

The food system we inherit

Young people and Europe's protein transition

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Generation Climate Europe

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Executive Summary

This report examines the EU Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan from a youth perspective, exploring how these initiatives shape Europe's protein transition and highlighting gaps in youth participation, environmental sustainability and long-term food system planning.

The report highlights five key recommendations to ensure a more inclusive, sustainable and youth-driven protein transition:

- Ensuring meaningful youth participation in EU agricultural and food policy processes;
- Strengthening food and protein literacy through education and awareness initiatives;
- Supporting young entrepreneurs and innovators through mentoring, technical assistance and access to research and innovation networks;
- Enabling young farmers to diversify production through financial support, knowledge sharing and improved market access;
- Integrating intergenerational fairness into agricultural and protein policies to safeguard opportunities and resources for future generations.

Introduction

The EU Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan, published in July 2026, establishes a framework for strengthening the resilience, competitiveness and sustainability of Europe's livestock and protein systems. As these strategic initiatives are intended to guide the development of European agriculture and food systems in the coming years, this report examines their implications for younger generations and assesses whether their current approach adequately reflects the diverse roles young people already play in the food system.

Through this report, we use the term young people primarily to refer to those aged 15 - 29, in line with the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the European Commission's definition of youth. However, when discussing young farmers and generational renewal in agriculture, we also consider farmers up to the age of 40, reflecting the broader age range commonly used in EU agricultural policy for young farmers.

We believe that the Livestock Strategy sees young people primarily as future workforce, expected to ensure farm succession and keep rural areas economically and socially active. Similarly, while the Protein Action Plan focuses on diversifying European protein production and strengthening value chains, it gives little attention to the perspectives and contributions of young people.

Moreover, we have also identified gaps in the transition framework itself. While both initiatives propose measures addressing innovation, environmental performance, protein diversification and competitiveness, they provide limited clarity on how these measures contribute to a longer-term environmental pathway, what outcomes they are expected to deliver, and how responsibility for achieving them will be shared among the different actors in the food system. A more comprehensive approach should consider not only how production can adapt, but also how consumption, markets, rural economies and social conditions will evolve. Young people should be meaningfully included in discussions and decisions across these areas, with their different experiences, roles and perspectives reflected in the process.

We conclude with five recommendations to make youth participation in the protein transition meaningful, so that Europe's protein transition is resilient, sustainable and responsive to the generation that will shape and experience its long-term consequences.

1. Meaningful youth engagement

The decisions being taken today on livestock, protein production and food-system resilience will shape European agriculture and diets for years to come. Young people will live with these decisions for the longest and will also play a central role in implementing them; as farmers, consumers, workers, entrepreneurs, rural residents and citizens. Yet the question of how young people can meaningfully influence the direction of this transition remains insufficiently addressed.

This report focuses primarily on the roles the recently published EU Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan assign young people in shaping Europe's livestock and protein transition. The central problem is not that youth are entirely absent, but that they are represented too narrowly. In the Livestock Strategy, young people appear predominantly as young farmers and new entrants, framed through the challenge of generational renewal, and the need to maintain agricultural activity and economic vitality in rural areas. Financial, technical and start-up support for young farmers is important, particularly given the ageing farming population. The Protein Action Plan reinforces this gap: despite setting out a long-term direction for a more resilient and sustainable European protein system, it gives little attention to young people as actors in that transition.

Recent efforts show growing recognition of the need for youth participation, but also its limitations. The September 2026 Youth Policy Dialogue on the Livestock Strategy brought together young citizens and organisations from farming, food, rural, labour and environmental backgrounds, yet the official framing of the dialogue remained largely centred on young livestock farmers, generational renewal and support for the next generation of farmers. Young people should be allowed to influence the direction of the transition and bring perspectives beyond farm succession and competitiveness.

Generational renewal, therefore, cannot simply mean attracting more young people into agriculture or preparing them to replace an ageing workforce. The more fundamental question is what kind of agricultural sector, rural life and food system they themselves want to participate in and inherit. Income, access to land, and profitability matter, but so do working conditions, the possibility of taking regular leave, social life, housing, transport, digital infrastructure and access to essential services. Young people should not be treated as a reserve workforce expected to ensure the continuity of the existing system, but as actors with the capacity to question it and help shape its direction.

This requires looking beyond young farmers. Young people engage with the food system in multiple ways: as consumers, workers, innovators and entrepreneurs, rural and urban residents, citizens and future generations. Yet these broader roles are only limited in the Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan. Their dietary preferences, concerns around

affordability and accessibility, environmental expectations, views on animal welfare, and perspectives on the future of rural communities are all relevant to decisions about Europe's protein transition. Limiting the youth perspective mainly to generational renewal therefore risks overlooking many of the ways in which young people are already affected by, and can contribute to, changes in the food system.

Meaningful youth engagement should consequently go beyond consultation or simply having young people represented in policy discussions. It requires moving from policies designed for young people towards policies shaped with them. This means creating opportunities for young people to bring priorities and concerns to the table, and actively collaborating to cultivate new food systems.

2. The EU Livestock Strategy & The Protein Action Plan

The European Commission adopted the **EU Livestock Strategy and the Protein Action Plan** in July 2026 as two closely linked initiatives. The Livestock Strategy is about the future of Europe's livestock sector: how to keep it economically viable and competitive while responding to environmental, animal welfare and structural challenges. It focuses on five areas: 1) resilience, 2) competitiveness, 3) sustainability, 4) territorial diversity and 5) excellence. It proposes measures around risk management, innovation, animal welfare, environmental performance and support through the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The Protein Action Plan focuses on another key challenge: Europe's strong dependence on imported protein, specifically for animal feed. Its main goal is to make the EU protein system more resilient by increasing protein production within Europe, reducing vulnerability to global markets, and strengthening local and regional value chains. The Commission plans to support this through CAP tools, research and innovation, and investment in processing, storage and infrastructure. The Protein Plan also recognises the potential of plant-based and alternative protein sources to create new markets, diversify production and support rural economies.

Both policies will continue to develop through mechanisms such as the EU Livestock Workstream and planned Protein Dialogues with Member States. These spaces will help determine how the strategies are put into practice, making them important for youth engagement. The remaining bottlenecks to be addressed are youth's access into the sectors and their roles in decision-making processes.

3. The protein system young people will inherit

The Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan respond to real pressures within Europe's food system. Europe does not face a shortage of protein but the challenge is in protein production, consumption and distribution. Average protein intake among European adults

is around 80–85 grams per person per day, with animal-based products accounting for approximately 60% of total protein intake (EEA, 2026). At the same time, European dietary guidelines increasingly recommend limiting red and processed meat, while increasing the consumption of legumes and other plant-based protein sources (European Commission, 2025a; 2025b).

This consumption pattern is closely linked to how European agriculture is organised. Around 71% of EU agricultural land is used, directly or indirectly, for livestock production, while around 63% of arable land is used to produce animal feed (Greenpeace, 2019). In contrast, grain legumes such as peas, faba beans and soybeans occupy only around 3% of EU cropland (van Loon et al., 2023). The system is also highly dependent on external inputs because the EU imports nearly two-thirds of the high-protein feed for livestock production, including around 30 million tonnes of soybean products annually (EEA, 2026). This exposes European agriculture to global supply uncertainties, price shocks and geopolitical risks, while the EU shadows a part of its environmental footprint by shifting it outside of Europe (EEA, 2026).

These pressures are environmental as well as economic and health-related. Livestock production accounts for more than 65% of EU agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, while agriculture was responsible for around 94% of EU ammonia emissions in 2023 (EEA, 2026). According to Eurobarometer (2023), European citizens expressed that animal transport conditions, protection measures, and ethical breeding practices on EU farms should improve. Additionally, the European Consumer Organization's Farm Animal Welfare Survey (2024) highlights that better animal welfare is linked to food safety and human health, with respondents stating that imported animal products should be subjected to the same welfare rules as EU products. Without clear indicators, traceability requirements and accountability mechanisms, references to animal welfare risk remaining uneven and hard to enforce across Member States and the EU as a whole.

Together, these pressures point towards the need for a more diversified protein system. Diversification does not mean eliminating livestock farming, but rebalancing production and consumption so that a wider range of protein sources can contribute to European diets and food production. This could include pulses and legumes, plant-based products and, as technologies mature, novel proteins alongside more sustainable forms of livestock production (IEEP, 2025; EEA, 2026). A gradual shift could reduce agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, lower dependence on imported feed and create new value chains and opportunities for farmers and businesses (Pexas et al., 2023; IEEP, 2025; EEA, 2026).

The transition moves beyond choosing between livestock and plant-based production, and focuses on calibrating the future European protein system Europe, its path to transition, and its stakeholders' scope, including youth involvement.

4. Bringing youth priorities to the table

If young people are to have a role in Europe's protein transition, participation cannot be limited to discussing how they can enter or adapt to the sector. It should also give them space to raise their concerns and contribute to the choices that will determine its future. Two questions are particularly important: **what kind of food system Europe should build, and what kind of environmental transition it should pursue.**

4.1 What food system should Europe build?

The demand side of the food system receives less attention than production in the Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan. The Protein Action Plan does include demand-side measures, such as public procurement, origin labelling and awareness campaigns, but its central focus remains strengthening European protein supply and reducing dependency on imported feed. Changing consumption patterns, affordability, accessibility and dietary preferences therefore need to be considered alongside questions of production.

The Commission's own market outlook also shows that there is no single trend across livestock sectors: poultry production is expected to grow, pigmeat production and consumption remain broadly stable, while ruminant sectors face declining production and other pressures. Increasing production or competitiveness therefore cannot be a universal solution. Farmer incomes, changing demand, environmental limits and animal welfare must be considered together.

This is also where a broader youth perspective matters, as both consumers and producers. Questions around affordable food, healthy and sustainable diets, different protein sources and animal welfare concern them directly.

4.2 What kind of transition should Europe pursue?

A similar question emerges around the environmental direction of transition. The Livestock Strategy recognises that different production systems and territories require different approaches, and proposes measures including emissions monitoring, improved nutrient management, technological innovation and farm-level sustainability tools. This flexibility is important given the diversity of European agriculture. However, these measures are not brought together under a clear transition pathway explaining the environmental outcomes the sector should ultimately reach, the steps to get there or the potential timeframe.

The Livestock Strategy recognises the sector's environmental pressures and proposes a range of measures to address them. These include 1) a harmonised methodology for measuring farm-level greenhouse gas emissions, 2) precision feeding, 3) improved manure management, 4) methane-reducing technologies, and 5) recommendations to Member

States through the future CAP. The Strategy estimates that technological solutions could contribute to at least a 16% decline in livestock greenhouse gas emissions by 2040. However, this figure is presented as mitigation potential rather than a binding sectoral target. As such, Member States remain largely responsible for deciding which measures and investments to prioritise according to their national circumstances (European Commission, 2026a).

Therefore, the gap is not a lack of individual measures but the absence of a clear action pathway connecting them. The Strategy does not set out a common trajectory explaining the reach of environmental outcomes, the actionable changes, Member State-level progress reporting, or the financial support. Its emphasis remains strongly on measurement, technological improvements, incentives and changes at farm level. This risks placing much of the environmental transition responsibility on individual farmers, while leaving the wider structural direction less clearly defined. This is particularly relevant given that the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change concludes that technological and farm-level improvements alone will not be enough, calling instead for a systemic transition across production, land use and consumption, backed by targeted transition support and adequate public funding (ESABCC, 2026).

The Protein Action Plan moves further towards this transition logic by recognising protein diversification as part of a more resilient and sustainable food system. It supports diversified production systems, plant-based protein crops, stronger value chains and measures to stimulate demand. It sets a benchmark to increase the share of EU-produced oilseed and protein crops used as feed from 25.8% in 2025 to 35% by 2035 (European Commission, 2026b). This benchmark primarily addresses strategic autonomy and feed dependency. What it does not provide is an overall environmental pathway for how diversification should contribute to changes in production, consumption and resource use across the food system.

According to youth voices (Agroecology Europe Youth, 2022; EIT Food, 2024) the lack of a clearer pathway creates uncertainty about the kind of food system they are being asked to enter, invest in and help sustain. A stronger transition framework should make it clearer how protein diversification, environmental objectives and support for farmers fit together, and where younger generations can contribute to shaping that change.

Young people are already shaping this transition through food choices, development of farms and businesses, new innovations and policy debates. The question for Europe is not whether the protein system will change, but how that change will be managed and who will have a role in shaping it. Recognising young people's contribution is therefore essential to building a transition that is not only resilient and sustainable, but also responsive to the generation that will carry it forward.

5. Young people as drivers

Delivering Europe's protein transition will require more than changes in agricultural production. It also depends on shifts in consumption patterns, innovation, public engagement and policymaking. Young people are already shaping each of these areas, yet their contribution remains only partially recognised in the EU Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan. This section argues that young people should be seen not as a single stakeholder group, but as key actors in implementing Europe's protein transition.

This requires recognising the different ways in which young people are connected to and influence the food system:

As future generations

The decisions taken through the EU Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan will shape European agriculture and food systems well beyond 2030. This makes the protein transition not only an environmental and economic challenge, but also an issue of intergenerational fairness. As Júlia Montoliu Boneu from FutureFoodMakers explains, "We – the next generation of leaders, decision makers and consumers – deserve a voice about these changes and what our future food system should look like. It is time for young people to be heard" (EIT Food, 2024). This principle is also reflected in the EU Youth Strategy, which identifies meaningful youth participation as a cornerstone of democratic governance (European Commission, 2019).

As consumers

Young people are already influencing Europe's food system through their consumer choices. While reducing meat consumption is a trend observed across generations, younger consumers (Gen Z) are more likely to adopt vegetarian, vegan and pescatarian diets than older age groups (Boomers, Gen X) (Smart Protein Project, 2023). At the same time, sustainability is becoming an increasingly important factor in young people's food choices. According to EIT Food's Menu for Change survey, 78% of Gen Z respondents believe urgent action is needed to make food production and consumption more sustainable, while 64% report that sustainability has become more important in their food choices over the past year (EIT Food, 2024). These trends suggest that young people are already influencing the direction of Europe's food system rather than simply adapting to it.

As farmers

Young people are equally important on the production side. Generational renewal remains one of the greatest challenges facing European agriculture, with only around 12% of EU farm managers under the age of 40 (Eurostat, 2023). At the same time, young farmers are

often among the first to adopt innovative technologies, diversify production systems and invest in more sustainable practices.

As innovators

Beyond farming, young entrepreneurs and researchers are developing alternative proteins, biotechnology solutions and digital tools that support more resilient food systems. Companies such as Juicy Marbles, Infinite Roots, ProteinDistillery and Agreena illustrate how young innovators are already contributing to Europe's protein transition. However, while both the EU Livestock Strategy and the Protein Action Plan place strong emphasis on research and innovation, they do not explicitly recognise or support the role of young innovators and entrepreneurs in driving this transition.

As citizens

Beyond their roles as consumers, farmers and innovators, young people also have the right to participate in shaping the policies that will affect their future. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 identifies "Engage" as one of its three core pillars, calling for young people to participate in all aspects of democratic life and in decisions that shape their future (European Commission, 2019). Research on participatory governance further shows that involving those affected by public policies can improve their quality, legitimacy and long-term implementation by bringing diverse perspectives and increasing public trust (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2020). Recognising young people as active partners in Europe's protein transition is therefore not only a matter of representation, but also of better policymaking.

The different roles and contributions described above represent an opportunity to strengthen the implementation of both the Livestock Strategy and the Protein Action Plan by drawing on the ideas, innovation and engagement of young people across the food system. The following section therefore explores how young people can be more systematically included in the implementation of Europe's protein transition, helping to ensure that it is not only environmentally and economically sustainable, but also socially inclusive and future-oriented.

6. Youth agenda and recommendations

The implementation of both the Livestock Strategy and the Protein Action Plan should systematically involve young people, recognising them not only as future farmers and consumers, but also as innovators and citizens shaping Europe’s food system. To achieve this, we recommend:

1. Ensure meaningful and representative youth participation in policy processes

Youth organisations and young farmer associations should be meaningfully represented in Protein Dialogues, CAP consultations and other relevant policy processes. Representation should go beyond simply having a seat at the table: young people's experiences, ideas and concerns should be actively considered in policy design and implementation. At the same time, policymakers should recognise that existing youth and young farmer organisations may not represent the full diversity of young people or farming realities across Europe. Outreach should therefore include a broader range of young farmers, rural youth and young people involved in the food system.

2. Strengthen food and protein literacy through education

Education should help young people understand the links between diets, health, agriculture, climate and the wider food system, while enabling them to make informed choices. School food programmes can be an important entry point. As some schools are already introducing more plant-based meals, these changes should be accompanied by age-appropriate education about nutrition, food production and different protein sources, rather than treating menu changes as a standalone measure. Moreover, hands-on curricular activities, such as farm and factory visits, and gardening and food conventions/exhibitions, should be incorporated to enhance the learning experiences of young people.

3. Support young entrepreneurs and innovators in sustainable protein value chains

Young entrepreneurs developing new technologies, products and approaches can help accelerate protein diversification, but access to finance alone is not sufficient. Following the steps of Starter Pack for Young Farmers Support, the EU and Member States should become more ambitious and focus on a full start-up incubation package. This includes technical assistance, business planning and management skills, mentoring, access to research and innovation networks, and opportunities to test and scale solutions. This can help young innovators move from promising ideas to viable businesses and contribute to the development of more sustainable protein value chains.

4. Enable young farmers to diversify production and pioneer new business models

Young farmers should have access to the knowledge, advisory services, infrastructure and financial incentives needed to diversify their production, including into protein crops and

other emerging opportunities. At the same time, policy should help create markets for new and locally produced foods through public procurement, consumer awareness and knowledge-sharing initiatives. Organising local markets or fairs for new and underdeveloped sectors can help create more effective openings for young entrepreneurs, where they can market their products and increase their visibility. Supporting farmers to reach markets is as important as supporting them to change what they produce.

5. Make intergenerational fairness a guiding principle

The long-term consequences of today's protein and agricultural policies will be experienced most strongly by younger and future generations. Intergenerational fairness should therefore be considered when designing policies and evaluating their successes. This means asking not only whether policies deliver short-term economic or environmental outcomes, but also whether they strengthen the resilience of Europe's food system and leave future generations with the resources, opportunities and capacity to shape their own food system.

Conclusion

Europe's protein transition is not only a question of how protein is produced, but of who shapes the system and who inherits it. This report has argued that the EU Livestock Strategy and the Protein Action Plan address real pressures, yet they largely treat young people as a future workforce expected to secure farm succession and keep rural areas active. This view is too narrow. Young people are already shaping the food system as consumers, farmers, innovators and citizens, and as the generation that will live longest with today's decisions.

The report does not promote one food model over another. It calls for a transition that is credible and inclusive. At present, the Strategy and the Plan propose numerous technological and environmental measures, but they do not bring them together in a clear transition pathway with timelines, interim targets, adequate financing and shared responsibility across the value chain. Without this, young people are asked to enter, invest in and sustain a system whose direction remains uncertain.

Our recommendations offer a way forward: meaningful and representative youth participation in policy processes; food and protein literacy through education; full support packages for young entrepreneurs and innovators; better conditions for young farmers to diversify; and intergenerational fairness as a guiding principle for designing and evaluating policy. Together, they move the approach from policies designed for young people to policies shaped with them.

The coming implementation phase is the moment to act. We call on policymakers to ensure that youth organisations are meaningfully represented in the Protein Dialogues, the EU Livestock Workstream and the CAP consultations. We encourage member organisations to bring their members' priorities into these spaces and to hold decision-makers to account.

The question for Europe is therefore not only how young people can be involved in today's food system, but how that system can evolve to meet the needs and aspirations of the generations who will shape its future.