



ERIAFF NETWORK NEWSLETTER

Friday 7th August, 2026

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WHAT HAPPENED IN AMSTERDAM ?

The **12th ERIAFF Annual Conference**, opened with institutional remarks by European Commissioner for Agriculture and Food **Christophe Hansen**, setting the stage for discussions on the future of European agri-food and forestry systems.

Hosted under the theme "*Regional Agri-Food & Forestry Systems: balancing the Economic, Ecologic, Environmental and Social innovations*", the conference featured three days of inspiring keynote speeches, interactive plenary sessions, parallel workshops, Working Group meetings, poster presentations, networking activities and technical visits.

The programme was structured around the priorities outlined in the **EU Vision for Agriculture and Food**, encouraging dialogue on topics such as the future of new farmers, true pricing, competitiveness through quality and innovation, and nature-friendly farming. Participants also explored biodiversity restoration, sustainable forest management, resilient regional food systems and stronger rural-urban connections, highlighting the importance of regional cooperation in addressing today's environmental, economic and social challenges.

Beyond the technical discussions, the conference provided **valuable opportunities** for networking, collaboration and the exchange of best practices, reinforcing ERIAFF's mission to connect European regions and foster innovation through shared knowledge. The Annual Conference once again confirmed the **strength** of the ERIAFF network and its commitment to building more sustainable, resilient and competitive agri-food and forestry systems across Europe.



Watch the institutional message of the Commissioner **Christophe Hansen**





HOW WAS IT DONE ?



PLENARY SESSIONS

- **Alex Datema:** director of Food&Agri Netherlands, Rabobank
- **Esmée van Veen:** Head of CSR, Lidl
- **Arndt Hampe:** Inrae
- **Jacqueline Broerse:** Professor VU Amsterdam
- **Marjolein Brasz:** CEO of Foodvalley
- **Sander Groenen:** Director of AgriFood Capital

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

- **Pillar 1:** influx of young farmers and true pricing as a perspective. Moderator: *Roy Meijer*.
- **Pillar 2:** guaranteed quality in products and business processes as a competitive advantage. Moderator: *Jochem Wolthuis*.
- **Pillar 3:** adapting to climate change and focusing on nature-friendly agricultural practices. Moderator: *Silko Mergenthal and Gino van Maaren*.
- **Pillar 4:** vibrant rural areas for vibrant urban areas by FoodClic, including the Amsterdam foodstrategy. Moderator: *Ruben Smolders, Léon Feenstra and Juliane Kürschner*.
- **Pillar 5:** forest cooperatives and success experiences on social economy in forestry. Moderator: *Pau Brunet, Álvaro Picardo Nieto, Tiina Paakkari and Carina Christiansen*.
- **Pillar 6:** nature-inclusive in combination with goal-orientation approach. Moderator: *Simon Maas, Ingeborg Visscher and Aleid Teeuwen*.
- **Pillar 7:** short food supply chains through the lens of food security. Moderator: *Mark Fredriks and Oleksandra Avramenko*.



HOW WAS IT DONE ?

FIELD VISITS

1. **Amsterdam**: urban agriculture and food systems
2. **Flevoland**: agroforestry and future farming
3. **Gelderland-Overijssel**: protein transition and food upcycling
4. **Noord-Brabant**: high-tech and precision farming
5. **Noord-Holland**: seed breeding and local dairy
6. **Zuid-Holland**: horticultural innovation ecosystem

1 A short bus ride from VU Amsterdam brought delegates to **Noordoogst**, the largest urban agriculture site inside Amsterdam's ring road and a joint effort between **FoodCLIC** and the Municipality of Amsterdam. What used to be a set of abandoned sports fields has, over twelve years, turned into more than 4.5 hectares of urban farming: a CSA scheme feeding 150 families, plus over 20 small, circular enterprises sharing the same ground, among them a bakery, a vineyard and a mushroom grower. The group was split in two for the afternoon. One half walked the food forest with urban farmer *Sven*, meeting several of the site's entrepreneurs along the way; the other sat down to discuss food-sensitive urban planning and how peri-urban production can strengthen ties between city and countryside. Halfway through, the groups swapped. A closing conversation with the **Municipality of Amsterdam** and other stakeholders turned to the area's uncertain future, as new development plans move forward and questions remain about which functions (food production among them) deserve a place in the neighbourhood that comes next.

2 **Flevoland** is sometimes called Europe's vegetable garden, and this excursion gave participants a taste of why (quite literally, at the first stop). On the drive out from Amsterdam, chef and civil servant *Sharon de Miranda* told the story of Flevoland itself, the world's largest man-made island. At **Saalland Farm**, *Marga* and *Wim* have spent the last two years threading rows of woody crops through their arable fields, testing



whether agroforestry can make the whole system more resilient; representative Jan Klopman walked the group through the plot, and several of the crops were there to sample.

From there it was on to the Farm of the Future, Wageningen University & Research's experimental site, where a brief seminar laid out the pressures facing modern agriculture before the real tour began: a tractor and trailer through the test fields,

I HOW WAS IT DONE ?

with researchers pointing out how biodiversity, soil health, crop protection and yield are all being studied side by side. Between a working farm and a research station, the day made a strong case for keeping pioneering growers and academic science in close conversation.

3 This excursion took delegates deep into **Wageningen's** innovation scene, with protein transition and food upcycling as the connecting thread. A bus tour of the university campus ended at **Plus Ultra II**, the incubation hub where start-ups, established companies and researchers work under one roof.

From there, the group stopped at **OnePlanet**, which applies nano and digital technology to agriculture, food, health and the environment, before **Foodvalley NL** took over; an organisation built to connect the right people around a shared ambition for a fairer, more sustainable food system. Two of its communities got particular attention: the **Protein Cluster** and the **Upcycling Community**, both wrestling with how to make better use of what the food system currently wastes. A walk through several start-ups working on exactly these problems rounded out the programme. Drinks and informal conversation closed out the visit before the bus headed back to Amsterdam, a good reminder of how much regional innovation clusters can achieve when the right players are put in a room together.

4 Precision agriculture was the focus in Noord-Brabant, where the group visited the **VDBorne Campus** in Reusel, a site that developed from farmer Jacob van den Borne's family-run business and now brings farmers, technology companies, universities and public authorities together under one roof. The business has been growing and producing potatoes for three generations, combining long-standing agricultural experience with a strong commitment to innovation. Under the third generation, the company expanded its activities by establishing a dedicated training centre for its own employees and for young people wishing to enter the agricultural sector. This investment in knowledge and skills is particularly significant when compared with the size of the

business. The farming operation employs seven workers, while the training centre itself has a staff of five. This relatively substantial commitment of human resources to education and training highlights the importance placed on professional development, knowledge transfer and the preparation of a new generation of skilled agricultural workers.





HOW WAS IT DONE ?

The underlying principle of the campus is simple to explain but difficult to implement: rather than managing an entire field in the same way, farmers should treat individual plots, or even individual plants, according to their specific needs. Sensors, drones, satellites, GPS systems and connected machinery all contribute to this objective, transforming raw field data into practical guidance on when and where to irrigate, fertilise, sow or spray. Particular attention was given to drones equipped with Red, Green and Blue (RGB), multispectral and thermal cameras. These technologies allow the campus to identify differences in biomass, detect water stress and recognise early signs of disease before they become visible to the human eye.

The visit also included the **Agri Drone Port** and the **Field of the Future**, where eighteen plots are managed side by side using conventional, high-tech and regenerative farming methods, allowing their results to be directly observed and compared. The main takeaway from Reusel is that precision agriculture advances most effectively when practical farming experience, technological expertise, research and education are closely integrated. By combining three generations of potato production with advanced technologies and a strong emphasis on training, the VDBorne Campus demonstrates how farmers, researchers, businesses and future agricultural professionals can work together to accelerate innovation in the sector.

5 **North Holland** does two things well (water management and agri-food) and this excursion showed off both. First stop was **Gitzels Plant Nursery** in Wervershoof, family-run since 1952 and now in its third generation, and one of the country's largest suppliers of young plants to seed companies and vegetable growers. The company's previous owner led the tour himself, weaving in the wider story of **Seed Valley** along the way. From there the group drove to Nicolaashoeve, a mixed arable and dairy farm sitting in the middle of De Beemster, a polder reclaimed from a lake back in the 17th century and now a UNESCO World Heritage site with real weight in Dutch agricultural history.

The bus ride between the two stops covered plenty of ground: how De Beemster once fed Amsterdam, and how **CONO Kaasmakers'** Caring Dairy programme fits into the picture today. At Nicolaashoeve itself, participants wandered through the stables and picked up local products at the farm shop, a fitting close to a day that moved from cutting-edge plant breeding to farming rooted in centuries of local history.

6 Ask why Dutch horticulture leads the world, and the answer isn't really about soil or climate; it's about how willing competitors are to sit at the same table. That was the theme running through the visit to the **World Horti Center** in **Zuid-Holland**. The bus ride down came with a crash course in the region's horticultural history, and on arrival, *Lenny Dijkshoorn*, the Center's Manager International Affairs, welcomed the group in person.

HOW WAS IT DONE ?



What followed was a themed walk through the building, with input from regional network partners: a stop at Cultivation for Compounds, where plants are studied for what else they might be good for beyond food; the HortiHeroes Startup Wall, introducing young companies trying to shake things up; and a run through zones dedicated to Health, Robotics & AI, Energy and Value Chains. What stood out was less any single technology and more the ecosystem around it;

governments, schools, researchers and rival companies genuinely working on the same problems together. For the policy makers and regional developers in the group, it was a useful prompt to ask what similar trust might unlock back home.



HOW WAS IT DONE ?

WORKING GROUP ACTIVITIES

1. **Bioeconomy and Resilience + Forested Regions**
2. **Agroecology + Food Systems**
3. **Health, Nutrition and Food Innovations & EU Citizen Awareness + Alternative Proteins**
4. **Social Innovation**
5. **High Tech Farming + Plants**

1 The **Bioeconomy and Resilience** Working Group, together with the **Forested Regions** Working Group, presented a number of regional initiatives demonstrating how the bioeconomy can contribute to a more competitive and sustainable European transition.

The first part, presented by *Gölin Carina Christiansen* (Senior Policy Adviser in European Affairs, North Sweden European) focused on the **European Bioeconomy Strategy**. The presentation highlighted its role in supporting the green transition, the relevant EU regulatory framework, the economic value of forest-based value chains, and the importance of innovation and circularity in promoting a more efficient use of biological resources.

During the second part, *Johan Norman* (Forestry Expert at the Swedish Forest Agency and member of the Swedish FOREST EUROPE Presidency team, Gothenburg, Sweden) presented the latest developments within **FOREST EUROPE**, the pan-European policy process promoting sustainable forest management through cooperation among European countries. His presentation outlined how the initiative operates, its membership, the role of observers, and the priorities of the Swedish Presidency for 2025–2026. The EU regulatory framework concerning novel foods was also analysed.

Finally, a roundtable took place centered on possible existing tensions between economic growth, environmental protection and social acceptance and their solutions.

Irene Galletti (Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the Regional Council of Tuscany), focusing on the **Tuscany Region** reality recognized that In Tuscany trade-offs are especially related to extractive biobased projects (which don't bring value to the local area and are in competition with other objectives). A place-based approach is one solution, in Tuscany, in particular this approach involves short supply-chains and cascading use of biomass. An alternative solution is inclusive governance - involving farmers, business and local authorities - along with a positive orientation towards environmental sustainability. Tuscany has always respected circularity principles thanks, and not in spite of, its diversified reality (high quality agriculture deeply rooted in local areas, extensive forested areas, rural districts and local supply chains), which make it even more resilient in front of the circular/bioeconomy transition.

HOW WAS IT DONE ?

The Tuscan bioeconomy is artisanal, cooperative, widespread and strongly connected to the territory. Regional authorities, being the closest ones to local communities, have a decisive role in supporting this diversification with flexible tools adapting to specificities.

A final recommendation to the EU policy-makers is to make Regional authorities concrete partners of the new EU Bioeconomy Strategy by involving them more directly and frequently especially in selecting

priorities, building supply chains and monitoring impacts in the European bioeconomy process.

More information about the Tuscany Regional Bioeconomy Strategy is available [here](#).

Markus Hirvonen (Mayor of the Regional Council of North Karelia, Finland) intervened on the lessons other European Regions could take from North Karelia experience concerning the combination of local governance, industry, and citizens. More information about North Karelia's Circular Economy Roadmap is available [here](#).

Josè Almodovar Araez (Forestry wildfires expert of the Castilla La Mancha Government, Spain) focused on potential consequences of the bioeconomy on issues relating to rural depopulation, water scarcity, and land use. More information about Castilla La Mancha's Circular Economy Strategy is available [here](#).



2 The **Agroecology** and **Food Systems** Working Groups dedicated their thematic session to presenting some of the most relevant challenges and opportunities facing Europe's agri-food sector.

The session provided concrete examples of how research, innovation, regional cooperation and technological development are contributing to the transformation of European agriculture and food systems.

The first part explored how Regional authorities, research organisations and agricultural stakeholders are advancing the transition towards more **sustainable** and **resilient farming systems**. The presentations covered the new Regional dimension of the Agroecology Partnership, presented by *Carlos Cabo Domínguez* (Project Technician, FUNDECYT Science and Technology Park of Extremadura, Badajoz, Spain); practical experiences in agrobiodiversity governance, presented by *Sara Burbi* (Assistant Professor, Institute of Plant Sciences, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa, Italy);



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and the European LivingSoiLL project, presented by *Eriselda Canaj* (EU Projects Officer, AREFLH, Brussels, Belgium) and Michele Gentile (EU Policy Officer, AREFLH, Brussels, Belgium).

The session also featured regional initiatives promoting agroecological practices in Pays de la Loire, presented by *Luisa Bouzoubaa* (Innovation, Research and Development Officer, Regional Chamber of Agriculture of Pays de la Loire, Nantes, France), and a science-based perspective on sustainable and regenerative agriculture, presented by *Lorenzo Furlan* (Director of Innovation and Experimentation, Veneto Agricoltura – Veneto Region's Agency for Innovation in the Primary Sector, Legnaro, Italy).

The second part, entitled "**Food Technology and Processes**", showcased innovative research and interregional cooperation supporting resilient and circular food systems. Speakers presented projects on food-quality control, led by *Markus Ojala* (Project Manager specialising in food-chain digitalisation and quality management, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences – SeAMK, Seinäjoki, Finland); the valorisation of agri-food by-products, presented by *Giovanna Ferrentino* (Tenured Associate Professor of Food Science and Technology, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Bolzano, Italy); and digital tools for sustainable and inclusive food systems, presented by *Rosanna Dimita* (Area Specialist for European Project Development, Fondazione Ag rifood & Bioeconomy FVG, Colloredo di Monte Albano, Udine, Italy).

Finally, *Alberto Ortiz* (Researcher in the Meat Quality Area, Centre for Scientific and Technological Research of Extremadura – CICYTEX-La Orden, Badajoz, Spain) presented the application of portable near-infrared spectroscopy technologies in livestock production and meat processing.

3 The **Health, Nutrition and Food Innovations & EU Citizen Awareness** Working Group explored the role of food and nutrition innovation in promoting healthier, more sustainable and resilient food systems, highlighting the importance of collaboration among research institutions, businesses, public authorities and European Regions.

At the beginning of the session, *Minna Storm* (Project Manager, Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia, Seinäjoki, Finland) presented the objectives and activities of the Working Group, which focus on fostering innovation in nutrition and health, supporting the development of European projects and strengthening interregional cooperation. She also presented the Working Group's achievements and future initiatives, including the **ReTradAI** project, which integrates regional food traditions with artificial intelligence to promote more sustainable food choices.

At the beginning of the session of the **Alternative Proteins** Working Group, the Co-Chairs, *Machteld van Dijk* (Senior Project Manager, Foodvalley NL, Wageningen, the Netherlands) and *Martin Broberg* (Business Development Manager, RISE Research

HOW WAS IT DONE ?

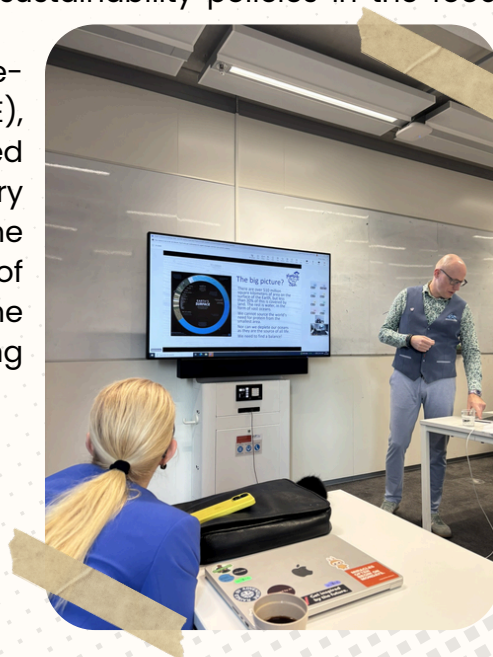
Institutes of Sweden, Gothenburg, Sweden), presented the objectives of the Working Group, highlighting its commitment to increasing the availability of plant-, microbial-, marine- and insect-based proteins through EU-funded projects, policy monitoring, project development and the exchange of best practices among European regions. They also emphasised the Working Group's role in fostering collaboration between regional authorities, universities, clusters and businesses to support the transition towards more sustainable food systems.

Throughout the session, *Lennart Wallander* (Business Development Manager, RISE Research Institutes of Sweden, Gothenburg, Sweden) outlined the key trends expected to shape the future of food, while *Anna Papaconstantinou* (Project Manager, Regional Development Fund of Central Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece) highlighted the value of Mediterranean food traditions through the case of authentic Greek Macedonian cuisine, emphasising the link between cultural heritage, regional identity and nutrition. *Thijs Wullems* (Chief Executive Officer, Seafood without Fish, Wageningen, the Netherlands) presented an innovative business model for producing alternatives to conventional seafood products, highlighting the potential of new protein sources.

The second part of the meeting focused on future developments in the sector *Daniele Fantechi* (Research and Innovation Officer, Tuscany Region, Florence, Italy) illustrated how the bioeconomy can contribute to the development of innovative food value chains, while *Dr. Pierre Kirisci* (Founder and Chief Executive Officer, AIKYA, Munich, Germany) showcased the applications of Agentic Artificial Intelligence in the development of new food and beverage products, underlining the growing role of artificial intelligence in research, innovation and industrial development.

Els Bedert (Senior Policy Adviser, Comeos – Belgian Federation of Trade and Services, Brussels, Belgium) discussed the role of European sustainability policies in the food retail and trade sector.

Finally, *Dr. Ivona Babić* (Policy Officer, Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE), European Commission, Brussels, Belgium) provided an overview of the European Union's regulatory framework for Novel Foods. She explained the authorisation process, safety requirements, the role of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), and the European Commission's main initiatives concerning innovative foods and alternative proteins.





| HOW WAS IT DONE ?

4 The **Social Innovation** session at ERIAFF 2026, coordinated by the **Marche Region**, focused on the implementation of social farming through Sub-measure 16.9, under the RDP 2014–2022.

Mrs. Antonella Passarani (Policy Officer of the Marche Region, Brussels) introduced the Social Innovation workshop emphasising the quadruple helix model (which brings together universities, local governments, farming companies, and society), the core element of most of the funded projects.

Representatives from Italian regions, including Liguria, Emilia-Romagna, Marche, and Toscana, discussed projects and the final outputs of the funding campaigns throughout their territories.

For the Marche Region, the projects **Tutti in Campo** for the E-museum of ancient fruit varieties (project leader: SI.GI, a farm in Macerata), **Natural(mente)** (project leader: Azienda Agricola Fattorini, a farm in Ancona), and **L'Orto del Sorriso** (project leader: Cooperativa Sociale Agricola L'Orto del Sorriso, a farming cooperative in Ancona) were presented in detail, highlighting the interactive ancient fruits museum as a permanent result, as well as innovations in the local welfare system offered through farms to disadvantaged people.

Mrs. Marialaura Maricanola (Policy Officer of the Liguria Region, Liguria) pointed out the fund of €1.7 million allocated, implemented alongside other sub-measure funds, to support and enhance public-private cooperation in social farming.

The Toscana Region discussed projects benefitting non-self-sufficient people, financed through Sub-measure 16.9. It presented its strategic evolution from the 2018 and 2022 calls to the upcoming 2025 SRG07 funding. Featured case studies included: **Reti che sostengono** by the Calafata social farming cooperative (Lucca), focusing on stable job inclusion, and Recto Verso, which provides professional olive-growing training for inmates on Gorgona Island while preserving biodiversity (project leader: SS. Annunziata, a farm in Livorno).

This part of the session highlighted social farming's potential to combat rural depopulation by fostering qualified employment and social services within agricultural settings. A key takeaway was the need for expanded European cooperation to bridge the existing gap between Northern and Southern regions. Moving forward, the working group aims to involve more international actors to refine social innovation strategies and measure the long-term impact of these initiatives across the EU.

5 The joint **High-Tech Farming** and **Plant** WGs session focused on identifying the main technological, agronomic and governance challenges shaping the future of European agriculture. Discussions highlighted five strategic areas: robotics and automation, controlled environment agriculture (CEA) and livestock farming, plant science, data management, and governance.

A first area of discussion addressed the growing role of **robotics** and **automation** in

HOW WAS IT DONE ?

tackling structural labour shortages across European agriculture. Participants stressed the need to improve the reliability of robotic systems under real farming conditions and to accelerate the integration of sensors, artificial intelligence and autonomous operations into practical farming solutions. Controlled Environment Agriculture and livestock production were also identified as priority sectors, where automation can reduce labour intensity while improving resource efficiency through integrated climate, irrigation and crop management systems.

The session also explored **plant science** and **digital innovation**, emphasising precision agriculture technologies to reduce chemical inputs, alongside AI-based tools for the early detection of pests and diseases. Advanced crop models and digital twins were recognised as promising approaches to increase resilience to climate variability and support farm decision-making. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of interoperable data platforms, real-time monitoring networks and AI-powered decision support systems capable of transforming data into practical knowledge. Beyond technology, discussions underscored the need for stronger governance frameworks, updated regulatory approaches and greater coordination between research, policy and industry to accelerate the uptake of innovation across Europe's agri-food sector.



For more details about:

- the thematics addressed by each Working Group
- conference video sessions



SAVE THE DATE: **AC27** IN JÖNKÖPING

Mark your calendars! The **13th ERIAFF Annual Conference** will take place in **Jönköping**, Sweden, from **24–27 May 2027**.

Hosted by Region Jönköping County, the conference will bring together ERIAFF members and stakeholders from across Europe to explore the future of forestry, sustainable bioeconomy and regional innovation, while fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange and new partnerships for more resilient rural areas.



UPCOMING ERIAFF EVENTS

- **23/09 CC ERIAFF** members, WG leaders and guests (online meeting)
- **21/10 CC ERIAFF** members, WG leaders and guests (online meeting)
- **11/11 CC ERIAFF** members, WG leaders and guests (online meeting)
- **09/12 CC ERIAFF** members, WG leaders and guests (online meeting)

About ERIAFF

The Network of European Regions for Innovation in Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ERIAFF) is an informal association of **regional Authorities** that was established in 2012 in Florence (Tuscany, Italy). The Network is currently participated by 53 member Regions and 39 observers from 21 European countries. ERIAFF allows its members to work on **themes** of common interest and has established a number of thematic **working groups** which are coordinated by the most committed members. The participation to the Network and its Working Groups is free and based on a **voluntary commitment**. ERIAFF accepts as member any Regional Authority (or a delegated Public organization) that commits to the objectives of the ERIAFF Joint Statement (2012) and Declaration (2013). Regional Authorities may also be accepted as observers. Visit our [website](#) for more information.

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Member and Observer
Regions

21

European
Countries

14

Year since
establishment



ERIAFF network

European Regions for Innovation
in Agriculture, Food and Forestry

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