



# Position Paper (bloc I) : Copa-Cogeca's Position on the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF)

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## EUROPEAN AGRICULTURE AS A PILLAR OF COMPETITIVENESS AND SECURITY

Agriculture has always been central to the European Union due to its strategic economic, social and geopolitical importance. EU rural areas host **137 million people (almost 30% of the population)** and cover more than **80% of EU territory**.

Across the Union, **9.1 million farms employ 8.7 million people (4.2% of total employment)**, with **95% being family farms** producing arable crops, permanent crops and livestock. In addition, **more than 23,000 agricultural cooperatives employ over 607,000 people**, forming a key pillar of the agri-food value chain.

Every day, farmers of all sectors and agri-cooperatives provide safe, high-quality and nutritious food, alongside feed, fuel and fibre. In an increasingly unstable geopolitical context, they remain a stabilising force contributing to food security, resilience, health, sustainability, bio-diversity, cultural heritage and peace,

As a leading exporter of agricultural and agrifood products, the agri-food system, where the farmers, fishers, foresters, role is pivotal, strengthens Europe's geopolitical relevance and competitiveness. Overall, the agri-food value chain generates **more than €1 trillion in gross value added**.

Through their daily activities, farmers, forest owners, fishers, agri-cooperatives, farmer and agri-cooperatives organizations:

- sustain vibrant rural territories
- protect biodiversity and natural resources
- reduce emissions and enhance carbon sequestration
- produce renewable energy and advance the bioeconomy
- innovate through the uptake of new technologies.

However, the sector faces increasing strain due to global uncertainty, unfair trade which impacts strategic European productions, regulatory complexity, outdated rules hindering innovation, and rising administrative burdens. These constraints delay investment, weaken resilience and slow the transitions expected by society.

The farm sector is additionally confronted with a significant financing gap estimated according to the European Investment Bank at Euro 62 billion (for 2022)

**Europe must therefore recognise the sector's full potential to contribute to all strategic objectives of the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) — from competitiveness to security — and place agriculture at the core of its competitiveness agenda.**



## AGRICULTURE MUST BE EXPLICITLY RECOGNISED AS A STRATEGIC COMPETITIVENESS SECTOR

The proposed European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), part of the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, aims to consolidate existing funding instruments into a single investment capacity supporting strategic technologies and sectors along the full innovation and deployment journey.

Placing agriculture at the core of the EU's competitiveness agenda should also be reflected operationally in the design and implementation of the ECF, including through concrete access to funding and participation in its governance structures.

Without the structural integration of agriculture into the Competitiveness Fund, the EU will not be able to achieve its goals of strategic autonomy and sustainable transition.

**Attracting private and public investment in agriculture and the agriculture food chain requires a coherent policy framework that goes beyond agricultural policy alone.** Farmers, forest owners, fishers, agri-cooperatives, farmer and agri-cooperatives organizations are ready to further contribute to a stronger Europe, but this depends on their ability to remain competitive, innovate and seize technological opportunities on an equal footing with other sectors, in order to ensure that investment flows are not disproportionately directed towards more capital-intensive industries.

This requires investment in physical, human and knowledge capital. The CAP instruments alone, even more in the revised post 2027 structure are not sufficient and neither adequate to cover the investment needs of the sector, particularly in areas such as infrastructure, innovation uptake and scaling. Even with clearly different objectives among ECF and CAP, complementary support through the ECF will therefore be essential to unlock more wins and synergies between agriculture and the European competitiveness project, in particular in supporting large-scale deployment, infrastructure and system-level capacities that go beyond the scope and implementation of the CAP. This complementarity in no way can compensate for the unacceptable cuts of the CAP budget.

**The ECF can play a key role in strengthening the resilience and multiple transitions of a sector characterized by millions of actors at the heart of rural economies.** At the same time, there is also the need to better reflect the specific conditions for innovation uptake in agriculture, including the importance of advisory services, skills development and effective use of data at farm level fostering interoperability, as well as investments in infrastructure and services that enable large-scale deployment and scaling across Member States, which are key enablers for translating innovation into productivity and resilience.

Agriculture and the agriculture food chain **have a strong, unique potential to mobilise private investment across all ECF priority areas:**

- clean transition and decarbonization
- digital transition
- health, biotechnology, agriculture and bioeconomy
- security, defence and space

In this context, **food security must be recognised as a strategic EU priority.**

**Agriculture — farmers and agri-cooperatives — should be explicitly acknowledged as strategic sectors for competitiveness, resilience and security.**

**This requires a specific approach within the ECF, including dedicated resources and fair governance rules for the participation of agriculture actors.**

To this end Copa-Cogeca proposes the **following 6 key areas of improvement of the ECF proposal** for the European Commission.

## 1. AGRICULTURE IN THE OVERALL OBJECTIVES OF THE ECF (ART. 3, PAR. 1)

Agriculture should be explicitly reflected in the ECF's main objectives as a strategic sector underpinning EU competitiveness, resilience, energy, sustainability and security.

The role of agriculture should be made operative in the following General objectives of the ECF :

- **Reducing strategic dependencies** via targeted investment on key agriculture inputs and addressing supply chain bottlenecks with logistics, strategic infrastructure of food /energy and critical inputs for agriculture
- **Developing critical infrastructure, data and services:** recognising agri-food related infrastructure as “critical infrastructure” for competitiveness (including resource management, water and supply chain/energy grid infrastructures and enabling technologies and services that support productivity, traceability and risk management).
- **Addressing skills shortages** with dedicated actions to strengthen skills and advisory capacity in farming communities and rural areas, especially digital skills, ensuring that SMEs and collective structures can access and deploy innovations effectively.
- **Promoting innovation and digitalisation:** The sector should adopt advanced technologies (precision agriculture, biotechnology, digital tools) to improve productivity, sustainability, and competitiveness.
- Explicitly referring to **rural areas to ensure a just transition** to a sustainable and digital economy that is fair and supporting workers and communities.

## 2. A STRONG AGRICULTURE PILLAR WITHIN THE “HEALTH, BIOTECH, AGRICULTURE AND BIOECONOMY” WINDOW (ART. 3. PAR. 2 AND ART. 37)

The draft European Commission proposal explicitly recognises “the specific objective of

fostering the competitiveness, sustainability, and resilience of **the agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture, forestry and rural and coastal areas** and their role in the transition to a climate neutral climate-resilient, water-smart, nature-positive economy and the protection of natural resources biodiversity while contributing to long term food security in the Union”.

This should be maintained and further strengthened as detailed in the following chapters.

### 2.1 Agriculture

**Food security and the resilience of European agriculture -farmers and agri-cooperatives –must become central priorities within this policy window together with the investments to be put in place all along the agriculture food chain.**

ECF investments should support the **full innovation and deployment cycle** starting from agriculture and across the **whole agri-food chain focusing on strategic priorities and leveraging investments, also through public private partnerships.**

There is the need to bridge the gap between research and deployment, by also prioritising investments in infrastructure translating research outputs into operational and scalable solutions across— including energy grids, connectivity constraints—as well as data systems and services that enable large-scale deployment and scaling across Member States.

It is important also to highlight the need that investments look to the three aspects of sustainability -economic, environment and social including in terms of generational renewal and quality employment conditions, as these elements are directly linked to the long-term competitiveness and resilience of the sector.

**Priority investment areas need to have clear links with the agriculture sector** and include:

- productivity and resource efficiency
- climate- and water-resilient value chains including water management including water storage
- storage and processing capacity creating added value within the EU

- food processing and marketing of European products
- digital agriculture and AI streamline agricultural activities on farm and along the entire food value chain
- technologies reducing environmental and climate pressures while maintaining productivity
- plant diseases
- animal health and welfare
- reduced dependence on imported fertilisers, feed protein, and energy and soil health to ensure national and regional resiliency
- training and mobility programmes addressing skills shortages
- Investments in the sector to support risk management tools and climate adaptation for example to extreme events, such as droughts, floods and wildfires (i.e. forecasting modelling, early warning ...)
- promote development of bio-based value chains and industrial uses of European agricultural biomass
- on-farm energy production, energy storage and grid stabilisation
- sustainable nutrient management and circular use of resources including manure
- contaminant-free recycled fertilizers derived not only from farm-owned raw material sources but also from community waste sludges
- sustainable forest management and climate resilient production systems,
- forest and plant based circular and bio based materials,
- ecosystem service markets and tools enabling forest owners to deliver climate and biodiversity services,
- digital tools and data platforms for both agriculture and forestry.

## 2.2 Bioeconomy

### **Agriculture and Forestry should be recognised as a key pillar of the European bioeconomy**

and as an essential source of biomass for food, feed, energy and bio-based materials. ensuring fair value distribution along bio-based value chains, supporting the active participation of farmers and forest owners, and maximising local economic benefits in rural areas. It is important to advocate for the creation of distinct policy frameworks and funding mechanisms that specifically target agricultural innovation, sustainability, and resilience.

Forest management and economically viable forest ownership must be recognized as a precondition for delivering bioeconomy, climate and resilience objectives. Europe's clean industrial transition, construction, packaging, chemicals and bio-based industries depend on secure access to sustainably managed forest resources.

**Priority investment areas need to have clear links with the agriculture and forestry** sector and include:

## 2.3 Health and biotechnology

### **Agriculture sector should be recognised as integral contributor to public health objectives,**

notably through the provision of safe, nutritious and sustainable food, and the promotion of healthy diets.

A **One-Health approach** that also includes zoonotic risks affecting food safety and agricultural production, the combination of digital tools, advisory services and monitoring systems, which can support early detection of risks, improve biosecurity and enhance overall resilience are all key to be considered.

**Priority investment areas need to have clear links with the agriculture** and forestry sector and include:

- food safety
- tackling animal disease risks and prevention
- improving animal welfare
- prevention of zoonotic and food-borne diseases

- innovation in plant breeding, new genomic technique and biotechnology
- applications in agriculture such as plant and animal breeding,
- the development of biocontrol products and feed additives

### 3. DEDICATED FINANCIAL ENVELOPES FOR AGRICULTURE (ART. 4)

The characteristics of the European agriculture sector and its investments needs and opportunities with dispersed beneficiaries, smaller project sizes, collective implementation and the importance of deployment in rural territories should **be fully recognized in all policy windows foreseen in the ECF.**

The main challenge will be ensuring that **the agricultural component is not marginalised within large, cross-sectoral calls** and that evaluation criteria continue to recognise the specificity and societal importance of applied agriculture. Without appropriate safeguards, investments may disproportionately flow towards more capital-intensive sectors, limiting the effective participation of agriculture.

Broader, less prescriptive calls risk diluting resources for the specific needs of the sector.

More specifically, by merging agriculture with health, biotech, and the wider bioeconomy under a single policy window, the agriculture sector enters in direct competition with larger industrial and life science sectors. In this more competitive environment, farmers, cooperatives, farmers' organisations, and rural SMEs face structural disadvantages

Copa-Cogeca calls for the establishment of **dedicated minimum financial envelopes for agriculture** within the policy window **"Health, Biotech, Agriculture and Bioeconomy."**

At the same time, as highlighted throughout this paper, the agriculture sector contributes significantly to the achievement of the **other specific objectives of the ECF**

Therefore, **dedicated minimum financial allocations for agriculture-related activities should also be ensured** across the policy windows "Clean Transition and Industrial

Decarbonisation," "Digital Leadership," and "Resilience and Security."

Such an approach would reflect the **central role of agriculture in Europe's competitiveness and strategic food security**, while ensuring that investments in the sector:

- address its specific structural and operational challenges
- provide adequate visibility and prioritisation
- prevent dilution of objectives and excessive competition for funding

Minimum financial envelopes for agriculture should be set on a **fair and proportionate basis**, while recognizing the key and direct role that agriculture plays in areas such as food security, bioeconomy and primary production, while its contribution to other areas, such as security or digital applications, is more of enabling in nature.

The following minimum financial envelopes in each policy window are proposed, in particular:

- "Health, Biotech, Agriculture and Bioeconomy": 50% of the proposed €20.4 billion (€ 10.2 billion)
- "Clean Transition and Industrial Decarbonisation": 15% of the proposed €26.2 billion (€ 4 billion)
- "Digital Leadership": 15% of the proposed €51.5 billion (€ 8 billion)
- "Resilience and Security": 20% of the proposed €125.2 billion (€25.4 billion)

This would result in **an overall dedicated minimum financial envelope for agriculture around 20% of the total of € 223.3 billion (€47.6 billion)**

In parallel, formal safeguards should be introduced to support the effective participation of the agriculture sector. These should include:

- **Targeted support measures, differentiated co-financing arrangements, simplified funding procedures** (such as lump-sum grants, scalable participation mechanisms and higher co-financing rates), as well as **dedicated capacity-building**

**instruments** to ensure fair access and territorial cohesion.

- Allocation mechanisms should also guarantee **balanced geographical distribution and accessibility across all Member States**, taking into account structural differences such as market size and administrative capacity.
- Furthermore, **full participation in the governance of the ECF should be ensured**, with the active involvement of farmers, agri-cooperatives, foresters and their representative organisations in the design, implementation and monitoring of priority projects (see governance section below).

Funds that are not earmarked should remain **competitively allocated on the basis of excellence, impact and strategic relevance**.

**Any future increase in the overall financial allocations under the ECF should be proportionally reflected in the dedicated envelopes for agriculture.**

#### 4. **AGRICULTURE ACROSS THE OTHER SPECIFIC ECF OBJECTIVES (ART. 3 A) C) D) AND ARTS. 33, 39 AND 42)**

**Agriculture -farmers and agri-cooperatives –should also be recognised as integral contributors to the other specific objectives of the Competitiveness Fund** allowing for the clean transition and decarbonization and for our contribution to Digital leadership of EU and to Security and Defence.

- **For support to “Clean Transition and Industrial Decarbonisation”:** EU objectives will only be achievable if efficient investments build on **the climate change mitigation potential of the land-based sectors** namely via including activities with clear links to the agriculture sector -farmers and agri-cooperatives such as: **carbon reduction and sequestration**, potential carbon stored in long-lived wood products, **bio-based materials and soils**, biofuels, renewable energy production, on-farm energy production, water resilience, promoting circular approaches based on biogenic sources.

- **For support to “Digital Leadership”:** It should explicitly cover **digital agriculture, forestry and use of data, interoperability, rural connectivity, deployment of enabling systems** and shared infrastructures enabling data integration and scalability across that improve efficiency, sustainability and resilience across agricultural production and agri food supply chains including strengthening cybersecurity.

- For support for “Resilience and Security”, agriculture should be recognised as a component of EU strategic autonomy, security and preparedness: strengthening resilient production, investing in strategic infrastructure and storage, reducing dependencies in critical inputs and reinforcing supply chain stability by investing in decentralized infrastructure to storage, and transport of key agricultural commodities, food products and critical inputs, dual-use solutions that strengthen both agricultural continuity and broader security directly linked to Europe’s capacity to respond to market, geopolitical and climate related risks. A specific attention should also be given to Member States sharing a land border with countries at war maintaining agricultural production capacity in crisis situations.

#### 5. **GOVERNANCE, PARTICIPATION AND ELIGIBILITY (ARTS 9, 12 14 AND 15)**

Governance will define the **structures, rules, and processes through which decisions will be made, responsibilities allocated, and activities coordinated between and within the ECF**.

The governance schemes accompanying these new proposals **must ensure that the farming community is participating adequately in priority setting, program and calls design, and monitoring outcomes**, while helping maintain the right balance between predictability and flexibility, crucial for the ultimate success of the programmes.

Governance should establish a bottom-up multi-actor approach,, transparent, and participatory system, ensuring coordination between EU and national levels, implementation capacity and absorption challenges across Member States.

Active involvement of stakeholders also a National level should be ensured.

To reduce uncertainty, **priorities should be anchored in transparent multiannual orientations aligned with the ECF objectives** and communicated early enough to support pipeline development. Where work programmes evolve during the year, changes should follow predictable criteria and include preventive stakeholder consultation, ensuring that agriculture-related priorities (especially deployment and scaling needs) are not crowded out by more agile sectors.

**Participation of the farming community should be ensured in the governance structures, including the window-level committees,** reflecting the diversity/constraints of the agriculture sector and territories **to guarantee that priorities reflect real constraints and investment needs in the agriculture** sector and rural territories, in order to better align ECF priorities with real investment needs on the ground. This is particularly important for aligning ECF choices with the competitiveness needs of SMEs and collective structures in the agri-food chain.

With agriculture as a pillar of the EU Single Market improving access to capital markets will enhance its competitiveness and resilience, ensuring its pivotal role in the European economy.

This approach would ensure that the ECF's competitiveness logic (impact, scaling, and resilience) is applied to agriculture in a way that is workable across Member States with many small and medium-sized farms, agri-cooperatives and SMEs and diverse rural territories

The following key recommendations are proposed:

- key strategic priorities should be defined through the ordinary legislative process or implementing acts, rather than extensive reliance on delegated acts;
- Delegated acts are particularly problematic due to long planning horizons and property-based investment decisions especially in case of the budget reallocations.
- transparency and stakeholder consultation should be ensured in the preparation of work programmes.

- Governance with multi-actor approach and the active participation of Farmers, forest owners, fishers, and agri cooperatives fishers, forest owners, agri-cooperatives and their organizations in the design, implementation and application of programs, calls and projects should be guaranteed. To make this work, farmers' and growers' associations, cooperatives and rural SME's must be structurally included in project consortia with differentiated targeted criteria and simplified access.
- representatives of farmers' organisations and agricultural cooperatives should be included in relevant committees and advisory structures
- governance should follow a partnership based approach, meaning that cooperation between EU institutions, national authorities, and regional/local agriculture actors is needed. Also, the involvement of stakeholders in planning, implementation, and evaluation phases is essential.
- ECF should simplify application procedures and reduce administrative burdens while having clear rules for decision-making and allocation of funds, public access to information together with strong monitoring and reporting mechanisms.
- ensure balanced evaluation criteria that recognise the specific characteristics of agricultural investments and actors.
- as said above, the dedicated amount should be set fairly—the same share for each of the four sub-areas
- decision-making affecting agriculture must involve agriculture, forest owners and agrifood actors and policy-makers.

## 5.1 Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria and selection mechanisms should explicitly recognise the characteristics of agricultural investments: granular and dispersed beneficiaries, smaller project sizes, collective implementation needs, and the importance of deployment in rural territories.

To ensure financing reaches strategic agricultural investments, with an impact all along the value chain the ECF should enable access pathways that work for:

- Farmers, agri-cooperatives, forest owners, farmers organizations (national and sectorial),
- Agriculture value chain investments (processing/logistics) including for SMEs,
- Deployment-oriented investments improving production resilience and efficiency,
- Skills and advisory capacity as an enabling condition for scaling.

A key request is to allow **simplified procedures for all CAP beneficiaries** with simplified access conditions adapted to the realities of farmers, cooperatives and rural SMEs, ensuring that smaller actors can effectively participate and benefit from the instrument.

## 6. COORDINATION WITH OTHER FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES TO MAXIMISE EFFECT

**A key issue is ensuring complementarity of the ECF with all other fundings specifically with the CAP, Horizon Europe new Program and NRPP along the “investment journey”, avoiding duplication while closing the deployment/scaling gap for agriculture.**

The CAP has a key role to as foreseen in EU Treaties to provides a fair standard of living, secure availability of supplies and provides consumers with food at reasonable prices together with offsetting the volatility of the agriculture activity; Horizon Europe and ECF have completely different objectives one in driving innovation, and the ECF enabling deployment of key strategic investments. Given this, securing investments in ECF and Horizon will in no way compensate for the proposed cuts in the CAP Budget.

Clear coordination is needed so that research outputs (Horizon) and sectoral policy instruments (CAP) connect effectively with ECF investment capacity for infrastructure, services and skills focusing on **key strategic investments also mediated by public-private partnerships.**

It will also be pivotal to efficiently use public funding and investment and leverage and de-risk private capital, working closely with institutional investors such as the European Investment Bank.

The Copa-Cogeca reflection paper on The Future of Horizon Europe (2028–2034) underlines our organization position in this respect.





Copa and Cogeca, founded respectively in 1958 and 1959, form the united voice of farmers and agri-cooperatives in the EU.

Copa members represent leading farming unions at national level, speaking for millions of farmers across Europe. Cogeca members represent the interests of the thousands of agricultural cooperatives in Europe.

Our democratic organisations, led by elected representatives, embody the vibrant diversity of European agriculture across all 27 EU Member States.

We are the collective voice of farmers and agricooperatives of all sizes and specialisations dedicated to the daily production of crops, livestock or mixed farming, encompassing both conventional and organic practices. Together, we ensure that EU agriculture is sustainable, innovative and competitive, guaranteeing food security to half a billion people throughout Europe and contributing to reducing food insecurity globally.

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