

Celebrating excellence in the countryside

One of the most memorable moments of the 2026 Friends of the Countryside General Assembly in Cáceres was the Gala Dinner held at Casa Palacio Huerta del Conde. Nearly 200 members and guests gathered in this historic setting for an evening celebrating friendship, shared values and a common commitment to Europe's rural landscapes and communities.



Stefanie SZALACHY
Senior Project Manager, ELO

A particularly moment of the evening was the presentation of several prestigious awards recognising exceptional dedication and achievements in support of rural communities, cultural heritage and nature conservation. The distinctions presented included the **Recognition for an Inspirational Life Dedicated to the Countryside**, the **Belleuropa Award**, the **Wildlife Estates Label** and the **Famigro Award**.

Through these awards, the Friends of the Countryside paid tribute to individuals, families and organisations whose vision, commitment and leadership continue to make a lasting contribution to the future of Europe's countryside.

Recognition for an Inspirational Life Dedicated to the Countryside

The 2026 General Assembly marked the inaugural presentation of the "Recognition for an Inspirational Life Dedicated to the Countryside", a distinction created to honour individuals whose lifelong commitment, leadership and vision have left a lasting mark on the rural world and inspired generations of landowners, farmers and countryside advocates.

The first recipient of this prestigious recognition was Don Alonso ÁLVAREZ DE TOLEDO Y URQUIJO, XII Marqués de Valdeuza. Through decades of leadership, advocacy and dedication to rural communities, nature conservation and cultural heritage, he has become a respected and admired figure far beyond Spain's borders.

By presenting this award, the FCS paid tribute not only to an exceptional personal achievement, but also to a lifetime devoted to serving and strengthening the rural communities and landscapes that shape our shared European heritage.

Wildlife Estates Label: Recognising responsible estate management

The Wildlife Estates (WE) Label recognises landowners and estate managers whose work demonstrates that productive land use and biodiversity conservation can successfully go hand in hand. Through their efforts, these estates contribute to the protection of wildlife habitats while maintaining vibrant and productive rural landscapes. This year, seven Spanish estates received the distinction:

- Majada Vieja, represented by María de SOLÍS, Condesa de Torralva;



From left to right: Dr. Jurgen TACK, Don Alonso ÁLVAREZ DE TOLEDO Y URQUIJO, Thierry de l'ESCAILLE.

- El Cristo y Valdecasillas, represented by Germán GAMAZO HOHENLOHE, Marqués de Soto Aller;
- Finca Hualdo, represented by José Antonio PECHE;
- El Nebral and Monteagro, represented by Blanca MONTORO;
- Cerrozamora, represented by Miryam DÍAZ-PATÓN;
- Cortijo Guadiana, represented by Rosa and Francisco VAÑO.

Belleuropa Award: Stewardship across generations

The 2026 Belleuropa Award was presented to Germán GAMAZO for the outstanding management of the El Cristo and Dehesa Valdecasillas Estate.

Established by the late Giuseppe NATTA, the award celebrates exemplary stewardship of Europe's rural landscapes. It honours landowners and estate managers who combine productive activities with the protection of biodiversity, natural resources and cultural heritage.

Extending across approximately 3,500 hectares, El Cristo and Valdecasillas offers an impressive example of how traditional land use, agriculture, livestock farming, hunting and conservation can be managed as part of a coherent whole.

The estate's landscape is characterised by extensive pasturelands scattered with centuries-old holm oaks, cork oaks and pedunculate oaks. Areas of mature Mediterranean vegetation provide valuable habitats for a wide range of species and contribute to the ecological richness of the property.

Agricultural production remains closely linked to the natural rhythms and carrying capacity of the land. Around 760 hectares are cultivated according to a three-year crop rotation, while free-ranging cattle and Iberian pigs graze on traditional pastures. Game management also forms part of the estate's wider environmental approach, with deer and wild boar populations managed across a significant part of the property.

Through long-term planning and careful stewardship, Germán GAMAZO has developed a model that balances economic activity with environmental responsibility. The estate illustrates how private land management can preserve rural heritage while ensuring that the land remains active, productive and resilient.

Members taking part in the post-tour had the opportunity to visit the estate and experience this work first-hand. The visit gave them a deeper understanding of the landscapes, practices and conservation efforts behind the award.

Famigro Award: innovation rooted in place

The Famigro Award highlighted a very different but equally important dimension of rural life: entrepreneurship.

Created by Karl GROTEFELT in 2013, the award supports young European entrepreneurs whose projects contribute to the economic, social and environmental vitality of rural areas. It recognises initiatives that respond practically to contemporary challenges while creating new opportunities for local communities.

The 2026 award was presented to Naturfriedhof Ammersee, a woodland burial initiative in Bavaria, south of Munich.



Félix von PERFALL (winner of the Famigro Award) and Karl GROTEFELT.

Félix von PERFALL accepted the distinction on behalf of the project.

Located within a protected forest ecosystem, Naturfriedhof Ammersee offers an alternative to conventional burial practices. Memorial sites are situated at the roots of selected trees, allowing the woodland itself to become a place of remembrance, tranquillity and reflection.

The approach combines social purpose with sustainable forestry and rural enterprise. Each burial site is discreetly integrated into the landscape, preserving the forest's character and leaving only a minimal visual footprint.

By bringing together environmental responsibility, economic viability and a thoughtful response to changing social needs, Naturfriedhof Ammersee shows how innovation can emerge from a close understanding of place. It is a compelling example of how rural areas can develop new activities without compromising their identity or natural value.

Looking ahead

The recipients honoured in Cáceres represent different generations, sectors and approaches, yet their work is united by a common principle: the countryside remains vibrant when people are willing to take responsibility for its future.

From lifelong leadership and exemplary estate management to conservation and rural entrepreneurship, their achievements demonstrate the continuing importance of individuals, families and locally rooted initiatives.

By recognising their work, the Friends of the Countryside celebrated not only past accomplishments, but also the ideas, values and leadership needed to sustain Europe's rural landscapes and communities for generations to come.