Farms and farmland in the European Union - statistics

This article is part of a set that is taken from Eurostat’s publication Agriculture, forestry and fishery statistics - 2018 edition. The EU’s farms are numerous and varied; they are of all sizes, varied in terms of what is grown or animals that are reared, run under different management structures and found in areas that have different geologies, topographies and climates.

Farms in 2016

There were 10.5 million agricultural holdings in the EU in 2016

One third (32.7 %) of the EU’s agricultural holdings (here-on termed 'farms') were located in Romania, much more than any other Member State; it was about the same as all the farms in Poland (13.5 % of the EU-28 total), Italy (10.9 %) and Spain (9.0 %) combined, the three Member States with the next highest number of farms.

The vast majority of the EU’s farms are family farms

The overwhelming majority (96.0 % in 2016) of the EU’s farms are classed as being family farms. Indeed, more than nine in every ten farms (93.0 %) in the EU only had family workers (the farmer and his/her family members) in 2016. Family farms were the dominant farm type in all Member States. However, France had a relatively sizeable minority of non-family farms (27.3 % of its close to 0.5 million farms) along with Estonia (21.0 %).

Most of the EU’s farms are small in nature

Two-thirds of the EU’s farms were less than 5 hectares (ha) in size in 2016 (see Figure 1). These small farms can play an important role in reducing the risk of rural poverty, providing additional income and food. At the other end of the production scale, 6.9 % of the EU’s farms were of 50 ha or more in size and worked two-thirds (68.2 %) of the EU’s utilised agricultural area (UAA). So although the average mean size of an agricultural holding in the EU was 16.6 ha in 2016, only about 15 % of farms were this size or larger.

The term 'family farm' refers to any farm under family management where 50 % or more of the regular agricultural labour force is provided by family members.
This distribution pattern was particularly clear in Romania, the Member State with the highest number of farms; nine in every ten farms (91.8 % or 3.1 million farms) were smaller than 5 ha, but the 0.5% of farms of 50 ha or more in size farmed one half (51.1 %) of all the UAA in the country. Small farms of under 5 ha were also typical in Malta (96.5 % of the total), Cyprus (89.6 %), Bulgaria (82.6 %), Hungary (81.4 %), Greece (77.3 %), Portugal (71.5 %) and Croatia (69.5 %), as well as in particular regions of others such as the southern parts of Poland and coastal regions of Spain and Italy. The number of small farms in certain Member States and regions reflects a mixture of crop specialisation (such as small olive groves and vineyards), of wide land ownership, and geological and topographical constraints.

Larger farms (of 50 hectares or more) were much more common in Luxembourg (51.8 % of farms), France (41.3 %), the United Kingdom (38.6 %) and Denmark (35.3 %). In most Member States, a majority of UAA was concentrated on the largest farms (50 ha or more in size).

**EU farms can be characterised in three distinct size groups**

Broadly-speaking, there are three distinct groups of farms in the EU: (i) semi-subsistence farms, where the focus is on growing a high proportion of food to feed farmers and their families (ii) small and medium-sized farms that are generally family-run businesses and (ii) large agricultural enterprises which are more likely to have a legal form or be cooperatives.

These distinctions are made clearer by analysing farms in terms of their economic size. Of the EU’s 10.5 million farms, 4.0 million had a standard output below EUR 2 000 per year and were responsible for only 1% of the EU’s total agricultural economic output. These very small farms are at the (semi-)subsistence end of the farming scale; about three-quarters of such farms in the EU consumed more than one half of their production.

A further 3.0 million farms had an economic output within the range of EUR 2 000 - EUR 8 000 per year. Together these very small and small farms accounted for two-thirds (67.6 %) of all farms in the EU in 2016.

In contrast, 304 000 farms (2.9 % of the EU total) each produced a standard output of EUR 250 000 per year or more in 2016 and were responsible for a majority (55.6%) of the EU’s total agricultural economic output; these farms can be characterised as being large agricultural enterprises. Two in every five of these large farms had a legal or group holding form.
A majority (55.1%) of the standard output generated by agriculture across the EU was from farms in France (16.8%), Italy (14.2%), Germany (13.5%), and Spain (10.5%) in 2016. Although Romania accounted for about one third of the EU’s farms, it accounted for only 3.3% of the EU’s standard output (see Figure 2).

EU farms remain diverse in terms of what they grow or rear

The diversity of farm types can be shown according to what is grown or reared, based on whether there is a single dominant activity or not. A farm is considered to be specialised when a particular activity provides at least two-thirds of the production or the business size of an agricultural holding. Others have a mix of activities in which no one activity dominates.

Some farms are specialised in crop production, whether that be where field crop activities are the dominant activity, or where permanent crops (like apples, grapes and olives) dominate, or indeed horticultural activities. Some farms are specialised in animal production and animal products, whether that be where grazing livestock or granivores (such as pigs and poultry) dominate. Other farms have a mix of crops, mix of livestock, or mix of crops and livestock.
About one half (52.5 %) of all farms in 2016 could be categorised as being crop specialist farms; just under one third (31.6 %) of all farms were specialised in field cropping, about one fifth (18.9 %) were specialised in permanent crops, with remainder (1.8 %) being specialist horticultural farms. In this grouping of farms, general field cropping farms that specialised in root crops (such as potatoes and sugar beet), in field vegetables and field crops were the most numerous (accounting for 16.4 % of all EU farms – see Figure 3). This was closely followed by specialist cereals, oilseeds and protein crop farms (15.2 %) of all EU farms.

Another one quarter (25.1 %) of the EU’s farms were specialist livestock farms, with sheep, goats and other grazing livestock farms (6.2 %) and specialist dairy farms (5.4 %) the most numerous within this group. Mixed farms made up most of the rest (21.1 %), with a small percentage of farms not being classifiable.

Figure 3: Farms by type of specialisation, EU-28, 2016 (share of all EU farms, %)

Source: Eurostat (online data code: ef_m_farmleg)

Figure 3: Farms by type of specialisation, EU-28, 2016 (share of all EU farms, %)
Source: Eurostat (ef_m_farmleg)

In many Mediterranean countries (Spain, Italy, Greece, Cyprus) and also in Finland specialist cropping was the dominant farm type (with a share of more than 60 % of all farms), while in parts of North-West Europe (Benelux, Austria, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Norway) specialist livestock farming was the dominant activity (with a share of more than 50 % of all farms). More than 30 % of farms were mixed holdings in Portugal,
Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Croatia.

**Farmland in 2016**

EU farms used 173 million hectares (ha) of land for agricultural production in 2016

Almost three quarters (71.5 %) of the utilised agricultural area of the EU was based in just seven Member States; France used 27.8 million ha for agricultural purposes in 2016, Spain 23.2 million ha, the United Kingdom and Germany both 16.7 million ha, Poland used 14.4 million ha, Italy a further 12.6 million ha and Romania 12.5 million ha.

Farms managed just under one half (47.1 %) of the total land area of the EU in 2016

Farms in the EU managed two-fifths (38.8 %) of the total land area of the EU as UAA, as well as wooded areas (6.2 %) and other farm land not used for agriculture (2.1 %). Agricultural landscapes dominated the countryside in some Member States; about two-thirds of the land area in Ireland (70.0 %) and the United Kingdom (65.7%) was used as agricultural land and the share was also particularly high in Denmark (60.9 %). This was in stark contrast to Finland (6.5 %) and Sweden (6.9 %) where forest dominated the landscape. These two Nordic Member States were the only EU Member States where wooded areas belonging to agricultural holdings accounted for a higher share of the land area than that used for agricultural purposes.

![Figure 4: Land belonging to farms by type of land, 2016 (% share on total land area)](image)

Source: Eurostat (online data codes: ef_lus_main and reg_area3)

---

**The evolution of farms and farmland from 2005 to 2016**

The number of farms in the EU has been in steep decline

---

²For more details, see the Statistics Explained article on specialisation
The number of farms in the EU has been in decline for a long time. However, putting a precise figure on farm losses should be treated with some caution, as coverage has decreased in some countries with the raising of the size threshold for what is considered a farm. This means that figures in time series analysis of farm numbers, types of farms and characteristics of the labour force should be seen as indicative rather than precise\(^3\).

Bearing this precaution in mind, the number of farms in the EU decreased by about one quarter in the relatively short period between 2005 and 2016. This suggests losses of up to 4.2 million farms across the Member States, the vast majority of which (about 85\%) were small farms of a size under 5 ha. During this period, the largest reductions in farm numbers were recorded in Poland (an indicative loss of 1.1 million farms, or 43\%), Romania (an indicative decline of 0.8 million farms, or 20\%) and Italy (an indicative 0.6 million farms, or 34\%). All Member States, with the notable exception of Ireland, recorded falls in farm numbers. In proportional terms, the steepest declines of almost two-thirds were in Slovakia and Bulgaria.

The amount of land used in the EU for agricultural production has remained steady

The amount of land that was used for agricultural production remained broadly unchanged between (+0.2\%) 2005 and 2016, despite the sharp reduction in farm numbers. At the EU-level, this consolidation of agricultural land reflected the growth in the number of the largest holdings and the land that they used for agricultural purposes (see Figure 5).

![Figure 5: Change in the number of farms and utilised agricultural area by size class, EU-28, 2005–2016 (%)](image)

Among Member States, this readjustment took place in different size classes. In France, Germany, Finland and the United Kingdom, in particular, it was only in the largest farm size category of 100 hectares (ha) or more that there was growth in numbers and the utilised agricultural area, all other size classes shrinking. This

\(^3\)For more details, see the Statistics Explained article on Farm structure survey – survey coverage.
readjustment took place in smaller size classes in many other Member States; for example, there was growth in farm numbers and utilised agricultural area in farms that were larger than 20 ha in Italy and in Romania, and in farms above 10 ha in Hungary and in Bulgaria in the period between 2005 and 2016.

Although comparatively few, the number of farms in the EU taking a legal form rose by about 40 000 through to 2016. This growth in farms of a legal nature was noted in every size category, although most notably in farms of a 100 ha or more in size.

Source data for tables and graphs
- Farms and farmland in the EU: tables and figures

Data sources
Almost all of the statistics for farms and farmers were drawn from the Farm Structure Survey for 2016. The Farm Structure Survey (FSS) provides a wide range of information on agricultural holdings, including detailed data on farm labour force characteristics. The FSS is carried out in the form of an agricultural census every 10 years and in-between times as a sample survey every 3 or 4 years.

Context
Farming is an activity that is about growing crops and raising livestock. It is the business of providing key primary ingredients for the food that we eat and much of what we drink. Farming draws on a set of resources to produce these agricultural goods, as well as agricultural services. These resources or ‘factors of production’ can be broadly categorised as land, labour, knowledge, capital and entrepreneurship. Within the EU, the farming sector operates under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Just as agriculture needs to keep pace with scientific and technological advances, so the CAP needs to respond to developing challenges. The CAP has been reformed a number of times over the years and on 1st June 2018, the European Commission presented proposals for further changes beyond 2020. The proposed nine objectives of this future CAP highlight the central role of farms and farmers in meeting challenges to do with climate change, with creating vibrant rural areas, with preserving rural landscapes, with environmental care and with protecting food and health quality. These economic, environmental and climate-related and socio-economic challenges require that farmers be at the heart of Europe’s rural communities. This helps explain why support for the generational succession of farms and encouragement of a new generation of farmers is also a key part of the new CAP proposal.

Other articles
- Agriculture, forestry and fishery statistics
- Agri-environmental indicators
- Farm structure survey (FSS)

Tables
- Agriculture (t_agri)

Database
- Agriculture (agri) , see:
  - Farm structure (ef)
Dedicated section

- Agriculture

Publications

- Agriculture, forestry and fishery statistics — 2018 edition

Methodology

- Farm structure (ESMS metadata file — ef_esms)
- Farm structure — Methodology of Community surveys
- National methodological reports

Legislation

Main legislation

- Regulation 1166/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council on farm structure surveys and the survey on agricultural production methods (farm structure survey from 2010 to 2016)
- Summaries of EU Legislation: EU integrated farm statistics

Implementing legislation

- Commission Regulation 1200/2009 implementing Regulation 1166/2008 on farm structure surveys and the survey on agricultural production methods (farm structure survey from 2010 to 2016)

Related and older legislation

- Council Regulation 1217/2009 setting up a network for the collection of accountancy data on the incomes and business operation of agricultural holdings in the European Community
- Summaries of EU Legislation: Farm incomes and operations - EU statistics

External links


View this article online at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Farms_and_farmland_in_the_European_Union_-_statistics