

Digital skills and 5G centre stage as precision farming vies to enter mainstream

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/meps-push-smallholders-to-the-heart-of-smart-farming-talks/>

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Precision farming experiments have already increased productivity by up to 20%.
[\[Budimir Jektiv/Shutterstock\]](#)

Farmers, digital experts and representatives from the agricultural technology industry joined forces in Brussels on Thursday (12 October) to urge policymakers to bring farming into the digital era.

By giving farmers access to cutting edge digital technology, the European Commission's grand ambition is to make farming more competitive, reduce its environmental impact, cut food prices and better inform consumers about the food they eat.

But despite the widespread support it enjoys in Brussels, digital farming is struggling to enter the mainstream, hampered by an ageing farming population and patchy broadband coverage in rural areas.

"To reap the full benefits of digital farming, the EU needs to devise supportive, coherent and forward-looking policies," said Richard Markwell, President of CEMA, the European trade association of the agricultural machinery industry which organised the one-day conference.

He said that farmers who were experimenting with digital techniques had already seen productivity gains of up to 20% and insisted that the EU had a role to play in encouraging this kind of innovation.

"And this is a gigantic leap forward in terms of environmental protection," Markwell added. "This is not science fiction, it is science fact."

Boosting investment in innovation

With farm income squeezed by low market prices and high input costs, cash-strapped farmers have simply not had the capital to invest in technology. But the Commission said it was mobilising regional funds to ensure anyone who wants to invest in innovation is able to do so.

Khalil Rouhana, Deputy Director-General at the European Commission's directorate in charge of communications networks, content and technology (DG Connect), said farmers should take full advantage of the financing tools available to modernise the agricultural sector and boost investment in innovation, which has stagnated or even declined since 2008.

From 2020, SMEs in the agricultural technology sector will be able to access a €300m pot of EU money to develop scalable projects.



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Legislators push smallholders to the heart of smart farming talks

Several EU lawmakers from the European Parliament's agriculture committee expressed their concerns on Wednesday (30 August) about the introduction of new technologies in farming, claiming that it might put smallholders at risk.

Bridging the digital divide

Other speakers at the conference highlighted the "digital divide" between Europe's urban and rural areas and pointed out that until EU countries make the necessary investments in rural broadband internet infrastructure, digital farming will not make the leap into the mainstream.

The Commission wants the whole of the EU to be covered with high speed broadband by 2020. Most cities are approaching this target – broadband coverage in the EU's urban areas is around 87%. Rural areas are far behind but are gradually catching up.

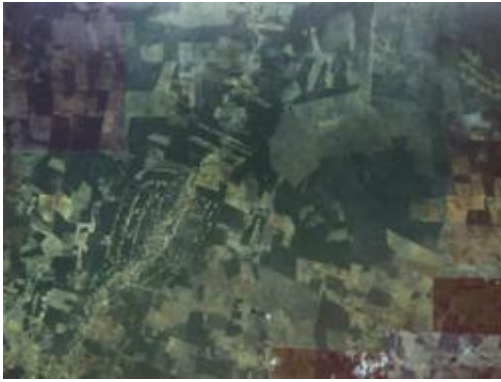
"Coverage in rural areas is about 46% in 2017, up from below 40% in 2016," said Rouhana.

"The transformation of our economy has to be for everyone, not just the happy few," the Commission official stressed. "And if we really want to do this then we have to bring broadband to every region in Europe."

For the head of spectrum policy at Nokia Networks, Ulrich Rehfuss, funding is again the main obstacle to network operators increasing connectivity investments that could support precision farming.

"We must get rural 5G coverage into the spectrum discussion," he told EURACTIV.com. "This issue goes far beyond farming."

5G is a part of the radio spectrum that can carry large amounts of data at very high speeds.



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EU mulls incentives for space technologies in farm controls

The European Commission is considering new proposals to encourage the use of technologies to monitor farm parcels receiving subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), an EU official told EURACTIV.com.

“5G has potential for so many use cases, including public safety applications,” Rehfuess said, adding that the uptake of 5G technology would be smoothed significantly by a simple regulatory framework taking into account all its possible applications.

The Commission is dealing with the issues of data protection and the cross-border flow of data generated by precision farming as part of its Digital Single Market strategy.

Skills gap

Another of the most immediate barriers holding back the advance of precision farming in the EU is the lack of digital know-how in an ageing agricultural sector. “More digital skills are needed,” said Markwell.

More than a third of EU farmers are over 65 years old, while less than 5% are under 35, and few have had training in the use of digital technologies. For Markwell, this is one area where policymakers need a strong role and where EU intervention can be a force for good.

“We have very important challenges in terms of equipping farmers with the new skills required for digital farming,” said Rouhana. “But we also have to have a very important reflection about the working environment and what jobs will be needed in the future.”

The official added that the Commission intends to propose a €10m package as part of its 2018-2020 work programme, to provide digital training to 6,000 agricultural workers across the EU.



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Precision farming may drive down food prices, Commission claims

Precision farming practices in the EU could play a role in driving food prices down, European Commission sources told EURACTIV.com.

Background



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Sowing the seeds of the post-2020 CAP

In June 2013, politicians approved the first major reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in a decade, following months of haggling over quotas, subsidies, and measures to improve environmental accountability.

But when the new rules took full effect in 2015, a year behind schedule, some of the same leaders who had approved it called for changes ...

