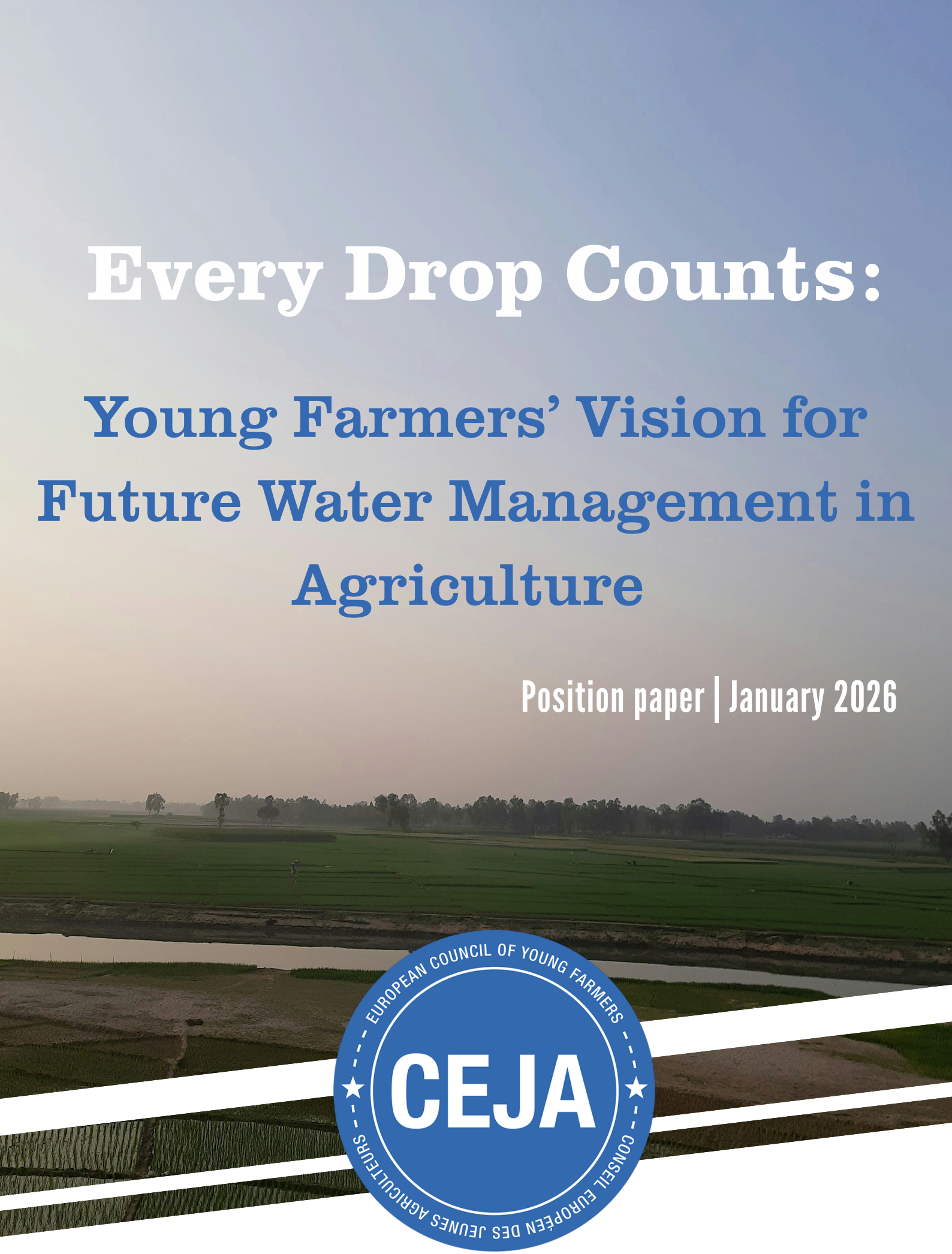


Every Drop Counts:

Young Farmers' Vision for Future Water Management in Agriculture

Position paper | January 2026

EUROPEAN COUNCIL OF YOUNG FARMERS
CEJA
CONSEIL EUROPÉEN DES JEUNES AGRICULTEURS

Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 1

1 PROBLEM DIAGNOSIS 5
Water quantity 5
Water quality 7

2 PERSISTENT CHALLENGES AT ON-FARM LEVEL 8
Lack of data and technologies 8
Public and private water management 9
Legislative barriers 10
Responsibilities of national and regional authorities 11
Societal debates 12
Lacking risk-management tools 12

3 TOOLBOX TO SOLVE IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES 13
On-farm practices and technologies 13
Investments 16
Public water infrastructure 17
Governance aspects and opportunities 19
Climate adaptation 22



Executive summary

In the past years, young farmers have been faced with rising challenges regarding water availability and quality, which have impacts on an economic, social and mental health scale. Adequate tools and regulatory support are crucial to enabling young farmers to respond accordingly to the pressing environmental and climate-related challenges.

Water-related issues are often indulged by climate change, which is provoking more frequent seasonal extremes, negatively impacting yields and thus the economic situation of farms. Particularly, young farmers, having started their business only recently, are vulnerable to exogenous shocks, such as extreme weather events. Extreme floods and droughts have had detrimental consequences for the agricultural sector in recent years.

Water quality, on the other hand, is impacted by various sectors, with agriculture contributing towards the presence of nutrients and plant-protection products (PPPs) in waterbodies. While Member States are responsible for the river basin management plans, different measurement methodologies, thresholds, substances monitored, and interpretations of data hamper an adequate cross-border comparison. The one-out-all-out principle of the Water Framework Directive additionally hinders the registration of progress of the status of waterbodies.

Gaps in national governance add to the natural challenges, particularly concerning on-farm investment support for more efficient water management, crop change and adaptation to new climatic conditions, the engagement of many actors around collective water management and insufficient risk-management tools. Young farmers, therefore, suggest a detailed toolbox addressing these shortcomings, while at the same time linking the instruments to the actions presented in the Water Resilience Strategy published by the European Commission in June 2025 [1].

[1] See Annex I.

Recommended toolbox

Young farmers see opportunities and needs for action in the following areas:

A. FARMING PRACTICES

Soil management practices - Improving soil quality and preventing erosion during floodings;

Promotion of sustainable fertilisation options - Reducing nitrogen pollution;

Conservation agriculture - Improving soil structure and organic matter;

Sharing of best practices - Sharing a set of best practices to minimise the impact of agriculture on water bodies.

B. FARMING TECHNOLOGIES

Technologies and innovation - Enhancing efficient water management and preventing nutrient pollution;

Technologies for manure management - Improving manure management at the individual farm level, stepping up the use of digestate and Renure;

Adequate on-farm monitoring - Increasing on-farm nutrient management and circularity;

Bioeconomy - Stepping up the use of by-products and decreasing dependency on imported mineral fertilisers;

Circular economy - Stepping up the use of on-farm available nutrients and decreasing the dependency on imported mineral fertilisers.

C. INVESTMENTS

On-farm investments - Both for technologies and farming practices to enhance water efficiency and boost climate adaptation.

D. PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Urban wastewater and household sludge - Decreasing freshwater consumption by ensuring the safe use of treated urban wastewater for agricultural purposes;

Public water resilience - Stepping up investments into public infrastructure to enhance resilience and decrease leakages; promoting investments into grey and green infrastructure.

E. GOVERNANCE

Fit-for-purpose legislative framework - Responding to the needs of farmers regarding water management;

Regulation based on a territorial approach reflecting the specific regional context - Adapting the Nitrates Directive according to a more flexible, tailored approach;

Reporting, compliance and reasonable controls - Modernising the reporting and compliance system with existing norms;

The role of the CAP - Using the CAP for water resilience in agriculture;

Water reuse - Increasing the uptake of repurposed water to decrease freshwater consumption;

E. GOVERNANCE

Coordination with national, regional and local authorities - Supporting cross-border cooperation to improve the governance of water resources;

Engaging multiple actors at the regional level - Enhancing consultations and cooperation between different actors to find a common approach towards water management;

Supporting collective water management - Increasing cooperation between different sectors to act as a leverage against competition;

Involving the public - Raising awareness about the circularity and use of water in agriculture for food production;

Engaging the value chain - Distributing the burden across the entire value chain.

F. RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Experience sharing and knowledge development - Boosting innovation, research and knowledge sharing for more efficient and resilient water management;

Research in alternative PPPs - Stepping up research, promotion and approval of alternative PPPs to reduce pollution.

G. CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Risk-management tools - Increasing the availability of risk-management tools to support climate adaptation, with a specific focus on young farmers;

Compensation schemes - Promoting the diffusion of compensation schemes in cases of flood prevention;

Crop change and new financial instruments – Supporting adapted production choices via the access to new financial instruments for young farmers;

NGTs and new varieties - Enhancing access to NGTs and new crop varieties to speed up climate adaptation.

1 Problem Diagnosis

Water is one of the most sensitive resources in agriculture, critical for food and feed production, animal welfare and the resilience of the entire farming sector. Agriculture works within the natural water cycle and feels the consequences of meteorological changes caused by climate change. While having sufficient water available is essential for both animal and arable production, water quality has a significant impact on the health of soils and related ecosystems.

Water quantity

In the past years, the effects of climate change on water availability have become increasingly visible through two frequent seasonal extremes: increasing periods of prolonged droughts and concentrated rainfall events. Lost harvests and lower production yields caused by extreme weather events have considerable financial consequences, increasing the economic pressure on young farmers and negatively impacting mental health, while posing serious continental risks by threatening European food security and strategic autonomy. Agriculture is currently losing EUR 28.3 billion annually to extreme weather events, corresponding to an Annual Average Loss (AAL) of about 6% of the EU-wide livestock and crop production respectively [2].

Water scarcity- Water scarcity not only impacts the availability and access to water for food and feed production but also leads to high competition between different sectors (i.e. growing demand from the largest consumers, urban areas and tourism) as well as within the agricultural sector itself, creating conflicts in farming communities. Incremental water scarcity leads to substantial shifts in agricultural productions, causing challenges regarding climate adaptation and urgently increasing the need for more efficient water management. The combination of droughts followed by extreme rainfalls also raises the risk of flooding, as the water retention capacity decreases with rising soil desiccation. It should be noted that, through water-saving techniques already implemented for some time, crops are currently under stress, as their water needs have been reduced to a minimum. Moreover, the introduction of drought-resistant varieties is a gradual process, dependent on research outcomes that will inevitably require a considerable timeframe.

[2] EIB Group, Insurance and Risk Management Tools for Agriculture in the EU, 2025.

Heavy rainfalls and floodings - Heavy rainfalls and subsequent floodings have a detrimental effect on the structure of the soil, damaging its infiltration capacity, while at the same time facilitating soil erosion and nutrient leakages. This also has a negative impact on microorganisms in the soil, which are vital for the organic matter. Heavy rainfalls impact the quantity and quality of yields, while also delaying harvests in time. This can lead to delayed manure spreading, which is only allowed at certain times of the year. If the manure cannot be spread accordingly to the schedule, farmers face challenges regarding limited manure storage capacity. Besides, urban sprawling and the sealing of land, decreasing the amount of land which can store and retain water, raises the risk of flooding. That is one of the reasons why young farmers insist on the need to establish a legally binding target of no-net land take by 2050. Floodings not only lead to excessive water availability but can also have detrimental effects on the quality of water by raising pollution risks. Sewer overflows, spilling out into nearby rivers during heavy rainfalls, significantly impact the quality of waterbodies and soil health of the surrounding agricultural land.



Water quality - Diffuse pollution by various sectors

Agriculture – According to the European Environmental Agency, diffuse pressure on waterbodies by agriculture amounts to 29% for surface waters and 32% for groundwaters [3]. In some instances, agriculture is associated with the presence of nitrates in surface and groundwater bodies, due to nutrient loss via soil wash-out, erosion or field run-off, natural processes in the soil and extreme weather events. At the same time, agriculture has a role to play, as it works within the natural water cycle, and particularly grasslands act as a water filter thanks to a higher number of microorganisms present in the soil. The presence of livestock can accelerate the speed of regeneration of the soil, resulting in efficient carbon sequestration, improvement of soil health and structure, and more effective water retention for crop growth [4].

Industry and urban discharges – also have an impact on water quality through UPBTs [5] (i.e., stem from atmospheric emissions from the combustion of fossil fuels, industrial processes, construction and building materials, plastics and paints [6]), PFAS [7] or 'forever chemicals' (i.e., which are used in various industries as well as in certain plant protection products), outdated sewage facilities, pollution from the mining industry, and pharmaceuticals not being properly filtered out of drinking water. The presence of high levels of nitrates in water is attributed to a variety of causes or concomitant factors, such as industrial wastewater, urbanisation (domestic sewage), agriculture and atmospheric precipitation.

Assessment of water quality – Water quality is assessed through the ecological and chemical status of surface and groundwater bodies. The quality of waterbodies is evaluated through the 'one-out-all-out' principle of the Water Framework Directive (WFD), stipulating that all assessment criteria must be met for a waterbody to be classified in 'good status'. It has been recognised that this methodology, besides different measurement methodologies,interpretations and substances monitored, is the cause for significantly diverging results across Member States, and the status of waterbodies not showing visible progress despite stricter management rules [8].

[3] European Environmental Agency, Europe's state of water 2024, 2024.
[4] Opinion Piece by CEJA former Vice-Presidents Anne-Catherine Dalcq & Thomas Duffy (2023), "Livestock: an ally of sustainability".
[5] European Commission, Implementation of the WFD and FD, 2025.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] European Commission, Implementation of the WFD and FD, 2025.

2 Persistent challenges at on-farm level

In addition to the natural challenges related to water quantity and quality, obstacles regarding water management, regulatory support and governance aspects impede finding viable solutions at the farm level.

Lack of data and technologies

Lack of data – Lacking data and deficient on-farm monitoring systems prevent young farmers from informed decision-making in adapting practices to improve water quality. Retracing pollution to an individual farm remains challenging, which impedes the adaptation of management practices, as well as pollution control and prevention. In this regard, it is essential to scientifically assess the responsibilities for water contamination across all sectors involved. More generally, concerning both water use and especially contamination, a thorough assessment and evaluation of the impact of the different sectors will be required.

Access to technology – At the same time, limited availability and accessibility of key technologies—such as infrastructures supporting the uptake of treated wastewater reuse, desalination systems, and predictive models for crop water demand hinder the efforts of young farmers to improve water management and efficiency. Despite growing interest among the younger generation in adopting sustainable and climate-resilient practices, the lack of practical access to these technologies creates a structural barrier.



Public and private water management

Public infrastructure – Public water infrastructure, such as pipes and dams, is ageing, creating substantial leakages and decreasing the resilience in the face of droughts or floodings. It is suggested that between 8% and 57% of water is lost due to leakages in public pipes [9]. Outdated sewage facilities failing to provide treated wastewater and household sludge safe for use in the agricultural sector urgently need investments. The lack of public water reservoirs for risk prevention and mitigation in times of water scarcity is additionally slowing the resilience of regions regarding periods of prolonged droughts. Failure to do so risks a significant reduction in crop yields, with overall detrimental consequences for the quality and quantity standards of European agricultural production.



On-farm water management – At the individual farm level, young farmers particularly struggle with the mismatch of the infrastructure needed and the regulatory demands. Legally, young farmers see themselves confronted with restrictions on water permits and storage facilities, hindering efficient climate adaptation and irrigation in summer, while overall negatively impacting yields and harvests. While some Member States allow for the installation of on-farm water storage, such facilities come at high financial expense and long administrative processes. Having continous access to water enhances the profitability of farms, which in turn can stimulate generational renewal.

Desalination installations – As a consequence of climate change, groundwater bodies close to the sea experience a change towards saltier water. In some cases, the pH of the water used needs to be adapted to the needs of the respective crops. Considerable financial costs and prolonged administrative processes hamper the installation of on-farm desalination facilities.

Legislative barriers

Insufficient legislative support – Serious obstacles to the implementation of different EU legislation are created through incoherence in their interpretation and national transposition, resulting in shifting objectives and targets that farmers are expected to meet. Initial goals are never reached, but new plans with more ambitious objectives are established regularly. Incoherent and conflicting legislation at the regional, national and EU level impede young farmers' opportunities to adapt water mismanagement at the farm level. The lack of clarity and targeted actions on how to concretely reach the goals has created a feeling of helplessness among young farmers.

Nitrates Directive – Moreover, the Nitrates Directive also creates an immense administrative and regulatory burden. For example, the manure action plans impose extremely detailed and sometimes not scientifically backed requirements concerning soil management practices when spreading and incorporating manure into the soil. Extremely strict inspections, a very low tolerance towards margins for error and tense atmospheres during controls of slurry transports make farmers feel uncomfortable and targeted in some European countries. Young farmers conclude that the legislative framework of the Nitrates Directive is not fit-for-purpose anymore, failing to reflect new realities and being adaptable to current on-farm challenges. It does not encourage the adoption of new practices aimed at obtaining manure-derived products such as digestate and recovered nitrogen fertilisers like RENURE, while at the same time not allowing for the recognition of individual responsibilities of farmers to reach the established goals. Equally, it has been doubling down on the generic measure framework, e.g. nitrogen norms or manure spreading dates.

Water Framework Directive – The 'one-out-all-out' principle of the Water Framework Directive leads to even stricter rules and numerous prevention measures, which come at high administrative and financial costs. It has been acknowledged that this methodology of assessing the status of waterbodies might be one of the causes of why no significant progress in improving water quality has been made so far, despite the multiple pollution prevention measures implemented across various sectors, including agriculture.

Responsibilities of national and regional authorities

Lacking cooperation between Member States – The management of waterbodies and river basins falls under the responsibility of national authorities, resulting in obstacles for a coherent approach to cross-border water management. Different methods and instruments to assess water quality hinder the comparability of the collected data between Member States. Also, varying approaches towards data interpretation can result in diverging results across countries, which is especially problematic for the management of cross-border river basins.

Multi-layered governance – At the national level, the fragmentation of national and regional competences often leads to inefficient, multi-layered and complex governance processes. Intricate regulatory frameworks often prevent a common footing to tackle the prevailing challenges related to water availability and quality.

Consultations with the agricultural sector – Some countries have started with the development of water management strategies to improve water quality. However, while the initial aim is a positive one, the lack of consultations with the agricultural sector in the design of such strategies often results in unrealistic goals while at the same time increasing the pressure on the farming sector. Clear pathways of how to reach the determined objectives are missing, leaving farmers behind in the transition.



Water-pricing and prioritisation – Moreover, the use of water in agriculture is often erroneously not considered as an essential mean for food production. Water pricing should not be used as means of prioritisation, but should take into account the vital function of water, as well as the circularity of water, in agriculture.

Societal debates

Negative perception on the use of water in agriculture- In some European countries, the creation of basins to store rainwater or pump groundwater has led to polarisation of water use in agriculture. Rising scrutiny about prioritisation and conditions for users to benefit from the stored rainwater additionally feeds into inter-sectoral conflicts. Public information campaigns would raise awareness of the positive externalities of agriculture on the environment and the resulting ecosystem services, such as the creation of green belts around urban areas, the maintenance and establishment of new natural habitats, and the enhancement and conservation of biodiversity. Young farmers also call for policy frameworks that move beyond polarisation, prioritising targeted solutions to water management and the development of crucial water infrastructures to enhance storage and distribution, such as reservoirs.

Lacking risk-management tools

20%-30% agricultural losses induced by extreme weather events are insured through private and public risk-management schemes, including those at present in the CAP [10]. Lacking risk-sharing and risk-management tools that do not account for the cost of the lost production, result in high financial stress for young farmers. CEJA has been vocal on the need for a more robust risk-management framework to address current and future challenges concerning the resilience of European food systems [11].

[10] EIB Group, European agriculture faces growing climate risks that EU can help counter, 2025.
[11] CEJA, Resilience and sustainability of the agri-food supply chain, 2021.

3 Toolbox to solve identified challenges

Several responses to mitigate the effects on quantity and quality are already present.

Farming practices

Soil management – Soil management practices aiming at improving soil health are already implemented by many young farmers. Some key examples include crop selection and crop rotation, grassland maintenance, cover cropping, catch crops, buffer strips and the maintenance of organic matter in the soil – all contributing to prevent soil erosion, reduce compaction, increase infiltration, trap sediments and preserve the quality of surface water.

Promotion of sustainable fertilisation options – Young farmers advocate for increasing the options at farmers' disposal to reduce the use of mineral fertiliser, to make better use of organic fertilisers and the organic matter in the soil (e.g. manure, cover crops). Additionally, the development of regional management systems should be promoted, supported by research and innovation projects. Another opportunity presents other products containing plant-available nutrients, on the condition that they remain safe from any additional harmful substances, such as xenobiotics or heavy metals. Young farmers are aware of the level of nitrogen in certain soils and groundwaters and are willing to optimise their practices; they just need support in identifying their options and increasing their access.

Conservation agriculture – Other soil management practices promoting microbial diversity and improving soil structure and organic matter are currently being explored and may offer the possibility for a better use of nutrients, with potential effects appearing in the long-term. Nevertheless, experimenting with such practices may lead to additional risks and therefore require research, knowledge and time.

Sharing of best practices – Additionally, best practices from different European countries demonstrate high effectiveness in preserving water quality. Some of these are the establishment of a 'biobed' targeted towards wastewater generated by cleaning machinery, phyto-purification, where specific plant roots treat wastewater, or local water coordinators supporting farmers in their investment choice and monitoring the water quality in the respective region. Supporting the exchange of best practices enhances knowledge and expertise development, while at the same time boosting innovative solutions. Moreover, technical assistance should be provided to farmers to prevent both point-source and diffuse water pollution from plant protection products, through the implementation of TOPPS guidelines (Train Operators to Prevent Pollution from Point Sources), which establish measures for risk prevention and mitigation in field practices.



Farming technologies

Technologies for manure management – New methods regarding injection and near ground application of manure contribute to preventing run-off from the field and erosion. Technologies to up-scale manure into other types of fertilisers (e.g., RENURE and digestate) are crucial to account for the excessive production of organic fertilisers. Leakage-prevention layers below manure storages in protected water areas equally aim at avoiding nutrient loss into the soils and water-sensitive areas.

Technology and innovation – Precision-farming instruments, such as drip irrigation instead of water cannons, positively contribute towards improving water efficiency. Nevertheless, the use of new genomic techniques (NGTs) and different crop types adapted to the corresponding meteorological conditions is crucial in minimising the vulnerability of agricultural businesses, increasing resilience and adaptability. Digital precision-farming tools have shown promising advancements and hold tremendous potential to optimise nutrient management planning. Technologies enabling farmers to pick the best fertiliser option, use the right amount at the right time and target the areas with the highest needs contribute towards efficient nutrient management, overall decreasing the risk of nutrient leakage. However, such an uptake needs support from both public and private actors. Young farmers advocate for easy access to innovative solutions and call for improved CAP support and new investment schemes to benefit farmers who want to deploy these technologies.

Adequate on-farm monitoring – To improve practices related to water and nutrient management and enable informed decision-making at the farm level, individual monitoring of on-farm nutrient management is necessary. Therefore, consistent data about the nutrient balance on-farm is crucial, requiring appropriate advisory services providing guidance in nutrient management and investments in relation to the respective agricultural production.

Bioeconomy – The development of bioeconomy presents an additional occasion, allowing for a more optimal waste management via the upscaling of farm products and by-products from other industries, and preventing nutrient leakage in waterbodies. However, when using by-products from industry, attention should be paid to ensure that they do not contain contaminants from agricultural soils. Any presence of contaminants resulting from soil pollution should not be attributed to the farmer.

Circular economy – A practice that could help farmers to reduce inorganic or mineral fertilisers, if made more cost-efficient, is the use of by-products from the livestock sector as organic fertilisers, in particular, digested manure derived from green energy production. Additionally, incentivising barn technologies which enable the separate storage of faeces and urine, lower the biochemical interaction, capture ammonia emissions and store them as liquid nitrogen fertiliser. Actions aimed at promoting and facilitating such practices should be put forward to encourage demand and supply for stabilised and transportable organic fertilisers, while reducing EU dependency on imported chemical fertilisers. Such solutions call, however, for out-of-the-box thinking and for a better integration of industries and communities surrounding the farm.

Investments

On-farm investments – Targeted investment support is needed for young farmers to be equipped with accurate water management infrastructure, both on-farm and at the regional level. Many young farmers do not enjoy the opportunity of investing in storage facilities due to high costs, administrative requirements, and sometimes legal constraints. On-farm investments such as water reservoirs, up-to-date irrigation and desalination of water will help to counter the negative spillovers of water scarcity in times of drought. In the context of enhancing the efficiency of water management, investments should be promoted to expand precision irrigation systems to optimise water use and minimise losses. Drainage and levelling of fields support the prevention of flooding in cases of heavy rainfall. Drainage also helps to make water management more efficient in cases of water scarcity and droughts. Keyline systems enhance the water infiltration in soils, preventing soil erosion while contributing towards more efficient water use in times of scarcity. Targeted investment aid provided by the CAP, whose financial allocation should be strengthened rather than reduced, as envisaged in the proposal for an MFF 2028-2034, and specific funding for water resilience measures is essential to adapt to climate change and mitigate the negative externalities of agriculture on waterbodies.



Public infrastructure

Urban wastewater and household sludge – Investments into sewage facilities and systems are urgently needed to limit the reversal of urban wastewater into waterbodies. Additionally, properly equipping sewage stations to ensure a full clean-up of household sludge and urban wastewater is crucial. Improved wastewater treatment could give the opportunity for farmers to use the by-products produced by industry and urban wastewater, such as household slurry for fertilisation purposes. Nevertheless, the use of treated wastewater and household sludge can only be promoted if a robust traceability system is in place and treated urban waste is safe for agricultural use, since any presence of pollutants in the soil or agricultural products could result in the farmer being held legally liable.



Public water resilience - In the public sector, investments must also be stepped up to tackle the leakages in the public water pipes. The primary objective should therefore be to identify and invest in systems that enhance water storage and capture capacity, since the agricultural sector's water requirements must be met in the right quantities and at the right times. Consequently, the establishment of public infrastructure to collect and store rainwater, as well as the creation of weirs and dams, to enhance resilience and ensure the sustainable management of water resources across all Member States, should be promoted. Young farmers call for the promotion of both green and grey infrastructure, whereas nature-based solutions work hand in hand with public water infrastructure to support water resilience.

Governance aspects and opportunities

Legislative considerations

Fit-for-purpose regulatory framework – Young farmers call for a reorganised regulatory framework bringing more coherence between all levels of governance involved. The new framework should also incorporate investment support and foster knowledge-sharing, innovation and advisory services at the regional, national and EU level. Additional regulatory provisions should allow for the agricultural use of repurposed water from other sectors for irrigation purposes, in cases where the water does not meet the quality standards of potable water, for instance. The new framework should also prioritise the agricultural use of water before other sectors in times of scarcity, as food production and the well-being of farm animals is an exigency. In the next step, the development of national water strategies, besides the regular river basin management plans, looking at the aspects of water protection and securitisation, presents a crucial opportunity to enhance the resilience of national water systems.

Regulation based on a territorial approach, reflecting the specific regional context – Furthermore, scientific studies have shown that grasslands can absorb more nitrogen than the 170kg/ha as determined by the Nitrates Directive, without causing nitrate leaching. Young farmers believe that a more flexible, region-specific approach would enhance the effectiveness of the Nitrates Directive while boosting circular nutrient management. Allowing for permanent derogations or lifting the limitation on grasslands would contribute to the preservation of the organic matter in the soil, which is essential to enhance soil quality and thus the infiltration and water retention capacity of soils.

Reporting, compliance and reasonable controls – Reporting and control throughout the EU is important to keep a level playing field for all farmers. Nevertheless, it is crucial to provide for a positive atmosphere and foster positive relations between local authorities and farmers. To reduce the administrative burden, mutual recognition between public and private concerning the reporting obligation needs to be found. Moreover, a tailored approach or goal-oriented compliance should be developed towards the generic measures resulting from EU legislation. Farms which comply with the goals of EU legislation without following these general requirements should be exempted. This can be done through the possible implementation of goal-oriented water governance models.

The role of the CAP – While overall investment needs to exceed the support purely by public schemes, several CAP measures are in place to improve water quality. Green conditionality, eco-schemes and AECMs designed at national level can include practices to enhance water quality. When it comes to financing water management investments, the CAP, with its already stretched budget, considering the reduction foreseen in the post-2027 MFF proposal, cannot solely provide the needed financial support. The use of Cohesion Funds, however, presents an opportunity to provide financial support for on-farm investments such as water retention and storage basins.



Water reuse – Additionally, facilitating the use of repurposed water for irrigation would contribute towards decreasing water abstraction by agriculture for irrigation, whilst revaluing water recycling and decreasing freshwater consumption for purposes other than drinking water. Young farmers welcome the announced review of the Water Reuse Directive and the extension of using repurposed water for sectors beyond agriculture, which will contribute towards enhanced water resilience and reduced freshwater consumption across all sectors.

Multi-actor governance

Coordination with national, regional and local authorities – Young farmers stress that national and regional authorities must take their responsibility to present solutions to the challenges related to governance processes, happening at too many levels and implicating too many different actors. Member states should, at the same time, step up their efforts to support farmers in taking up more water-resilient practices. It is important to determine realistic long term objectives to ensure that these can be reached and positive effects can be measured. Besides, regional authorities are crucial in coordinating the efforts between farmers to improve water quality and on-farm nutrient management.

Engaging multiple actors at the regional level – Water regulation and purification go far beyond the sole environment of the farm, involving neighbouring industries, communities and regional and local authorities. Agriculture should be seen as a part of the solution and thus more involved in the local water management. Instead of the pursued top-down approach, resting on overly restrictive norms and rules, a bottom-up approach actively involving farmers, building trust and cooperation, is necessary. The uptake of best practices and inclusion of farming communities in the design of strategies to improve water management and minimise the negative impact of agriculture is essential to ensure the achievement of the objectives. Beyond public actors, increased cooperation, especially between agriculture and industry, is crucial to open opportunities for improving water management across different sectors.

Supporting collective water management – Efforts to increase water efficiency, such as using repurposed water or collective water management, should be investigated further and remunerated equally. Bodies such as syndicates or unions, involving farmers, researchers, authorities and local water management bodies, taking care of water governance collectively, are good examples of enhanced cooperation. Quota systems in proportion to the respective water levels can ensure that every actor depending on water enjoys adequate access to freshwater relative to their respective need. Collective water management plans allocating access to water equally across stakeholders can support a balanced solution towards the competition between different sectors.

Engaging other sectors

Engaging the value chain – For farmers, improving water quality, in line with the Water Framework Directive and the Nitrates Directive, comes at a cost which today is not compensated for through the marketing of end products. While public schemes such as the CAP offer options for support, they remain insufficient to cover investments costs. To truly acknowledge the added value of farmers' actions, costs should be shared with benefiting communities or consumers.

Involving the public – More awareness of the use of water in agriculture to produce food should be raised among the broader public and supported by politics. To antagonise narratives such as the need for 15,000L to produce 1kg of beef, for instance, the positive contribution of agriculture towards the natural water cycle should be emphasised. Additional methods to counter negative perception could be to raise awareness about food security and local productions. The valorisation and sharing of best practices publicly, as well as projects to enhance efficiency of water management in agriculture could also support a positive perception, while at the same time promote closer cooperation between different actors.

Boosting research and knowledge development

Experience sharing and knowledge development – Besides financial and legal constraints, the lack of experience and adequate knowledge are barriers to the adoption of new strategies and new tools, enhancing more efficient and effective use of water. Tailored advisory services providing support regarding crop choices and efficient water management could assist young farmers in their decision-making and overall foster networks of experience and knowledge-sharing. Public support must be unlocked towards research development and implementation, as well as knowledge and training programs.

Research in alternative PPPs – Further, research into less impactful PPPs and more targeted use of these is key in contributing to a healthier environment while limiting the negative impact on yields generated by diseases or insects. Young farmers stress that not only enhanced research, but also the availability of and access to alternatives is essential and must be safeguarded, before any phasing-out of traditional PPPs can be pursued. The use of phytosanitary products for the protection of crops is an absolute must to ensure the economic viability of farms while preserving food security in Europe.

Climate adaptation

Risk-management tools – Existing risk-management tools need to be more efficient and should be developed towards improving climate change protection and prevention measures. Additional state support is needed, besides the campaigning and diffusion of insurance schemes, which can offer crucial financial support in cases of low yields due to extreme weather events. At EU level, risk management tools in relation to prevention and protection of water bodies lack concreteness. At national level, adequate risk management tools and state support are lacking, preventing many farmers from the uptake of insurance schemes. On the other hand, risk-management funds cannot be based on farmers' contributions alone, but also need public support. Within the framework of risk-management instruments, European funding should be allocated for the creation of insurance schemes specifically designed for young farmers, to strengthen their resilience and support generational renewal in the agricultural sector. Besides, the dissemination of early warning systems for droughts and floods should also be encouraged to support farmers in future planning.

Compensation schemes- Renaturation programmes pursued by many member states, aiming to restore the natural flow of the river, come at high societal and natural costs not only for agriculture, but also for rural communities. Some countries provide compensation schemes to compensate farmers for losses in cases of flooding, which young farmers welcome.

Crop change and new financial tools – Due to the effects of global warming on the level of precipitation and the rising number of droughts, young farmers see the necessity of adapting their production and crop choices to the changing climatic conditions. However, uncertainty regarding sufficient market demand for such shifting productions hinders farm businesses in adapting to the respective climatic conditions, lacking guarantees for their productions to be economically viable and investments to become profitable in the long term. Thus, the desire or need to adapt agricultural production requires the support of new financial instruments that guarantee the repayment of capital when crops become productive and support opportunities to create new market demands. It is therefore necessary to design a financing plan for varietal replacement that does not impose restrictions on the return of investment, but disposes a minimum of 3-4 years of pre-amortisation.

NGTs and new varieties – Alongside the advancement of new technologies supporting adaptation to climate change, new genomic techniques (NGTs) and new varieties such as drought-resistant crops will be indispensable in the adaptation of the European agricultural sector. However, the introduction of drought-resistant varieties is a gradual process, dependent on research outcomes that will inevitably require a considerable time frame. Additionally, considering the European agri-food system, which is characterised by numerous Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indications (PGI), expressing the uniqueness and identity of European agriculture, it is necessary to promote and develop innovation in the field of climate adaptation, to ensure the future of traditional agricultural productions across Europe.



About CEJA

The European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA) is the voice of Europe's next generation of farmers to the European institutions.

CEJA acts as a forum for communication between young farmers and European decision-makers. Its main objective is to promote a younger and more innovative agricultural sector across the EU-27 and to create good working and living conditions for young people setting up in farming and those who are already "young farmers".

CEJA was established in Rome (Italy) in 1958 by organisations representing young farmers from the six founding members of the European Economic Community.

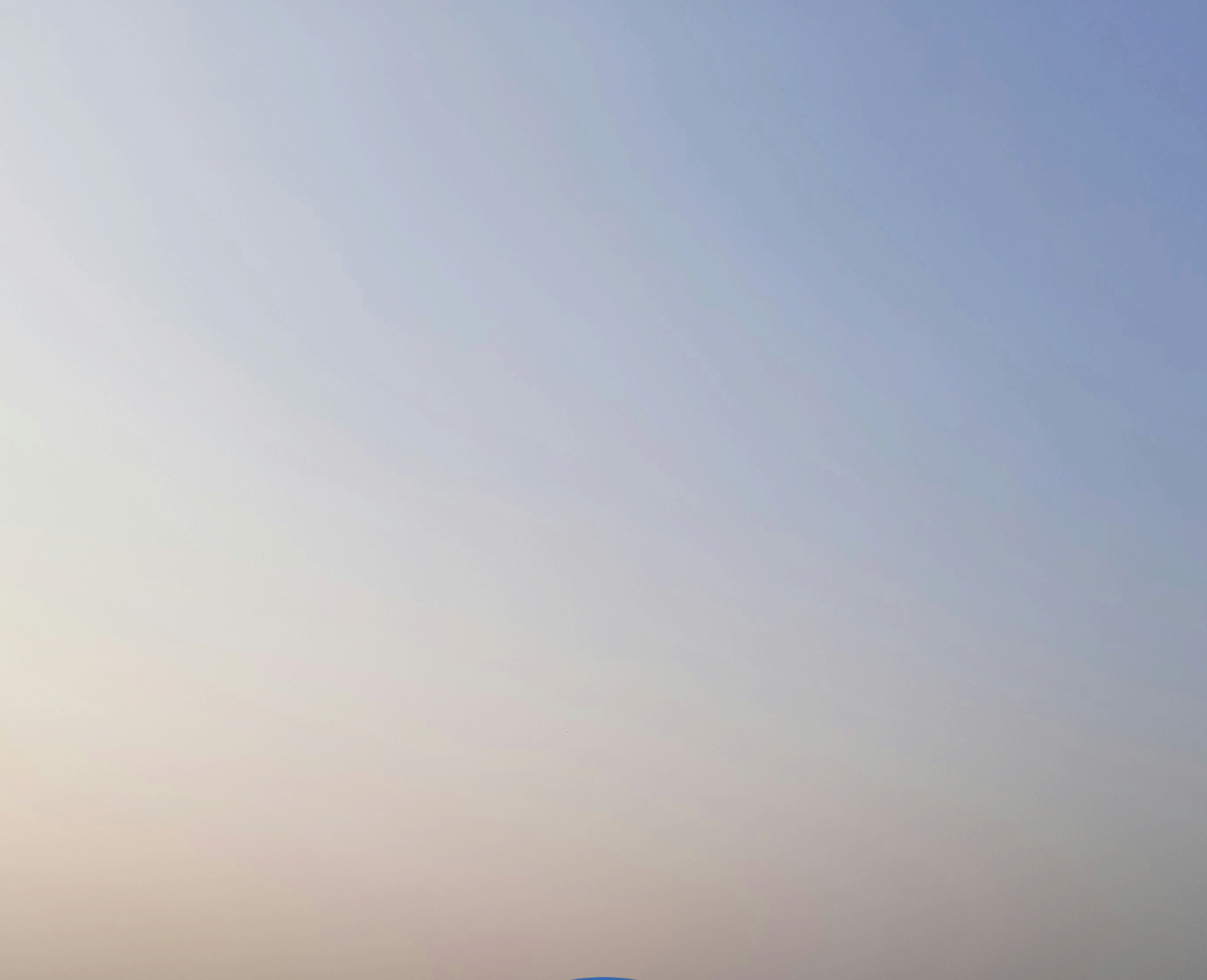
The organisation represents around 2 million young farmers in Europe. Our membership spans across 22 EU Member States and is made up of 31 national member organisations, as well as three associate members from the UK, Serbia and the Republic of Sprska, Bosnia and Herzegovina. We remain in regular contact with young farmers' organisations, agricultural institutions and associations throughout Europe and worldwide.

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