

Rural Pact Conference

Agenda

From vision to action: Empowering rural areas for the future

16 & 17 September 2025

Venue: Château du Biez. Rue de Lannoy 145

Pecq (near Kortrijk/Courtrai), Belgium

16 September 2025 (Day 1)

Timing	Agenda items
13.00	Shuttle busses departing from Courtrai/Kortrijk train station
14.00 – 15.00	Registration to the event & welcome coffee
15.00 – 15.45	Welcome and opening interventions > High-level opening • Mr Raffaele Fitto, Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, European Commission • Mr Christophe Hansen, Commissioner for Agriculture and Food, European Commission > Living in Europe's rural areas today: A citizen perspective • Ms Lina Noreikaitė-Rimkienė, Member of the Rural Pact Community, Lithuania
15.45 – 16.30	Setting the scene: Integrating EU policies at EU and Member State levels > Advancing with the Rural Vision and Rural Pact in Member States • Ms Sari Essayah, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland > Key challenges and opportunities ahead for the future of rural areas – Reinforcing Rural Resilience in OECD countries • Ms Dorothée Allain-Dupré, Head of the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance Division, Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and cities, OECD > Amplifying rural voices through the Rural Pact • Mr Radim Sršeň, Member of the Committee of the Regions and Chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group
16.30 – 17.00	Coffee Break
17.00 – 18.15	Key priorities for the future of rural areas Introductory remarks > Towards impactful and efficient action for rural areas for long-lasting results • Ms Iliana Ivanova, European Court of Auditors Panel debate: High-level representatives from EU institutions/organisations • European Commission Ms Emma Toledano, Director, DG REGIO • Council of the European Union (DK presidency) Mr Hans Peter Olsen, Deputy Permanent Secretary of State in the Ministry of Urban, Rural and Ecclesiastical Affairs of Denmark • Committee of the Regions Mr Radim Sršeň, Member of the Committee of the Regions • European Economic and Social Committee Ms Lidija Pavić-Rogošić, Member of the Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment Section • Rural Pact Coordination Group Ms Edina Ocsko, E40 European Smart village network services, Vice-chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group

18.15 – 18.30

Transition to the Networking session

18.30 – 19.30

Networking session: the Rural Pact Community committing to action

Networking spaces led by key organisations within the Rural Pact Community for focused exchanges, networking and plan join actions on key topics:

- > **Bringing the Rural Pact at local level through LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs)**
European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD)
- > **Implementing the rural vision in Member States and Regions**
Ministry of Agriculture of Hungary
- > **Village vibes: Smart villages for a rural future**
Smart Villages Network
- > **Rural Youth: Together for the present and the future of rural development**
Rural Youth Europe; European Rural Youth Observatory & Meridaunia Local Action Group, Italy
- > **Rural research & evidence-based policy making for the long-term vision for rural areas**
University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland; Natural Resources Institute (LUKE), Finland; & European Rural Development Network (ERDN)
- > **Bottom-up village plans: Communities building their own future**
Rural Pact Netherlands
- > **Sustainable rural development in mountain areas**
Euromontana
- > **Environmental actions for community-led transition**
European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability (ECOLISE)
- > **Community-led innovation in action**
PREPARE Network
- > **Rural tourism**
European Federation of Rural Tourism (Ruraltour)

19.30 – 21.00

Conference Dinner

21.00

Shuttle buses departing to Courtrai/Kortrijk train station



17 September 2025 (Day 2)

Timing	Agenda items
08.00	Shuttle buses departing from Courtrai/Kortrijk train station
09.00 – 09.30	Registration
09.30 – 09.50	Introducing the 2nd day of the conference > Introduction of the agenda of the day Rural Pact Support Office > Acting for rural areas under a new political landscape • Ms Elisabeth Werner, Director-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission
09.50 – 10.00	A closer look at Europe > Better rural statistics for evidence-based policymaking • Ms Teodora Brandmueller, Team Leader, Eurostat, European Commission
10.00 – 10.15	Transition to group discussions
10.15 – 12.30	Actions and recommendations to strengthen the rural society, economy and way of living (session 1) <u>Group discussions:</u> Participants will engage with peers to exchange insights on inspiring local initiatives and policies around key topics. Through participatory discussions, participants will: • Identify the main outstanding needs and emerging opportunities which require focus or attention. • Exchange on actions and policy recommendations needed to advance. • Develop concrete proposals to update the Rural Action Plan or contribute to further develop ideas proposed by Commission services, and advance with the Rural Pact. Group 1: Rural society in the digital era • Shaping rural futures with ‘3C Networks’ – Connectivity, Cloud, and Computing Mr Franco Accordini, DG CNECT, European Commission • 5G for water supply management and emergency response and recovery for Ilirska Bistrica smart municipality Mr Goran Živec, Vahta, (Slovenia) • Rural schools boosting digital skills: Rural Wings academy Mr Nikos Zygouritsas, Ellinogermaniki Agogi (Greece) • Koknese – local communities embracing new technologies Ms Ieva Utena, Koknese community member (Latvia) Questions for discussion > How to overcome the last miles in digital infrastructure? > How to boost the transfer and adoption on new technologies in rural areas? > How to improve the provision of public services through digital technology? > How to develop inclusive digital transformation strategies and policies in rural areas? > How to enhance digital skills in vulnerable groups?

Group 2: Rural areas as key players in the energy transition

- **Supporting energy communities in rural areas**
Mr Achille Hannoset, DG ENER, European Commission
- **Energy poverty and potential for rural areas**
Ms Clara Hormigos, Joint Research Centre, European Commission
- **Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans in rural areas**
Ms Alison De Luise, Covenant of Mayors
- **Development of rural energy efficiency roadmaps**
Ms Valerija Vrček Habazin, North-West Croatia Regional Energy and Climate Agency (REGEA) (Croatia)
Ms Kristina Eisfeld, Climate Alliance (Germany)

Questions for discussion

- > How to boost energy communities including renewable energies in rural areas?
- > How to ensure that vulnerable rural stakeholders have access to essential energy services?
- > How to boost Sustainable Energy & Climate Action Plans (SECAPs) in rural areas?

Group 3: Making rural areas attractive places for young generations

- **Rural youth in the European Union: findings and future**
Mr Charampoulos Papaioannou, DG EAC, European Commission
- **The European Youth Village Programme**
Mr Victor Cătălin, Active Development Association (Romania)
- **Changemaker #Nature: Supporting youth-led projects that protect rural nature conservation and boost innovation**
Mr Ronald Würflinger, Blühendes Österreich (Austria)
- **Rural volunteer programme: engaging young people in voluntary civic services that support rural development**
Ms Marélie Arrighi and Mr Baptiste Dubreil, In Site organisation (France)

Questions for discussion

- > What makes rural areas attractive for young people to live and work?
- > How can we support youth employment and business renewal in rural areas?
- > How can we support rural youth to take part in decisions and lead change?
- > How can we support vibrant rural communities for youth through culture, creativity and innovation?

Group 4: Empowering local communities to enhance resilience

- **EU territorial approaches for rural and coastal communities to build resilient societies**
Mr Anton Schrag, DG REGIO, European Commission
- **Implementing multi-funded CLLD in Czechia to foster rural resilience**
Ms Renata Kučerová, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Czechia)
- **Fostering informed decisions about climate change**
Mr Dariusz Piechowiak, Barycz Valley LAG/FLAG (Poland)
- **Community mobilisation for collaborative projects**
Mr Carlo Ricci, LAG Maiella Verde (Italy)
- **Combining CLLD and ITI to enhance rural resilience**
Ms Sandra Rosario, Associação In Loco (Portugal)

- **Communities getting ready for crises in a bottom-up way**
Ms Sofia Skörde, Leader Västra Småland (Sweden)
Ms Åsa Westström, Leader Linné Småland (Sweden)

Questions for discussion

- > How to design appropriate tools (including LEADER/CLLD) to empower local communities?
- > How can local authorities promote bottom-up approaches?
- > How to enhance resilience of local communities to crises?
- > How to foster voluntary and community action?
- > How to better empower of regions with special needs and constraints?

12.30 – 13.30

Lunch Break

13.30 – 15.45

Actions and recommendations to strengthen the rural society, economy and way of living (session 2)

Group discussions: Participants will engage with peers to exchange insights on inspiring local initiatives and policies around key topics. Through participatory discussions, participants will:

- Identify the main outstanding needs and emerging opportunities which require focus or attention.
- Exchange on actions and policy recommendations needed to advance.
- Develop concrete proposals to update the Rural Action Plan or contribute to further develop ideas proposed by Commission services, and advance with the Rural Pact.

Group 5: Boosting innovative and competitive rural economies and businesses

- **Enabling rural businesses to thrive**
Mr Crispin Waymouth, DG GROW, European Commission
- **Industrial and craft geographical indications fostering business development in rural areas**
Ms Audrey Aubard, Fédération Française des Indications Géographiques Industrielles et Artisanales (France)
- **Rural Tourism EuroCluster supporting small-scale enterprises**
Mr Maurizio Malè, Venetian Cluster (Italy)
Ms Frosso Dimitrakopoulou, Ecoclub (Greece)
- **Academy of social entrepreneurship for the rural area**
Mr Márton Balogh, Civitas Foundation for Civil Society Cluj (Romania)
- **Rural innovation ecosystems to foster business innovation**
Mr Simone Sasso, Joint Research Centre, European Commission

Questions for discussion

- > How can collaboration and support ecosystems foster innovation in rural businesses, including SMEs?
- > How to foster business capacity (including social entrepreneurship), in particular of women and young people?
- > How can rural areas benefit from the new emerging economic opportunities?
- > How to foster industrial and craft geographical indications in rural areas?



Group 6: Ensuring the 'right to stay' in rural areas: addressing demographic challenges through place-based approaches and access to services

- **Cohesion policy as a powerful engine to ensure the 'right to stay'**
Ms Diletta Zonta, DG REGIO, European Commission
- **Functional rural areas to deliver essential and other enabling services in 30 minutes**
Mr Cristian Garcia, Ministry of ecological transition and demographic challenge (Spain)
- **Turning village shops into multiservice hubs**
Ms Antonia Husberg, Ministry Agriculture and Forestry (Finland)
Ms Nina Nilson, Rautio village (Finland)
- **Attracting health professionals to rural areas in Alentejo, Portugal**
Mr Tiago Teotónio, Managing Authority of the Alentejo 2030 Regional Programme (Portugal)

Questions for discussion

- > What are the conditions to enable people to stay in and return to rural areas?
- > How to ensure quality health services in rural areas?
- > How to facilitate access to housing in rural areas?
- > How to roll out multi-service hubs in rural areas?
- > How to improve mobility in rural areas?

Group 7: Building inclusive rural communities

- **European Social Fund for social inclusion in rural areas**
Mr Aurélien Mornon Afonso, DG EMPL, European Commission
- **New trails: Social orientation and integration of newcomers in rural areas**
Ms Irene Almazán, Fundación Cepaim (Spain)
- **Social Farming as a community-driven tool for social inclusion and rural sustainability**
Mr Brian Smyth, Social Faring Ireland (Ireland)
- **Women-led innovation for rural transformation: insights from the GRASS CEILING project** (video intervention)
Ms Blanca Casares, AEIDL (Belgium)

Questions for discussion

- > How can rural communities support the integration of newcomers and ensure a sense of belonging?
- > How can rural communities reduce isolation and improve long-term care?
- > How can we improve opportunities and visibility for women in rural communities?
- > How can we support vulnerable groups into work in rural areas?

Group 8: Driving local prosperity through bioeconomy

- **The bioeconomy as a driver for local prosperity and competitiveness in rural areas**
Ms Silviya Aile, DG ENV, European Commission
- **Regional bioeconomy strategy in Grand-Est region, France**
Ms Marie Clotteau, Grand Est-Europe (France)
- **The green future for Bio-districts in the Netherlands**
Mr Michael Wilde, Organic Embassy (the Netherlands)
- **Flemish food strategy 'Go4Food', Belgium**
Ms Katrien Dejongh, Flemish Land Agency (Belgium)

Questions for discussion

- > How to mainstream a bioeconomy in rural areas which benefits local communities?
- > How can bio-districts be further supported?
- > How to enhance connections between territories, food and people?

15.45 – 16.15

Coffee Break

16.15 – 17.15

Key recommendations for the future

Report back of outcomes from group discussions by keynote listeners

- **Mr Spyros Papadatos**, Rural Youth Europe (Greece)
- **Ms Karen Keaveney**, University College Dublin (Ireland)
- **Ms Jone Fernandez**, Hazi Foundation (Spain)
- **Ms Simone Sterly**, Institute for Rural Development Research (Germany)

Stakeholder panel: Key messages, conclusions and recommendations for future action and policies, and ideas to update the Rural Action Plan and advance with the Rural Pact.

- **Mr Kevin Grauwels**, Flemish Land Agency (Belgium)
- **Ms Hilkka Vihinen**, LUKE Institute (Finland)
- **Mr Ben van Essen**, European Rural Parliament and ERCA
- **Ms Anita Sejicka**, Latvian Rural Forum (Latvia)
- **Ms Charlene Lambert**, Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP)

17.15 – 17.30

Closing the event

- > **Final institutional remarks**
 - **Mr Hugo Sobral**, Deputy Director-General, DG REGIO, European Commission
 - **Mr Mihail Dumitru**, Deputy Director-General, DG AGRI, European Commission

18.00

Shuttle buses departing to Courtrai/Kortrijk train station

