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Directorate F. Outreach, Research and Geographical Indications  
The Director

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**MINUTES**  
**WORKSHOP ON THE EUROPEAN COMPETITIVENESS FUND AND ITS**  
**RELEVANCE FOR THE AGRI-FOOD SECTOR**

**JOINT MEETING OF THE CIVIL DIALOGUE GROUPS**

**Brussels (CCAB) and online (Interactio)**  
**on Monday 18 May 2026 from 9:00- 13:00**

Chair: Diego Canga Fano, Director F, DG AGRI

**1. Approval of the agenda and opening remarks**

The meeting was opened by the Chair, who welcomed the members of the Civil Dialogue Groups (CDGs) and gave the floor to Elisabeth Werner, Director-General of DG AGRI, to introduce the session and set the scene for the discussion on the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF).

E Werner introduced the objectives of the workshop on the ECF and its relevance for the agri-food, forestry and rural sectors. She underlined that the ECF is a key new instrument in the next multi-annual financial framework (MFF), designed to complement the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), and Horizon Europe (HE) – the next EU Research and Innovation Framework Programme, to ensure a seamless innovation journey from research to deployment and industrial scale-up. She highlighted the persistent gap between strong EU research and limited commercialisation, and stressed that the ECF aims to address this by supporting deployment, scale-up and industrial uptake of innovation across the value chain. E Werner presented Policy Window 2 as particularly relevant, covering health, biotech, agriculture and bioeconomy, with significant funding potential, and noted that beneficiaries would include SMEs, start-ups and collaborative projects, and that the ECF would provide support for skills and shared infrastructure. She concluded by highlighting that the workshop should help identify project ideas and priorities, and referred to the ongoing preparation of a new research and innovation (R&I) strategic approach dedicated to agri-food, forestry and rural areas, ahead of the AgriResearch Conference on 24-25 September in Brussels.

**2. Nature of the meeting**

Participants attended the meeting in person and online. It was a non-public, hybrid meeting.

### 3. List of points discussed

#### **Presentation of the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) toolbox**

DG GROW presented the structure of the ECF according to the Commission proposal, explaining that it is designed to address the current fragmentation of EU funding instruments by bringing together multiple programmes under a single, more coherent and flexible framework. DG GROW underlined that the current funding landscape is characterised by scattered programmes with differing rules and limited coordination, which creates barriers for companies, particularly when trying to move from R&I to market deployment and scale-up. The ECF proposal therefore aims to provide a seamless ‘innovation-to-investment’ journey, better linking EU research, industrial policy, and deployment tools, while also increasing flexibility to respond to crises and emerging priorities.

It was explained that the ECF is structured around four policy windows, including the previously mentioned dedicated window covering health, biotech, agriculture and bioeconomy, alongside clean transition and industrial decarbonisation, digital leadership, and resilience, security, defence industry and space. The specific objectives for agriculture, food, rural areas and food security was presented as to strengthen EU competitiveness, food security and strategic autonomy. The ECF is designed to combine grants, financial instruments, budgetary guarantees and procurement tools, with the intention of mobilising significant additional private and public investment and supporting projects across the full innovation lifecycle.

The presentation also highlighted the importance of simplification through a single rulebook, common governance, and improved policy coherence with Horizon Europe, InvestEU and other EU programmes, as well as stronger links with national and regional funding instruments. The possibility for Member States to contribute additional resources was highlighted, including through national envelopes, NRPPs and voluntary top-ups, in order to boost the overall financial firepower of the instrument. In particular, the emphasis was placed on the role of advisory services, skills development, SME participation, and industrial policy tools aimed at strengthening EU value chains and scaling up strategic technologies.

In relation to agriculture specifically, DG GROW clarified that the ECF would complement rather than replace the CAP and the national and regional plans, with the objective of reinforcing innovation deployment and closing the gap between research and market uptake. The Commission concluded by stressing that the proposal is still under development, with work ongoing on governance, work programmes and implementation modalities, and that further dialogue with stakeholders will be essential to ensure that the instrument effectively supports EU competitiveness, resilience and long-term food security.

#### **Presentation of examples of possible use of ECF tools in the agri-food and forestry sectors, in rural areas**

DG AGRI Unit F2 presented a series of **illustrative examples** showing how the future HE programme and the ECF could work together, and in complementarity with the

NRPPs and the CAP, to support the full innovation-to-deployment cycle in agriculture, forestry and rural areas. Unit F2 highlighted again that under the next MFF, substantial funding is proposed to be available across HE and the ECF, particularly under Policy Window 2, while also mentioning relevant opportunities under other policy windows (digitalisation, clean transition and industrial decarbonisation and defence).

Across all examples provided, the central message was that HE would continue to support R&I, while the ECF would focus on scaling up and deploying solutions at industrial level, thereby addressing the gap between innovation and market uptake. Under the ECF, this would be complemented by InvestEU, which would help crowd in private and public investment, and by skills actions to support adoption across value chains. A strong emphasis was placed on ensuring coherence and complementarity with the CAP and the NRPPs, which could support for example the on-farm uptake of innovations, advisory services, training, and investment in equipment and practices.

DG AGRI illustrated this approach through several illustrative examples e. g. on fertilizers, plant protection, vaccines feed additives, water management and on the bioeconomy.

## **Q&A**

**Copa-Cogeca** emphasised that farmers and growers urgently need practical, market-ready knowledge and innovation to respond to climate change, new diseases, and geopolitical pressures. They stressed the importance of creating viable business cases for farmers, especially young farmers, to ensure generational renewal and sector viability. They underlined the need for open strategic autonomy and stronger integration of farmers into research and innovation systems, including cooperatives and Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS), and highlighted the importance to involve farmers and their organisations as active part of the process of creation of the EU programmes.

**FoodDrinkEurope/CEFS** stressed the importance of recognising primary food processors as a core part of the agri-food value chain. They asked whether funding mechanisms (specific tender) could better account for seasonal industries in competitiveness assessments. They also raised concerns about digestate from biomethane production, noting regulatory barriers to its use as fertiliser and asking whether additional policy flexibility could be introduced to support its valorisation as volumes increase.

**Eurogroup for Animals** asked technical questions on eligibility criteria for beneficiaries under the proposed instruments, the application of the “Do no significant harm” principle within financial instruments, and the possible use of counter-guarantees.

**The Commission (DG AGRI, DG GROW)** recalled that a key priority in the new strategic approach is improving the ‘innovation-to-uptake’ part of the investment journey. They emphasised the value-chain approach, covering primary producers, processors, and downstream actors. They clarified that work programmes could be annual or multi-annual, and are expected to be ready by 2028. The Commission explained the governance arrangements for the ECF, including a strategic stakeholder board, independent expert input for investment decisions, and advisory structures involving Member States and implementing partners. On eligibility, they clarified that criteria will be defined in work programmes. On counter-guarantees, they confirmed continued use under InvestEU-style mechanisms with high leverage effects.

**EURAF** raised concerns about blended finance implementation, particularly risks of misinterpretation or double financing in agroforestry. They requested clearer safeguards and a more proactive EU approach and asked whether ‘low-tech’ and nature-based solutions would be explicitly supported alongside high-tech innovation. They further stressed the need for better coordination and recognition of agroforestry at Member State level, including its role in both biodiversity protection and productive bioeconomy systems.

**ERCA** welcomed the emphasis on advisory services and stressed the importance of immediate local support to ensure small farmers and rural businesses can access funding quickly. They asked about the scope of eligibility for rural organisations beyond agriculture (e.g. rural tourism, cultural tourism, health tourism) and raised the issue of wool value chains, asking whether innovative wool uses (fertiliser pellets, insulation, etc.) could qualify for support. Finally, they asked how coordination between different EU funds would work in practice to ensure seamless access.

**AVEC** strongly supported the value-chain approach, stressing the importance of covering both upstream (genetics) and downstream (slaughtering, processing) parts of the poultry sector. They requested clarification on practical aspects of the new instruments, including timing of work programmes, co-financing possibilities, and whether innovation is a strict requirement for funding eligibility. They highlighted large-scale investment needs as essential for competitiveness.

**The Commission** highlighted the inclusive scope of ECF, emphasising that both high-tech and low-tech sectors may qualify if they contribute to EU competitiveness, strategic autonomy, and reduced import dependencies. No sector is excluded a priori, with explicit support for areas like sustainable tourism, construction, and SME transitions, as outlined under Policy Window 1. The ECF value-chain approach could support two-stage application processes to simplify complexity and foster collaboration. The ECF will have separate application procedures from CAP. On financing, blended models and combination funding are being developed, though strict no double-funding rules will apply under EU financial regulations. The work programme is targeted for launch by 1 January 2028, with a preference for multi-annual planning to ensure predictability and avoid implementation gaps.

**IFOAM** requested clarification on the ‘competitiveness seal’ mechanism and how it would function for agricultural and food actors, as well as a clarification on how resources would be allocated across different policy windows and how coordination between them would be ensured. IFOAM also asked about participation of associated countries (including Ukraine and Balkan countries) in the programmes and how access would be organised for non-EU countries.

**EAPF** asked who defines ‘emergency’ situations provoking production ramp-up actions under the ECF and requested clarification on governance, particularly the role of independent scientific experts. They also questioned how multi-annual programming could remain flexible enough to respond to unexpected strategic developments.

**The Commission** confirmed that cross-window collaboration is possible highlighting that DG AGRI as a DG is associated to multiple policy windows. In addition, collaboration with other DGs on joint topics across different policy windows would be foreseen. Work programme allocation will involve joint Commission input and stakeholder consultations. Third-country participation could be possible via specific agreements, as seen with Norway and Iceland in InvestEU. Governance will prioritise

balanced stakeholder representation, with calls for experts to ensure geographical and sectoral diversity. Ramp-up actions will be triggered by urgent competitiveness needs, aligning with ECF objectives. Flexibility in work programmes (annual vs. multi-annual, potential modifications) remains under review ahead of the next MFF, to be confirmed.

**PF** thanked the organisers and stressed the importance of the food processing industry involvement on early stage in work programme design.

**ELARD** asked how the ECF will connect with rural areas in practice, ensuring citizen and democratic engagement and for details on NRPSs collaboration.

**RED** asked how the ECF will interact with other EU funds and DG REGIO's potential involvement. The speaker highlighted the importance of integrated territorial approach to ensure cohesion between sectoral and territorial strategies. He also asked how the local/regional partnerships would fit into EU-level strategies.

**FoodDrinkEurope** asked clarification on where industrial equipment upgrades would now fit and how accessibility for SMEs would be ensured.

**Agroecology Europe** requested clarification on how the ECF will address territorial food systems, rural infrastructure, and local governance to strengthen shock resilience, and whether support would extend beyond commercial outputs to farming processes, not only outputs, like agroecology and organic methods.

**The Commission** reconfirmed its intention to industry involvement in shaping ECF work programmes, emphasising that stakeholder consultations, including workshops as today, are critical for identifying strategic investment needs. Industry input will be integrated early in the process to ensure practical alignment. On the rural and territorial dimension, the ECF explicitly includes rural, coastal, and local valorisation objectives across policy windows. Synergies with NRPPs are central, with multiple collaboration avenues such as competitiveness seal, co-financing, complementary investments. It was recalled that the ECF prioritises technology scale-up and industrial deployment, while technology acquisition (e.g., equipment) may fall under CAP or financial instruments.

**Cogeca** asked how the ECF could prioritise strategic reserves to enhance EU food security without earmarked funds, and highlighted again infrastructure modernisation is a priority.

**Via Campesina** welcomed the strong emphasis on organic farming and agroecological solutions in the programme and asked whether social innovation is also included.

**BirdLife** asked how the proposed instruments would support nature-based solutions in agriculture, particularly wetland and peatland restoration through paludiculture. They highlighted the need for investment in adapted machinery, management techniques for wet conditions, and development of viable bio-based value chains. They asked whether such nature-based solutions would be explicitly included in upcoming work programmes and eligible for funding under the ECF.

**The Commission** responded that strategic stockpiling would most likely fall under Policy Window 4 (resilience and security), and noted that there have already been proposals from the European Parliament to include it under that window. Regarding infrastructure, they clarified that simple replacement or maintenance of existing infrastructure would generally not be eligible under the ECF. Instead, support would

focus on new infrastructure, optimisation, and technologies that improve use of existing assets (e.g. sensors and digital water management tools). On social innovation, they confirmed it is embedded in the broader strategic approach to R&I, particularly through co-creation with farmers, local communities, and MAA. On nature-based solutions, they clarified that funding would be possible when these involve technological development, machinery, or value chain creation, while purely practice-based uptake would more likely fall under the CAP rather than the ECF.

### **Tour the table collecting ECF relevant needs from the participants**

**IFOAM** asked the EC to support organic farming through digitalisation and emphasised the use of AI to support knowledge sharing for organic farming, alongside large-scale training and upskilling in agroecology. It also strongly advocated for a decentralised territorial approach, including investment in rural processing facilities, mobile slaughterhouses, local bio-based fertiliser production, storage infrastructure, and energy communities to strengthen resilience and autonomy.

**EFFAB** stressed the importance of maintaining the Commission's original proposal and ensuring that European technology platforms and EU associations are formally eligible under the ECF. It highlighted the need for an enabling regulatory framework to support innovation and argued that adaptation of existing technologies (AI, robotics, digitalisation) is equally important for the agri-food sector.

**Copa** asked for explicit recognition of agriculture as a strategic sector across all policy windows of the fund. It highlighted investment needs in climate- and water-resilient value chains, digital agriculture, AI, risk management tools, fertiliser independence, storage infrastructure, rural energy, and connectivity. It also stressed the importance of integrating agriculture fully into EU competitiveness, resilience, and security strategies.

**Euromalt** emphasised the need to strengthen promotion of the European food system internationally, arguing that Europe should compete on quality, sustainability, food safety, and labour standards rather than volume.

**Eurogroup for Animals** focused on animal welfare as a competitiveness issue, highlighting consumer demand for higher welfare standards. It supported financing for cage-free systems, mobile slaughter units to strengthen local supply chains, and the use of intelligent technologies such as AI and microchip-based monitoring systems to improve animal welfare and traceability.

**ELO** underlined the importance of fully integrating agriculture and bioeconomy into the programme and ensuring the inclusion of primary producers in decision-making. It stressed that Europe already has sufficient research capacity and should focus on faster implementation of existing innovations, alongside improved access to private-public financing and reduced regulatory delays.

**Cogeca** emphasised the need for both large-scale and small-scale collective infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. It supported investment in energy communities, cooperative models, and decentralised rural projects to ensure accessibility and territorial balance in implementation.

**RED** emphasised that sectoral and territorial approaches are complementary but require better coordination. They highlighted the need for sufficient critical mass to achieve strategic objectives, suggesting this could be attained through flexible territorial

networks. The speaker also stressed the importance of quality-based development to strengthen Europe's global position, noting that rural depopulation and declining agricultural activities, particularly in mountainous and remote areas, threaten resilience. They advocated for strategic territorial partnerships, with municipalities playing a key role in fostering cooperation among citizens and stakeholders, and underscored the necessity of harmonising innovation strategies with territorial goals to improve efficiency and access to both public and private funding sources.

**EUSTAFOR** highlighted the importance of active forest management and investment across the full forest value chain. It supported decentralised bioeconomy models, small-scale biorefineries, and stronger skills development for a digitalising forestry sector. It also called for reduced investment risk and greater mobilisation of public and private capital.

**ELARD** stressed the need for multi-stakeholder cooperation and citizen participation to drive rural innovation and inclusive development.

**ERCA** called for skills transfer partnerships, farm-to-product traceability, soya replacement, social farming, and stronger farmer/youth roles in governance and projects.

**Agroecology Europe** emphasised that competitiveness comes at a social and environmental cost, citing the decline of Europe's farmers and well-documented environmental impacts. It called for investments in nature restoration, such as pollinator habitats and local seed systems, to sustain critical sectors like European honey production, stressing the need for rural infrastructure and local food processing facilities, which form the foundation of a lasting, agroecological competitiveness.

**FoodDrinkEurope** called for explicit recognition of the food and drink manufacturing sector as strategic for EU competitiveness. The need to support the decarbonisation of the energy-intensive facilities and highlighted the risks to farmers if processing plants close. It also stressed the importance of SME access, digitalisation, AI inclusion, and stronger public-private partnerships for food innovation.

**Beelife** stressed the challenges faced by highly dispersed actors such as beekeepers in accessing funding and forming consortia. It called for better and stronger support for pollinator-related innovation, and measures to protect European honey production maintaining quality standards.

**Euroseeds** called for dedicated R&I funding for plant breeding, highlighting its upstream role in ensuring productivity, resilience, biodiversity, and sustainability.

**Cogeca** stressed the need to modernise ageing grain storage and improve transport logistics to enhance food security and reduce pollution. It urged recognising agriculture as a strategic sector, proposing investments in climate-resilient value chains, reduced fertilizer dependency, circular bioeconomy, digital connectivity, and strategic storage infrastructure to bolster EU food security.

**EURAF** called for integrated agriculture-forestry policies, clearer sustainable finance rules to attract private investment, and open agricultural data access to enable climate modelling and confirmed that EURAF is pleased to see agroforestry covered in ECF.

**RED** highlighted the need for territorial innovation strategies, conflict resolution tools for shared resources, and Commission-led training programmes to support local development and slow innovation in agroecology.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The Chair concluded the discussion highlighting some key challenges and points for reflection. The Commission reiterated its commitment to balancing these priorities while ensuring stakeholder involvement in the next steps of the process.

#### **5. Next steps**

The Chair thanked participants for their active engagement and informed them that the presentations and the minutes will be shared shortly.

#### **6. List of participants**

List of participants– Minutes  
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 on Monday 18 May 2026 from 9:00- 13:00**

ORGANISATIONS PRESENT
AEEU - Agroecology Europe
AnimalhealthEurope
AREFLH - Assemblée des Régions Européennes Fruitières Légumières et Horticoles
AVEC - Association of Poultry Processors and Poultry Trade in the EU Countries
BeeLife - Bee Life - European Beekeeping Organisation
BirdLife Europe
CEJA - Conseil Européen des Jeunes Agriculteurs / European Council of Young Farmers
CELCAA - European Liaison Committee for the Agricultural and AGRI-Food Trade
CEPM - European Confederation of Maize Producers
CEVI - Confédération Européenne des Vignerons Indépendants / European Confederation of Independent Winegrowers
COGECA - European agri-cooperatives / General Confederation of Agricultural Co-operatives of the European Union
COPA - "European farmers / Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations of the European Union
EAPF - European Alliance for Plant-based Foods
ECVC - European Coordination Via Campesina
EEB - European Environmental Bureau
EFA - Eurogroup for Animals
EFFAB - European Forum of Farm Animal Breeders
ELARD - European Leader Association for Rural Development

ELO - European Landowner's Organisation
ELPHA - European Live Poultry and Hatching Egg Association
ERCA - European Rural Community Alliance
EURAF - European Agroforestry Federation
EUROMALT
Euroseeds
EUSTAFOR
FEFANA - EU association of Speciality Feed Ingredients and their mixtures
FoodDrinkEurope
GEOPA-COPA
IFOAM - International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements European Regional Group
PFP - Primary Food Processors
Rurality, Environment, Development
SLOW FOOD
TPE - Trade Promotion Europe

Observers:

European Committee of the Regions
European Economic and Social Committee