing strategic management time on farm

Time spent by farmers on strategic planning activities related to their farm business is often undervalued and low on the list of priorities farmers have on a day to day basis. Developing case studies of different types of farming systems and valuing the different activities farmers undertake in their businesses on a day to day and annual basis, would be an effective way of demonstrating to other farmers the benefits of taking time away from activities such as milking cows or ploughing a field which are economically fairly low cost activities, and spending more time on potential high return, strategic business planning.

7. References

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The European Innovation Partnership 'Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability' (EIP-AGRI) is one of five EIPs launched by the European Commission in a bid to promote rapid modernisation by stepping up innovation efforts.

The **EIP-AGRI** aims to catalyse the innovation process in the **agricultural and forestry sectors** by bringing **research and practice closer together** – in research and innovation projects as well as *through* the EIP-AGRI network.

EIPs aim to streamline, simplify and better coordinate existing instruments and initiatives and complement them with actions where necessary. Two specific funding sources are particularly important for the EIP-AGRI:

- the EU Research and Innovation framework, Horizon 2020,
- the EU Rural Development Policy.

An EIP-AGRI Focus Group* is one of several different building blocks of the EIP-AGRI network, which is funded under the EU Rural Development policy. Working on a narrowly defined issue, Focus Groups temporarily bring together 20 experts (such as farmers, advisers, researchers, up- and downstream businesses and NGOs) to map and develop solutions within their field.

The concrete objectives of a Focus Group are:

- to take stock of the state of art of practice and research in its field, listing problems and opportunities;
- to identify needs from practice and propose directions for further research;
- to propose priorities for innovative actions by suggesting potential projects for Operational Groups working under Rural Development or other project formats to test solutions and opportunities, including ways to disseminate the practical knowledge gathered.

Results are normally published in a report within 12-18 months of the launch of a given Focus Group.

Experts are selected based on an open call for interest. Each expert is appointed based on his or her personal knowledge and experience in the particular field and therefore does not represent an organisation or a Member State.

*More details on EIP-AGRI Focus Group aims and process are given in its charter on:

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eip/focus-groups/charter_en.pdf



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