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Two millennia of Land use transformation in Europe

2026 ForumforAg Annual Conference – Rebooting the food system

CAP and Land use - What governance do we need to deliver it?

ELO

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FOR FRENCH VERSION:

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The Forum for the Future of Agriculture 2026 confirmed a growing awareness of the challenges facing the agricultural sector. Discussions focused mainly on three priorities: adapting to climate change, transitioning towards more sustainable models, and the growing role of technologies, particularly artificial intelligence.

Overall, the diagnosis shared by the speakers is clear. The need to better manage natural resources, strengthen farm resilience, and ensure fair remuneration for farmers is now widely recognised. The Forum therefore marks a notable shift: the question is no longer only how to make agriculture more environmentally friendly, but also how to make it economically viable in the long term.

However, despite the quality of the discussions, a gap remains between the ambitions expressed and their concrete implementation. The financing of the transition, future policy directions, and the competitiveness of European producers remain largely open questions.

For those working on the ground, the challenge now is to turn this vision into solutions that are applicable, realistic, and supported by coherent policies. Ultimately, the Forum offers a clear vision for the future of agriculture. The next step must be to provide concrete answers: how to finance, support, and make this transformation possible in the short and medium term.

Thierry de l'ESCAILLE
ELO Executive President

ELO staff on stage at the ForumforAg Annual Conference.

ELO
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Two millenia of Land use transformation in Europe

Dr. Jurgen TACK, ELO Secretary-General on stage at the Forum

Dr. Jurgen TACK
ELO Secretary-General

Land use in Europe has undergone a profound and non-linear transformation since Roman times, shaped by demography, technology, and policy. In the presentation I delivered during Session 3 (CAP and land use) at the Forum for the Future of Agriculture, I illustrated these changes using a 25-meter rope with movable colored flags representing three categories: nature and forest (green), agriculture (yellow), and urban/industrial areas (red). This simple visual made clear not only the scale of change, but also the structural rebalancing of land functions over time.

In the Roman period (ca. 0–400 AD), Europe remained largely dominated by natural landscapes, with forests and semi-natural ecosystems covering roughly half to two-thirds of the land. Agriculture occupied around 30–45%, concentrated in fertile regions, while urban and industrial land use remained below 5%. Although Roman society already exerted pressure on ecosystems - particularly through deforestation in the Mediterranean - the overall system was constrained by low productivity and limited technological capacity.

The medieval period (ca. 500–1500) saw first a partial recovery of forests following the collapse of Roman structures, and then a major wave of agricultural expansion during the High Middle Ages. By around 1200–1300, agriculture likely covered 40–55% of Europe. This expansion was driven by population growth and technological improvements such as the heavy plough and crop rotation. The Black Death temporarily reversed this trend, leading to land abandonment and localized reforestation.

During the early modern period (1500–1800), Europe reached a peak in land pressure. Agricultural land expanded to as much as 60% in some regions, while forests declined to their lowest levels. Despite this expansion, productivity remained relatively low, requiring large areas to sustain growing populations. Urban land use was still limited in spatial terms, though increasingly important economically.

The industrial period (1800–1950) marked a turning point. Agricultural land reached its maximum extent - up to 70% in some regions - but this coincided with the beginning of a structural transition. Technological advances such as mechanisation and synthetic fertilisers increased yields, enabling a gradual decoupling of production from land. At the same time, urban and industrial areas expanded rapidly, and forest cover began to recover as marginal lands were abandoned.

In the post-war period (1950–2000), these trends accelerated. Under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), agriculture became highly productive and increasingly consolidated. While output continued to grow, the total agricultural area began to decline,

falling to between 40% and 60%. Forests and semi-natural areas expanded again, and urbanisation intensified through infrastructure development and suburban growth. The landscape became more fragmented, even as overall land shares stabilised.

In the contemporary period (2000–present), Europe's land-use distribution has largely stabilised in aggregate terms: agriculture accounts for around 38–42%, forests and semi-natural land for 43–45%, and urban/industrial areas for 5–7% in strict land-cover terms (with a larger functional footprint). The defining feature today is not major shifts in percentages, but increasing competition between land uses - food production, biodiversity, carbon storage, energy, and recreation.

Across two millennia, a clear trajectory emerges: from a predominantly natural landscape, to a peak of agricultural dominance in the 19th century, and finally to a modern system characterised by intensification, urban expansion, and partial ecological recovery. The rope-and-flags illustration captures this well: nature declines and recovers, agriculture expands and contracts, and urban land steadily grows.

The comparison between Roman times and today is particularly striking. The total surface of nature and forest is now broadly comparable to that of the Roman period, following a significant decline during the early modern and industrial eras. At the same time, urban and industrial areas have expanded structurally, representing a largely irreversible change. Most notably, agricultural land has declined since the introduction of the CAP, even as production has increased.

Looking forward, this trajectory raises a critical challenge. A continued decline in agricultural land combined with improving biodiversity and climate indicators is only feasible through the effective deployment of innovation. This includes New Genomic Techniques (NGTs), advanced biocontrols, feed additives, and progress in regenerative and precision farming systems. These approaches enable higher productivity with lower environmental impact, making it possible to reconcile food production with ecological objectives.

This is all the more important in a context of continued global population growth, which increases demand for food and bio-based resources. Europe's land-use system must therefore deliver more with less land, while contributing to global sustainability goals.

The historical evolution of land use shows that such transitions are possible but only when policy, science, and land management are aligned. The position of the flags on the rope is not fixed. The challenge ahead is to move them intelligently.

Dr. Jurgen TACK, ELO Secretary-General on stage at the Forum

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2026 ForumforAg Annual Conference – Rebooting the food system

Liz WILSON

Janez POTOČNIK, Chair ForumforAg and Chairman RISE Foundation (left) and Stephen SACKUR, International Broadcast Journalist (right)

The 2026 Forum for the Future of Agriculture (ForumforAg) Annual Conference was held on Tuesday, April 14, 2026, in Brussels and online. The event consisted of live broadcasts, moderated panel discussions and dialogues, interactive interventions, networking opportunities and exhibitions. "We are living in the most uncertain and the most dangerous of times." That was the message from Moderator Stephen SACKUR, International Broadcast Journalist, who with Rose O'DONOVAN, Journalist & Editor AgraFacts, set the tone for the 2026 conference.

Before starting the official proceedings, the audience observed a minute's silence to mark the tenth anniversary of the Brussels terrorist attacks of 22 March 2016, an event that had cast a long shadow over a previous gathering of the Forum in the same location on the day of the bombings.

Interview with Janez POTOČNIK, Chair ForumforAg and Chairman RISE Foundation

Interviewed by Stephen SACKUR, Janez POTOČNIK, Chair ForumforAg and Chairman RISE Foundation, said bluntly that the geopolitical situation was hard to read and changing by the hour. And it brought nothing good, least of all for agriculture. (…) His main lesson was this: build a food system that is as resilient as possible through regenerative, environmentally friendly agriculture. "Everything else is riskier." (…) Not everything can be resolved with strategic thinking and governments must help people through acute crises. But that is not an excuse to revert to business as usual the moment a crisis passes.

A consistent green agenda

Turning to the green and sustainability agenda, Mr POTOČNIK agreed that it is slipping down the political agenda in favour of energy policy and food security. (…).

At Stephen's suggestion that he was "a dreamer", Mr POTOČNIK replied: "If there were no dreamers, this world would have already collapsed." The lesson he drew from decades in policy was to stay consistent, keep repeating the message, and be patient. Circular economy, which he has long championed, is now a global trend. The fifth freedom - free movement of knowledge, research and innovation - which he proposed in 2007, is back on the agenda in 2026.

Europe's two main problems

On Europe's structural challenges Mr POTOČNIK highlighted two fundamental problems. The continent lacks energy resources, material resources, and competitive economic platforms, countries fail to work together. Tax competition between member states is a self-defeating example of collective weakness. Europe's real opportunity lies in demonstrating that a democratic, advanced economy can function under resource constraints.

Does Europe need to be more aggressively protectionist in the style of President TRUMP, asked Stephen. Mr POTOČNIK was sceptical. Europe has always championed openness and cooperation, and that instinct should not be abandoned. His reasoning went deeper than economics: we are the first generation living in a world of genuinely planetary scope - more interconnected and interdependent than any before, whether through climate change, pandemics, the internet, AI or trade.

Change is coming whether humanity chooses it or not, he said. History shows that when reason does not prevail, change is forced by disaster. The evidence is already visible: seven of nine planetary boundaries have been crossed, future generations are being indebted, and natural resources are being depleted. Mr POTOČNIK concluded: "We are apparently the most intelligent species on Earth and it's high time to prove it."

To rewatch and read the full version of the summaries visit https://forumforag.com/events/2026-annual-conference

Why food connects all the dots

Liz WILSON

How do we reframe the concept of food security and tackle the "weaponization" of food? This was the theme of Michael WERZ's talk and discussion with Mark TITTERINGTON, co-founder and member of the Forum's Advisory Council. Mr WERZ, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, "works at that nexus between food security, climate, migration, and emerging countries," said Mark TITTERINGTON in his introduction.

Mr WERZ explained his organization's mission. "People need to finally understand that food security is not exclusively a humanitarian issue, that it is in the midst of a geopolitical tectonic shift. We need to change our approach, the ways we talk about food security, the concepts we use, and the strategic outlook that is associated with the impact that food security has on the globe," he said.

Heading for a perfect storm

The Iran conflict illustrates the complexity of the challenge. The Gulf region imports 75–90% of its rice, corn and soybeans. Wheat consumption across the wider region is exceptionally high. With attacks on desalination infrastructure, disruption of up to 30% of international fertilizer exports, and an El Niño season expected to drive droughts across key growing regions, Mr WERZ saw the conditions for "a perfect storm."

"Food is being used as a weapon of war… and the situation we're creating now is potentially offering new access points of vulnerability for malign actors," Mr WERZ said. He highlighted several examples.

- In Gaza, food has been used directly - blocking supplies to create famine.
- In Sudan and parts of the Sahel, food has been weaponized as a recruitment and retention tool by insurgent groups.
- In Ukraine, Russia has pursued "food as a long-range weapon" - mining agricultural fields, attacking transport infrastructure, bombing port installations, and targeting seed companies.
- Globally, cyber-attacks and bioterrorism are other concerns.

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Michael WERZ, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

Agri-food stakeholders can connect the dots

What should be done, asked Mark TITTERINGTON? The Council is already working with military and intelligence communities, said Mr WERZ. First, the concept of security must be broadened and embedded in geopolitical assessments and strategic planning. Second, the world needs stronger legal and normative instruments, for example, an updated or new international treaty protecting food security in times of conflict. Third, the NGO and business communities represented at the Forum should "connect the dots" by "not only talking to each other, but actively engaging in a geopolitical conversation that needs to be informed by the wealth of knowledge, data, experiences, and local insights that all of you have". Military and strategic planners often lack the on-the-ground insights that NGOs and private sector actors carry.

Incentives for change

Politics responds to immediate pressures, quarterly reporting drives business decisions, and the loudest voices call for subsidised gas prices rather than long-term investment. Piling on moral pressure tends to produce a backlash. Instead, we need scenario-based thinking: working backwards from 2035 or 2040, gaming the consequences of inaction, and making the strategic costs of short-termism concrete and visible.

Cause for optimism are things like the Forum with its diversity of actors in the room. Also conversations happening at forums like the Munich Security Conference and at NATO headquarters, where food security specialists and resilience planners are finding common ground. But Mr WERZ emphasised: "This will not happen and this will not be successful without actors from the global South." The emerging countries that are big producers and consumers need to step up and play a constructive, forward-looking role – "which in the majority of the cases, they have not so far".

The end of the world as we know it – what are the consequences for agriculture and environment?

Liz WILSON

From left to right: Cristina BRUCE, Tassos HANIOTIS, Sandrine DIXSON-DECLÈVE, Stephen SACKUR, Mariangela HUNGRIA

What does "the end of the world as we know it" mean for agriculture and the environment – and how do we respond to the challenges? Panellists brought diverse perspectives in the first panel, moderated by Stephen SACKUR.

Focus on innovation and the long-term

"We've been facing the end of the world as we know it for quite some time now from a climate perspective," said Cristina BRUCE, Senior Vice President, Sustainability and Social Impact, Anglo American. Her sector is already taking the long-term view: in mining, a project typically takes 17 years from discovery to production. Anglo American is developing the world's largest deposit of polyhalite, based in northern England, to produce innovative, low-carbon fertilizer products.

An over-financialised economic system

Sandrine DIXSON-DECLÈVE, Global Ambassador for The Club of Rome and Executive Chair, Earth4All, said a main point was that "we've been here before". The Club of Rome has brought systemic solutions to the European Commission following the COVID pandemic and again after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These included proposing that Europe diversify energy supply, invest in renewables, address energy efficiency, reduce dependencies and build resilience.

Europe needs to innovate, she agreed: invest in rural communities, forge a genuine partnership with Africa as a food production partner, and pursue a green-social-climate friendly deal.

Positive legacy of Europe's actions

Has Europe been "too busy defending the status quo and not thinking radical thoughts about the future?" That was the question Stephen SACKUR put to Tassos HANIOTIS, Special Advisor for Sustainable Productivity, Forum for the Future of Agriculture.

Mr HANIOTIS spoke from the perspective of many years in DG AGRI: he started with the 2003 reform - "a real break with the past where we saw the positive effects for years." It positioned farmers as entrepreneurs: reversing the downward trend in farm income, generating strong growth in the agricultural trade balance, and reducing agricultural emissions - the only major agricultural sector in the world to have achieved this.

But there are continuing issues, (…) three major changes define the new landscape, he concluded: trade no longer operates within a predictable framework; the ambition of the climate agenda has been pushed to unrealistic levels and is now swinging to the other extreme; and public trust in science is eroding.

A "micro green revolution"

Mariangela HUNGRIA, the World Food Prize 2025 laureate – awarded for her work in biological means of fixing nitrogen in soils - joined by live video link from Brazil. "Are we living through a watershed moment?" Stephen SACKUR asked her.

She drew a parallel with the Green Revolution, arguing that today the world needs a "micro green revolution" – a transformation of agriculture through biologicals. Many microorganisms can partially or fully replace synthetic fertilizers, and the world is not yet taking sufficient advantage of this. Ms HUNGRIA gave the example of Brazil's soybean sector, which now relies entirely on biological nitrogen fixation.

The discussion turned to whether Europe is taking advantage of the opportunities offered by science. Key questions were raised regarding who will provide the necessary investment without the promise of suitable returns, and whether the focus should shift from purely financial metrics to broader long-term value.

How to resist climate-related impacts such as desertification through green finance – experience from Mongolia

Liz WILSON

A country warming at twice the average, facing 80% land degradation, yet home to some of the most precious ecosystems on Earth: that is Mongolia. Extreme climate stress has prompted an innovative financing solution, presented to the Forum by Nomindari ENKHTUR, CEO of Mongolia's Nature Legacy Foundation.

Mongolia is vast - 156 million hectares, larger than Germany, France and Spain combined - and home to some of the last remaining intact ecosystems on Earth, serving as major carbon sinks and biodiversity hotspots. Its nomadic herders, still 30% of the population, have practised a resource-efficient, nature-positive way of life for centuries – "the kind of life we now want to build," said Ms ENKHTUR.

But the situation is deteriorating fast. More than half its permafrost has been lost, climate events are growing more frequent and intense, and in 2025 winter storms killed 7 million livestock - around 12% of the total. This has forced herders off the land and into the capital, Ulaanbaatar: the coal they burn in informal settlements has made it one of the world's most polluted capital cities.

Nomindari ENKHTUR, CEO Mongolian Nature's Legacy Foundation

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"All this creates a health crisis, economic crisis, supply chain disruptions and more. In Mongolia, we are living climate change on a daily basis, and everyone is feeling it," said Ms ENKHTUR.

A $200 million fully integrated financing solution

Faced with these pressures, Mongolia has developed the Eternal Mongolia Project Finance for Permanence (PFP) initiative. All stakeholders - government, donors, and private sector - come together, agree on conservation targets (including the 30x30 goal), and commit their funding in a single long-term deal. Mongolia's PFP is a $200 million, 15-year initiative: $71 million from donors and philanthropy, $129 million from government and public sources. Tools include results-based public budgeting, environmental taxes, conservation levies, and market-based mechanisms such as green loans, biodiversity credits and carbon credits.

"No single financing source alone can tackle this issue," Ms ENKHTUR said. The PFP's power lies in combining public, private and philanthropic funding towards the same goal – "the only way to move forward is to work together."

She gave two examples of PFP in action: a complementary sustainability-linked loan scheme which targets the agriculture sector directly, and a digital impact verification system.

Major lessons from Mongolia's experience

How did they achieve alignment, asked Mark TITTERINGTON. Initially a purely market-based initiative, one key lesson was to involve government earlier: the private sector alone cannot sustain the transition indefinitely; policy signals, public incentives and a mandated longer-term vision are essential. "I know there's urgency, but it's also critical that we really recognize the importance of permanence, consistency, and patience," she said.

How important is verification? "At the core of everything," said Ms ENKHTUR - crucial to demonstrate outcomes whatever the funding source. "Whenever there is a financing discussion, we need to think backwards: start with what impact, what outcome, what are we going to achieve, and then link your financing system from there."

Read all the summaries on the Forum website.

How can we finance and accelerate the transition on the ground?

Liz WILSON

From left to right: Lauren M. PHILLIPS, Harvey LOCKE, Michael BRÜCKNER, Martin STUCHTEY, Kurt VANDENBERGHE, Rose O'DONOVAN

The keynote and second panel, moderated by Rose O'DONOVAN, explored both barriers to financing and potential solutions.

Keynote: carbon farming as a catalyst

"It looks as though everything is changing. But one thing that is not changing is climate change," said Kurt VANDENBERGHE, Director-General, DG CLIMA, delivering the keynote. Agriculture is one of the EU's most climate-exposed sectors, with rising risks for food production, farmers' livelihoods, and EU security and stability. Crop losses, soil degradation, loss of carbon sink capacity and geopolitical events all contribute.

"We are putting in place the main elements for a well-functioning and credible voluntary carbon farming market in Europe," said Mr VANDENBERGHE, outlining three pivotal criteria:

1. Credible certification: the Carbon Removals and Carbon Farming Regulation (CRCF) covers quantification, additionality, durability and biodiversity benefits
2. Accessible monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV): harmonised MRV for land is on the way
3. Strong and predictable demand: the Commission is establishing an EU Buyers' Club.

How do we price the invisible?

Martin STUCHTEY, Founder, The Landbanking Group, raised the question of how we value land use. The current approach looks backwards - valuing land on historic agricultural productive capacity - rather than forwards at its total future productive capacity, capturing the ecosystem services on which all economic activity depends. Nature risks are growing: flatlining yields, mounting costs, and the prospect of a market correction repricing nature from invisible asset to visible liability.

The point was reinforced by Michael BRÜCKNER, CEO, Munich Re Investment Partners GmbH. Climate and nature risks are already affecting yields, supply chains, insurance costs and asset valuations - yet are still often treated as idiosyncratic rather than systemic. "When climate and nature is priced, addressing those risks stops being a preference and becomes a necessity." Integrating these risks into mainstream investment decision-making is the most powerful lever available. Better policy support to define who carries climate risk, stronger corporate disclosure standards, and shared modelling approaches would all help create the common baseline needed.

From environmental case to economic case

Harvey LOCKE, President, Harvey Locke Conservation Inc. and Vice Chair for Nature Positive, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, reframed the discussion entirely. The challenge is not the environmental case for protecting nature: it is the economic case, he said. His example was the Amazon and the agricultural heartland of the Río de la Plata basin.

Barriers and opportunities in financing

The barriers to financing were set out by Lauren PHILLIPS, Director of Partnerships and UN Collaboration, FAO, drawing on its paper on financing food for the future. She cited three issues:

- a quantity problem: insufficient overall funding, and the need to reduce the amount that would go to social protection
- a quality problem: existing money not used effectively, with subsidies often misaligned with social and environmental goals
- and a targeting problem: financing heavily skewed towards richer countries and richer people within poorer countries, with less than 1% of climate finance reaching smallholders.

The debate followed on what is needed for investments to work.

At the edge of the World: Lessons from Antarctic exploration and extreme conditions

Liz WILSON

Antarctica has a way of shrinking human ambition to its proper size – that was the message from Henri de GERLACHE, Belgian explorer, filmmaker, and great-grandson of the pioneering polar explorer Adrien de GERLACHE, brought to the Forum in his inspirational talk followed by a conversation with Mark TITTERINGTON.

Mr de GERLACHE has visited Antarctica three times, including an ascent of Mount Vinson, at 5,140 metres the continent's highest peak. He is currently preparing a documentary series on the heroic age of polar exploration. His talk took the audience from adventure to what Antarctica reveals about nature, about limits, and about humility.

"Because in those frozen expanses, everything reminds us of human fragility. The cold, a force that seeps in, exhausts and destroys. The wind, capable of erasing tracks, disorienting, isolating. And the silence, immense and almost oppressive," he said.

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Henri de GERLACHE, Belgian explorer and filmmaker

The great explorers of the early 20th Century set out to plant flags and trace routes. "Very quickly, Antarctica imposed its own rules," said Mr de GERLACHE. "It slowed them, blocked them, broke them." The Antarctic Treaty of 1959 dedicated an entire continent to peace and scientific research and a rare collective acknowledgement that some limits must be respected.

What Antarctica is telling us

Today, scientists from across the world live and work there, not to conquer the continent, but to listen to it, he said. "Antarctica is now speaking and what it tells us is deeply concerning. Sea level rise, for instance, depends on what is happening in Antarctica." The history of Antarctic exploration can be seen as a journey from ignorance to knowledge, from audacity to mastery. But another view is that it is a slow learning of humility.

"At every stage, the history reminds us that nature is not a backdrop. It is not merely a setting in which humanity evolves freely. It's a force, a complex system, upon which we entirely depend. Where humanity believed it could impose itself, it had to adapt."

Mr de GERLACHE concluded: "If these icy lands, so long perceived as a desert, have something to teach us, it may be this: that the greatness of humanity lies not in its ability to dominate nature, but in its capacity to respect it."

Cooperation as survival

Asked by Mark TITTERINGTON about the power of collaboration, Mr de GERLACHE replied that in Antarctica, cooperation is not optional: "If you are alone there, you are almost dead." He highlighted AMUNDSEN - the first to reach the South Pole, in December 1911 - as the explorer who understood this most clearly. AMUNDSEN learned from the Inuit, travelling light, working with the ice rather than against it.

And what gives him hope, Mark TITTERINGTON asked? The answer was that spirit of enforced collaboration across nations and across disciplines. He hoped the Antarctic Treaty would be renewed in 2040, because what it represents - nationalities obliged to collaborate to survive – may become a model not just for one continent, but for the planet.

Read all the summaries on the Forum website.

CAP and Land use – What governance do we need to deliver it?

Liz WILSON

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From left to right: Delphine BABIN-PELLIARD, Jörg-Andreas KRÜGER, Dr Jurgen TACK, Barry COWEN, Ricard RAMON I SUMOY, Rose O'DONOVAN

The reform of the CAP – and the governance structures needed to deliver it – was the focus of the third panel. Five panellists offered sharply different but often complementary perspectives on what needs to change, and how fast.

A new direction of travel from the Commission

One of the key architects of the overhaul of the future CAP set out the direction of travel. "Simplification, less administrative burden for farming and for operators" were the goal, said Ricard Ramon I SUMOY, Head of Unit, Policy Perspectives at DG AGRI.

He described a shift away from top-down regulatory mechanisms from Brussels towards more bottom-up, market-based solutions with greater cooperation across the food chain. Flexibility is central: policies need to be able to adapt to a rapidly changing reality. Two-thirds of the actions promised in that vision, he said, are now being implemented.

"Ambition without funding will fail"

The ambition in the Commission's proposals is real, but the budget proposed to deliver it is not: there is a 20% gap. That was the blunt assessment from Barry COWEN, Member of the European Parliament and Renew, Ireland. "How it can be delivered is dependent solely and totally on finance and on budget," he said. "It's as simple as that, and it's as plain as that."

"Innovation is the only answer"

Dr. Jurgen TACK, Secretary General of ELO, brought an unconventional visual aid: a 'living graph' of colleagues holding banners showing the changing division of land between nature, agriculture and urban areas over time. But producing more on less called for innovation – something which is now stifled. "The only way we can cope with climate change, a growing population and environmental problems is innovation," he said. Innovation sent Artemis II around the moon – and he called on policymakers to take their lead from that.

More of the same will not be enough

The ability of the new CAP to future-proof agriculture was also questioned by Jörg-Andreas KRÜGER, President of NABU. The CAP to date has not addressed agriculture as a primary driver of biodiversity loss in Europe and a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. Nor has it dealt with deep structural distortions - unequal land access, global competition, labour cost differences or the steady loss of farm holdings. "We were surprised that the proposal is more of the same… not setting priorities on the protection of the environment and of the ecosystem services for the future."

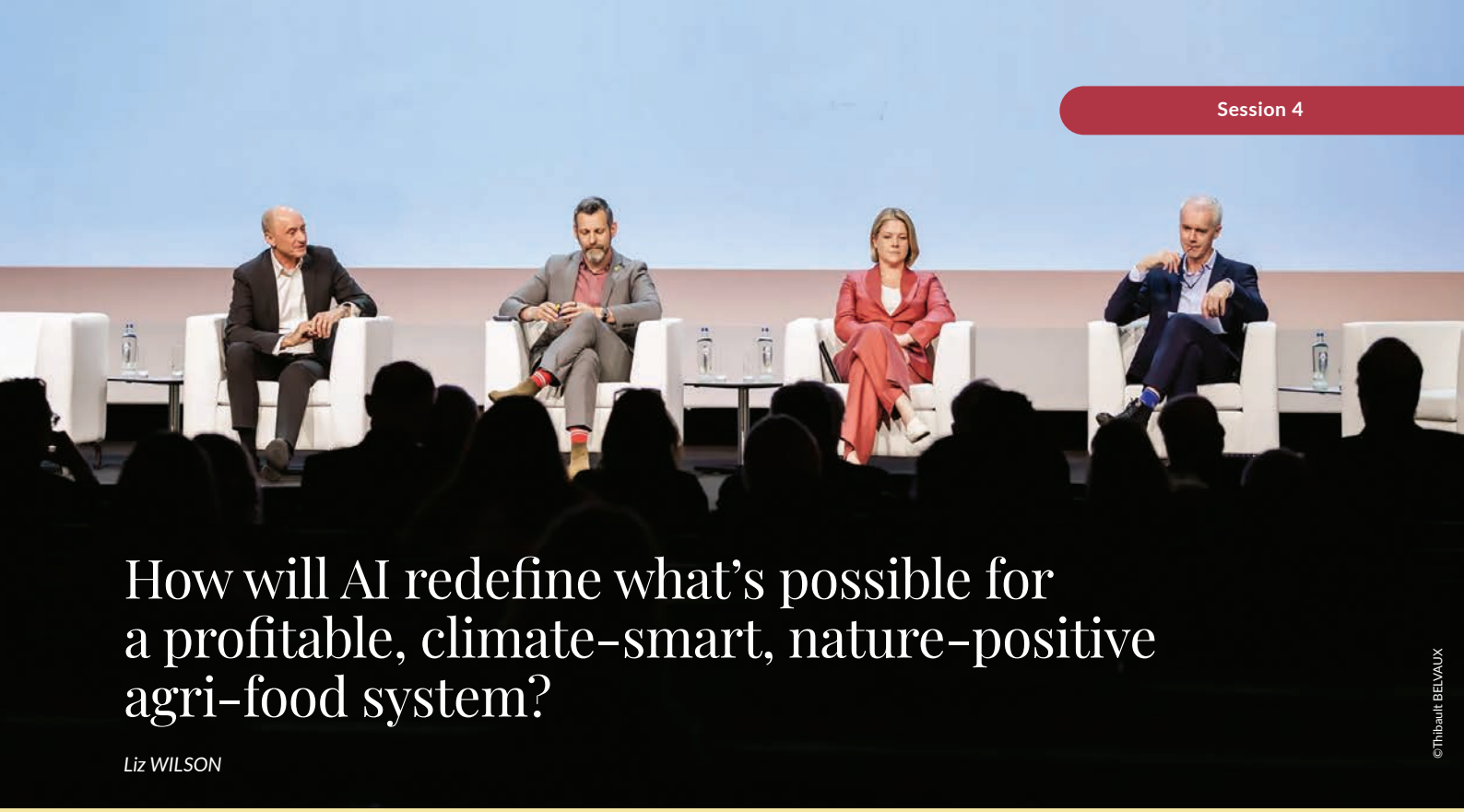
Competitiveness and nature are not in conflict

Delphine BABIN-PELLIARD, Senior Advisor for Food and Agricultural Systems at the IUCN, framed her contribution around "a false choice". The debate is not environment versus competitiveness and food security - the question is how to secure Europe's production systems for the next 10, 20 or 30 years. The answer is by investing in nature, she said.

"Competitiveness increases when nature is part of the system…and protecting nature is a long-term investment in food security and the economy," she ended.

The discussion: governance in practice

Among the issues discussed was the proliferation of Commission initiatives: how would they be coordinated and work on the ground, asked Rose O'DONOVAN.



How will AI redefine what's possible for a profitable, climate-smart, nature-positive agri-food system?

Liz WILSON

From left to right: Martin CLOUGH, Ethan SOLOVIEV, Jessica AGNEW, Stephen SACKUR, Justin ROSE

The final panel turned to artificial intelligence – and whether it can genuinely redefine what is possible for a profitable, climate-smart, nature-positive agri-food system.

AI for policymakers, not just farmers

A gap in the current AI landscape was highlighted by Jessica AGNEW, Director of the GAP Initiative and Managing Editor of the Global Agricultural Productivity Report at Virginia Tech. Only around 5% of AI solutions being developed for agriculture are targeted at decision-makers rather than at farm level. Policymakers, ministers and development banks are still operating with fragmented and out-of-date data - making decisions by intuition despite the technologies available. The GAP Initiative is working on a platform integrating total factor productivity data with climate, economic and other datasets, designed around user experience. (...).

Data as a new crop

Data was also the topic for Ethan SOLOVIEV, Chief Innovation Officer at HowGood. His organisation is the world's largest database for food and agriculture sustainability, tracking the carbon footprint, water footprint, biodiversity impact, labour risk and animal welfare credentials of 33,000 ingredients and around 4.5 million products globally, for clients ranging from Danone and Nestlé to major retailers.

Farmers should be able to own their data and be compensated for it, he said - "data can be a new crop". With data, agriculture is uniquely positioned among economic sectors to move from being a source of emissions to a net carbon sink, through regenerative approaches that simultaneously enhance biodiversity and improve farmer livelihoods.

Agricultural intelligence

An optimistic perspective came from Martin CLOUGH, Head of Digital, Collaboration and Sustainability in Crop Protection Research at Syngenta. He saw this as an "epic time" to be in research and development, driven by the convergence of generative AI, big data capability and breakthroughs in 'omics' science - the understanding of how chemistry and biology interact.(...) He likened it to a Rubik's Cube: solving one side at a time inevitably scrambles the others, whereas AI allows all sides to be solved at once. He saw potential to cut years off the time-to-market for new products, delivering more and better solutions to farmers faster.

From horsepower to smart power

Justin ROSE, President of Worldwide Agriculture and Turf, Small Agriculture and Turf Care, Europe, Africa and Asia, at Deere & Company, joining from the company's headquarters in Illinois, said AI is already reshaping what happens in the field every day - a shift "from horsepower to smart power".

Why is this important? He gave a striking illustration: in Europe, 23 trillion individual weed plants must be controlled every year to protect small grain cereal and oilseed crops. Research shows that weeds cover only 1-5% of arable land – but today, farmers broadcast-spray entire fields with herbicides. Deere's AI-enabled sprayer can identify individual weeds and apply herbicide only where needed (...).

The discussion: accountability, data and the social media lesson

Stephen SACKUR drove the discussion with a pointed challenge: are we at a naively optimistic stage in our relationship with AI, one that mirrors the early days of the internet and social media? The question for agriculture is who controls the technology, who benefits, and how much autonomy stays with farmers.

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Unboxing innovation in uncertain times

Katie Mc ROBERT
Executive Director,
Australian Farm Institute

In the margins of the ForumforAg annual conference, a smaller but no less significant conversation took place on 15 April, hosted by the Committee of the Regions, to "unbox" the Food and Agriculture Organization's Agri-Food Systems Technologies and Innovations Outlook Knowledge Base (ATIO-KB).

The ATIO Knowledge Base is intended as a dynamic, open-access platform that curates and structures agrifood innovations, bringing together data, indicators and real-world use cases. Yet the purpose of the event was not to describe the tool, but to interrogate its potential: could such a platform meaningfully accelerate innovation in agriculture, and under what conditions?
What distinguished the discussion was not simply diversity of opinion, but diversity of experience. Participants ranged from grassroots organisers to international policymakers, from sustainability scientists to those working directly with farmers across very different systems.

Across contributions, a consistent theme emerged: the constraint on agricultural innovation is not a lack of ideas, but a lack of connection. Megha DESAI of SEWA spoke to the persistent divide between grassroots innovation and the 'formal' system, where recognition, validation and scaling pathways are often limited. Others echoed the need to make locally developed solutions more visible and accessible, particularly where they have already demonstrated impact.

Tiina HUVIO highlighted the striking commonality of challenges faced by farmers in very different contexts. The opportunity, she suggested, lies in enabling these farmers to learn from each other's lived experience: not only their successes, but also their failures and adaptations along the way.

If the event reinforced the importance of connection, it also underscored the urgency. Leonard MIZZI of DG INTPA described the current environment facing European farmers not as a "perfect storm," but as "a raging inferno of tsunamis and cyclones." Geopolitical instability is disrupting supply chains and access to key inputs such as fertiliser, while impending changes to the European Union's CAP from 2027 introduce further uncertainty around public support. In this context, innovation is not optional—it is essential, but also increasingly risky.

In an Australian context, farmers operate in a similarly volatile environment, shaped by exposure to global markets and acute climate variability. Droughts, floods and bushfires—sometimes within the same season—demand constant adaptation. Innovation, in such systems, is not a strategic choice but a condition of survival.

Against this backdrop, the discussion turned to a more fundamental question: what enables innovation to be adopted at scale? The answer, repeatedly, was trust. However, trust is not uniform. For farmers, confidence in a new technology or practice is grounded in tangible evidence—seeing what works in the paddock, under real conditions, and understanding the risks involved. Policymakers, by contrast, are more likely to look for alignment with broader objectives: environmental outcomes, productivity gains, or social benefits that justify policy support.

Central to this is the concept of de-risking. Several contributors emphasised that accelerating innovation is not about eliminating failure, but about making risk more visible, manageable and shared. Farmers are willing to take risks—but only when those risks are understood and supported.

Here, the ATIO KB could play a practical role. By clearly documenting what is working, who is involved, and how innovations have been developed and adapted over time, the platform can provide a clearer line of sight for others seeking to adopt similar approaches. Just as importantly, it can normalise the role of iteration and failure as part of the innovation process, rather than something to be concealed. The real value of the ATIO-KB will depend not only on the information it contains, but on its ability to connect people, build trust, and reduce the perceived risk of change.

In a period defined by uncertainty, the need for practical, credible pathways to innovation has rarely been greater. The ATIO-KB is an ambitious attempt to meet that need. Its impact will ultimately be determined by whether it can translate connection into confidence, and confidence into action.

See more about the event here:
https://forumforag.com/events/2026-a-global-outlook-for-local-impact/

ATIO Agrifood Systems Technologies and Innovations Outlook
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Forum for the Future of Agriculture

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From left to right: Thierry de L'ESCAILLE, Silvija AILE, Martin H. GERZABECK, Kseniia MISHCHENOK, Óliver RUIZ GARRIDO, Max NEWBERT

Asociación Semillistas wins the Land and Soil Management Award 2026

Asociación Semillistas has been awarded the prestigious Land and Soil Management Award 2025, recognising its innovative contribution to sustainable land use and soil restoration. The award was presented in Brussels on April 17th during the Annual Conference of the Forum for the Future of Agriculture. Óliver RUIZ GARRIDO accepted the prize on behalf of the organisation, under the joint chairmanship of Thierry de l'ESCAILLE, Executive President of ELO, and Professor Martin GERZABEK, former Rector of BOKU University.

Established in 2008, the Land and Soil Management Award highlights pioneering practices that address soil erosion, degradation, biodiversity loss, and contamination while promoting scalable and sustainable solutions. This year's winner, Asociación Semillistas, stood out for its transformative work in Granada, Andalusia, where it applies Biotechnological Direct Seeding (BDS) to restore ecosystems in climate-vulnerable areas.
The initiative combines scientific research with community engagement and is structured around three pillars: SeedLab, Siembrabosques, and SeedToSeed. By "priming" seeds to synchronise germination with rainfall and protecting them with Seed-Shelters, the project enhances natural processes while reducing costs. Fieldwork is carefully timed and supported by contour barriers that prevent erosion and encourage root development. This "low-tech, high-knowledge" approach is designed to be easily replicated by rural communities worldwide.

The jury praised the project's holistic vision, which successfully integrates ecological restoration with economic viability. Asociación Semillistas has restored fire-damaged landscapes, mobilised over 600 volunteers, and reached more than 500,000 people through its outreach efforts.

In addition, three projects from Sweden and Ukraine received diplomas of recognition, reflecting the diversity and innovation driving sustainable soil management across Europe.

Thank you to everyone who joined us, both in person and online, for the Annual Conference of the Forum for the Future of Agriculture. All panel discussions and inspirational talks are available on the Forum website, along with the speaker interviews.

We look forward to seeing you again next year, as the Forum celebrates its 20th Annual Conference with more thought-provoking discussions on the future of agriculture.