



Forum for the
Future of Agriculture®
Annual Conference 2026

Rebooting the food system

Session 2 – How can we finance and
accelerate the transition on the ground?

Keynote address

Kurt Vandenberghe
Director-General, DG CLIMA,
European Commission



Forum for the Future of Agriculture
2026 Annual Conference
Tuesday, April 14, 2026

Rebooting the food system

Session summaries



Rebooting the food system

The 2026 Forum for the Future of Agriculture (ForumforAg) Annual Conference was held on Tuesday, April 14, 2026, in Brussels and online. The event consisted of live broadcasts, moderated panel discussions and dialogues, interactive interventions, networking opportunities and exhibitions.

“We are living in the most uncertain and the most dangerous of times.” That was the message from Moderator Stephen Sackur, International Broadcast Journalist, who with Rose O’Donovan, Journalist & Editor AgraFacts, set the tone for the 2026 conference. The event came against a backdrop of acute global uncertainty – a timely moment for the theme of rebooting the food system. Questions of food security and food sovereignty had never felt more urgent – “it feels like the end of the world as we know it”, said Rose, referring to the title of the first panel session.

Before starting the official proceedings, the audience observed a minute’s silence to mark the tenth anniversary of the Brussels terrorist attacks of 22 March 2016, an event that had cast a long shadow over a previous gathering of the Forum in the same location on the day of the bombings.

Interview with Janez Potočnik, Chair ForumforAg and Chairman RISE Foundation

Interviewed by Stephen Sackur, Janez Potočnik, Chair ForumforAg and Chairman RISE Foundation, said bluntly that the geopolitical situation was hard to read and changing by the hour. And it brought nothing good, least of all for agriculture. Chain reactions set off by conflict and instability have exposed just how fragile the interconnected systems underpinning food supply are. “If things move slightly, we all feel the consequences,” he said.

His main lesson was this: build a food system that is as resilient as possible through regenerative, environmentally friendly agriculture. “Everything else is riskier.” He drew a direct parallel with the extreme weather events that struck Slovenia in the summer of 2023, when flooding caused damage estimated at 16% of Slovenian GDP. The costs of inaction fall on individuals, on governments, and ultimately on European budgets, he warned.

Not everything can be resolved with strategic thinking and governments must help people through acute crises. But that is not an excuse to revert to business as usual the moment a crisis passes.



A consistent green agenda

Turning to the green and sustainability agenda, Mr Potočnik agreed that it is slipping down the political agenda in favour of energy policy and food security. "That's a mistake, a strategic mistake that will be very costly," he said. And he does not intend to abandon his efforts.

At Stephen's suggestion that he was "a dreamer", Mr Potočnik replied: "If there were no dreamers, this world would have already collapsed." The lesson he drew from decades in policy was to stay consistent, keep repeating the message, and be patient. Circular economy, which he has long championed, is now a global trend. The fifth freedom - free movement of knowledge, research and innovation - which he proposed in 2007, is back on the agenda in 2026. "Sometimes in politics you have to be patient."

Europe's two main problems

On Europe's structural challenges Mr Potočnik highlighted two fundamental problems. The continent lacks energy resources, material resources, and competitive economic platforms, countries fail to work together. Tax competition between member states is a self-defeating example of collective weakness. Europe's real opportunity lies in demonstrating that a democratic, advanced economy can function under resource constraints. "We have to understand that, if we work together, we can actually lead and not just follow."

Does Europe need to be more aggressively protectionist in the style of President Trump, asked Stephen. Mr Potočnik was sceptical. Europe has always championed openness and cooperation, and that instinct should not be abandoned. His reasoning went deeper than economics: we are the first generation living in a world of genuinely planetary scope - more interconnected and interdependent than any before, whether through climate change, pandemics, the internet, AI or trade.

Change is coming whether humanity chooses it or not, he said. History shows that when reason does not prevail, change is forced by disaster. The evidence is already visible: seven of nine planetary boundaries have been crossed, future generations are being indebted, and natural resources are being depleted. Mr Potočnik concluded: "We are apparently the most intelligent species on Earth and it's high time to prove it."



Why food connects all the dots

How do we reframe the concept of food security and tackle the “weaponization” of food? This was the theme of Michael Werz’s inspirational talk and subsequent discussion with Mark Titterton, Co-founder and member of the Forum’s Advisory Council.

Mr Werz, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, “works at that nexus between food security, climate, migration, and emerging countries,” said Mark in his introduction.

Mr Werz explained his organization’s mission. “People need to finally understand that food security is not exclusively a humanitarian issue, that it is in the midst of a geopolitical tectonic shift. We need to change our approach, the ways we talk about food security, the concepts we use, and the strategic outlook that is associated with the impact that food security has on the globe,” he said.

More than 630 million people already suffer hunger, there is deep fragility in agri-food systems across the global South, and the cascading consequences of the Iran war are layered on top of elevated fertilizer prices stemming from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Heading for a perfect storm

The Iran conflict illustrates the complexity of the challenge. The Gulf region imports 75- 90% of its rice, corn and soybeans. Wheat consumption across the wider region is exceptionally high. With attacks on desalination infrastructure, disruption of up to 30% of international fertilizer exports, and an El Niño season expected to drive droughts across key growing regions, Mr Werz saw the conditions for “a perfect storm.”

“Food is being used as a weapon of war... and the situation we’re creating now is potentially offering new access points of vulnerability for malign actors,” Mr Werz said. He highlighted several examples.

- In Gaza, food has been used directly - blocking supplies to create famine.
- In Sudan and parts of the Sahel, food has been weaponized as a recruitment and retention tool by insurgent groups.
- In Ukraine, Russia has pursued “food as a long-range weapon” - mining agricultural fields, attacking transport infrastructure, bombing port installations, and targeting seed companies.
- Globally, cyber-attacks and bioterrorism are other concerns.



Agri-food stakeholders can connect the dots

What should be done, asked Mark? The Council is already working with military and intelligence communities, said Mr Werz. First, the concept of security must be broadened and embedded in geopolitical assessments and strategic planning. Second, the world needs stronger legal and normative instruments, for example, an updated or new international treaty protecting food security in times of conflict. Third, the NGO and business communities represented at the Forum should “connect the dots” by “not only talking to each other but actively engaging in a geopolitical conversation that needs to be informed by the wealth of knowledge, data, experiences, and local insights that all of you have”. Military and strategic planners often lack the on-the-ground insights that NGOs and private sector actors carry.

Incentives for change

The discussion turned to incentives and short-termism. Politics responds to immediate pressures, quarterly reporting drives business decisions, and the loudest voices call for subsidised gas prices rather than long-term investment, said Mr Werz. Piling on moral pressure tends to produce a backlash. Instead, he argued for scenario-based thinking: working backwards from 2035 or 2040, gaming the consequences of inaction, and making the strategic costs of short-termism concrete and visible. “If we close our eyes and pretend that we’re going to go on another 20 years like we do now, it’s not going to end well,” he said.

To finish, Mark turned to positivity – after all, this was an inspirational talk. “What gives you cause for optimism?” he asked. One thing was this gathering itself and the diversity of actors in the room. Another was the conversations happening at forums like the Munich Security Conference and at NATO headquarters, where food security specialists and resilience planners are finding common ground. But Mr Werz emphasised: “This will not happen and this will not be successful without actors from the global South.” The emerging countries that are big producers and consumers, need to step up and play a constructive, forward-looking role – “which in the majority of the cases, they have not so far”.



The end of the world as we know it – what are the consequences for agriculture and environment?

What does “the end of the world as we know it” mean for agriculture and the environment – and how do we respond to the challenges? Panellists brought diverse perspectives in the first panel, moderated by Stephen Sackur.

“Focus on innovation and the long-term”

“We’ve been facing the end of the world as we know it for quite some time now from a climate perspective,” said Cristina Bruce, Senior Vice President, Sustainability and Social Impact, Anglo American. Her sector is already taking the long-term view: in mining, a project typically takes 17 years from discovery to production. Anglo American is developing the world’s largest deposit of polyhalite, based in northern England, to produce innovative, low-carbon fertilizer products. The company is also divesting from thermal coal and reshaping its portfolio around copper, iron ore and polyhalite.

“We need a focus on supporting innovation, supporting companies that are looking to the long term - working with customers and regulators to develop systems resilience and sustainability,” she said.

“An over-financialised economic system”

Sandrine Dixon-Declève, Global Ambassador for The Club of Rome and Executive Chair, Earth4All, said a main point was that “we’ve been here before”. The Club of Rome has brought systemic solutions to the European Commission following the COVID pandemic and again after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These included proposing that Europe diversify energy supply, invest in renewables, address energy efficiency, reduce dependencies and build resilience.

“Now, we are seeing a plethora of knee-jerk reactions in the area of defence... and in the risk of not thinking long term,” she said. The core issue was an over-financialised economic system – transactional, rooted in rentierism, and indifferent to equitable distribution of wealth.

Europe needs to innovate, she agreed: invest in rural communities, forge a genuine partnership with Africa as a food production partner, and pursue a green-social-climate friendly deal.

Positive legacy of Europe’s actions

Has Europe been “too busy defending the status quo and not thinking radical thoughts about the future?” That was the question Stephen put to Tassos Haniotis, Special Advisor for Sustainable Productivity, Forum for the Future of Agriculture.

Mr Haniotis spoke from the perspective of many years in DG AGRI: he started with the 2003 reform - “a real break with the past where we saw the positive effects for years.” It positioned farmers as entrepreneurs: reversing the downward trend in farm income, generating strong growth in the agricultural trade balance, and reducing agricultural emissions - the only major agricultural sector in the world to have achieved this.

But there are continuing issues: less of a focus on analysis and impact assessments; farmers making combined economic-environmental decisions when policy treats them separately. And data - private companies generate vast amounts of data and these could be pooled through a public platform.

Three major changes define the new landscape, he concluded: trade no longer operates within a predictable framework; the ambition of the climate agenda has been pushed to unrealistic levels and is now swinging to the other extreme; and public trust in science is eroding.

A “micro green revolution”

Mariangela Hungria, the World Food Prize 2025 laureate – awarded for her work in biological means of fixing nitrogen in soils - joined by live video link from Brazil. “Are we living through a watershed moment?” Stephen asked her.

She drew a parallel with the Green Revolution, arguing that today the world needs a “micro green revolution” – a transformation of agriculture through biologicals. Many microorganisms can partially or fully replace synthetic fertilizers, and the world is not yet taking sufficient advantage of this.

Ms Hungria gave the example of Brazil’s soybean sector, which now relies entirely on biological nitrogen fixation. In the last crop season alone, this saved Brazil an estimated \$26 billion in fertilizer costs and avoided 260 million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions. One factor is vitally important: biological solutions do maintain yields, she said.

Missing out on science’s opportunities

The discussion turned to whether Europe is taking advantage of the opportunities offered by science. Sandrine Dixson-Declève highlighted satellite technology as a prime example of science connecting the digital and green transitions in ways that could directly help farmers. She emphasised how much untapped potential exists for joining up agricultural production methods, and land use for food, forestry and fibre. “Why are we not seizing these opportunities... and using this as the moment to shift - because we have the solution,” she said.

Stephen went further: Is Europe particularly slow in encouraging R&D and innovation, given its complex multi-state regulatory environment, he asked. Ms Dixson-Declève said the answer was not deregulation but better regulation – sound, agile and flexible enough to support companies moving in the right direction, while not abandoning impact assessments. She was concerned about existing frameworks being weakened and the lack of the fifth freedom – free movement of research, knowledge and innovation across member states. And Europe risked allowing American-style short-termism to erode its own foundation of values and science.

“It is not just about the dollar – but about value”

Cristina Bruce returned to the question of navigating change. In her world, there has been a real shift in how sustainability needs to be argued: the language has to be about value – for the business, for the stakeholders, and for communities around operations. Short-termism that destroys trust or community wellbeing is not compatible with long-term success. “It is not just about the dollar,” she said, “but we have to be successful businesses. Partnership is a key piece of that.”

Tassos Haniotis agreed that Europe should learn from others without losing confidence in what it does well. Europe urgently needs to find common denominators – on soil health, for example, agreeing on a handful of core indicators. The space for independent analysis and individual expert contributions to policy had narrowed sharply, and this is a serious loss.

Who will invest without billion-dollar returns?

Mariangela Hungria identified profit as the central structural problem. Science produces solutions, but without a private partner willing to bring them to market, they do not reach farmers. The biological inputs sector generates far lower margins than the chemical inputs industry: even where solutions for small farmers exist, they go unused because no company has sufficient incentive to deliver them. Who, she asked, will invest in technologies that improve soil health when there is no prospect of billion-dollar returns? The answer requires new models – potentially involving governments – to bridge the gap between what science knows and what farmers receive.





How can we finance and accelerate the transition on the ground?

The keynote and second panel, moderated by Rose O'Donovan, explored both barriers to financing and potential solutions.

Keynote: carbon farming as a catalyst



"It looks as though everything is changing. But one thing that is not changing is climate change," said Kurt Vandenberghe, Director-General, DG CLIMA, delivering the keynote. Agriculture is one of the EU's most climate-exposed sectors, with rising risks for food production, farmers' livelihoods, and EU security and stability. Crop losses, soil degradation, loss of carbon sink capacity and geopolitical events all contribute.

This fragility is recognised in new proposals for the next multi-annual budget, which introduce tools for risk and crisis management: an expanded agriculture reserve, a safety net, and mechanisms to support farmers during climate crisis, he said.

EU policy entrepreneurs - including DG CLIMA - must create enabling conditions for land managers and value chain actors to adapt and transition, with carbon farming as a catalyst. Carbon farming - defined as agriculture and forestry practices that increase carbon storage in soils and biomass and reduce emissions - can support farmers' resilience and competitiveness through additional income while driving the shift towards regenerative agri-food value chains.

"We are putting in place the main elements for a well-functioning and credible voluntary carbon farming market in Europe," said Mr Vandenberghe, outlining three pivotal criteria:

1. Credible certification: the Carbon Removals and Carbon Farming Regulation (CRCF) covers quantification, additionality, durability and biodiversity benefits
2. Accessible monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV): harmonised MRV for land is on the way
3. Strong and predictable demand: the Commission is establishing an EU Buyers' Club.

How do we price the invisible?

Martin Stuchtey, Founder, The Landbanking Group, raised the question of how we value land use. The current approach looks backwards - valuing land on historic agricultural productive capacity - rather than forwards at its total future productive capacity, capturing the ecosystem services on which all economic activity depends. Nature risks are growing: flatlining yields, mounting costs, and the prospect of a market correction repricing nature from invisible asset to visible liability.



The Landbanking Group's response is to build digital, financial and legal representations of nature, giving every plot of land an "ecological passport" through which it can be measured, valued, contracted and transferred. A first nature cadastre is coming online this year. "Wouldn't that make it so much easier... to move towards a world where the next CAP is actually about agri-environmental outcomes, where you can measure them?" he suggested.

The point was reinforced by Michael Brückner, CEO, Munich Re Investment Partners GmbH. Climate and nature risks are already affecting yields, supply chains, insurance costs and asset valuations - yet are still often treated as idiosyncratic rather than systemic. "When climate and nature is priced, addressing those risks stops being a preference and becomes a necessity." Integrating these risks into mainstream investment decision-making is the most powerful lever available. Better policy support to define who carries climate risk, stronger corporate disclosure standards, and shared modelling approaches would all help create the common baseline needed.

From environmental case to economic case

Harvey Locke, President, Harvey Locke Conservation Inc. and Vice Chair for Nature Positive, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, reframed the discussion entirely. The challenge is not the environmental case for protecting nature: it is the economic case, he said. His example was the Amazon and the agricultural heartland of the Río de la Plata basin. The Amazon generates its own rainfall through what is known as the "flying river" - providing 30-40% of the water feeding agriculture in the Río de la Plata. Clearing more than 20% of the forest could cause this mechanism to fail, triggering not a food price shock but a food supply shock of catastrophic



proportions. With deforestation already at around 17%, the threshold is close. “We simply cannot afford to lose the Amazon rainforest for good financial and agricultural reasons.”

He proposed an insurance product: companies and agricultural producers would buy cover against the collapse of rainfall in the La Plata Basin, with part of the premium invested in forest protection. “You buy true insurance for indemnity, and you also take some of the premium and invest it in saving the forest.” Agricultural producers, water utilities, manufacturers, and large asset owners exposed through their supply chains all have a direct financial stake. “There is a difference between the economics of things and the financialization of things. We have lots of economics that says we cannot afford to lose these things. What we do not have is enough financialization of how to act on that.”

Barriers and opportunities in financing

The barriers to financing were set out by Lauren Phillips, Director of Partnerships and UN Collaboration, FAO, drawing on its paper on financing food for the future. Transforming agri-food systems requires an estimated \$680 billion per year, she said, spanning environmental, climate and social challenges: “About half of the world’s population depends on agro food systems for their livelihoods.”

Ms Phillips cited three issues:

- a quantity problem: insufficient overall funding, and the need to reduce the amount that would go to social protection
- a quality problem: existing money not used effectively, with subsidies often misaligned with social and environmental goals
- and a targeting problem: financing heavily skewed towards richer countries and richer people within poorer countries, with less than 1% of climate finance reaching smallholders.

The share of development finance going to climate-related agricultural investment has also fallen from around 50% to 20% and now comes almost entirely from four donors: the EU, Germany, France and Japan.

“We have an opportunity, though, to improve,” she concluded, pointing to debt-for-climate swaps, new bond instruments, and innovative insurance mechanisms of the kind Harvey Locke had described.

Making investments work on the ground

Rose asked Mr Stuchtey and Mr Brückner to give their perspectives “from outside the Brussels bubble” on what is needed for investments to work.

Mr Stuchtey called on the audience: “We have something hot to offer,” he said. “It’s our job as a community to show you that you can build up nature and soils, and measure what that does to the economy. That would give confidence to the rule-makers.”

For Mr Brückner, it was “important that we are starting to create a common baseline – to look at the same thing”: aligning models and developing a shared approach to improve investments and balance sheets.





How to resist climate-related impacts such as desertification through green finance – experience from Mongolia

A country warming at twice the average, facing 80% land degradation, yet home to some of the most precious ecosystems on Earth: that is Mongolia. Extreme climate stress has prompted an innovative financing solution, presented to the Forum by Nomindari Enkhtur, CEO of Mongolia's Nature Legacy Foundation.

Mongolia is vast - 156 million hectares, larger than Germany, France and Spain combined - and home to some of the last remaining intact ecosystems on Earth, serving as major carbon sinks and biodiversity hotspots. Its nomadic herders, still 30% of the population, have practised a resource-efficient, nature-positive way of life for centuries – “the kind of life we now want to build,” said Ms Enkhtur.

But the situation is deteriorating fast. More than half its permafrost has been lost, climate events are growing more frequent and intense, and in 2025 winter storms killed 7 million livestock - around 12% of the total. This has forced herders off the land and into the capital, Ulaanbaatar: the coal they burn in informal settlements has made it one of the world's most polluted capital cities.

“All this creates a health crisis, economic crisis, supply chain disruptions and more. In Mongolia, we are living climate change on a daily basis, and everyone is feeling it,” said Ms Enkhtur.

A \$200 million fully integrated financing solution

Faced with these pressures, Mongolia has developed the Eternal Mongolia Project Finance for Permanence (PFP) initiative. All stakeholders - government, donors, and private sector - come together, agree on conservation targets (including the 30x30 goal), and commit their funding in a single long-term deal. Mongolia's PFP is a \$200 million, 15-year initiative: \$71 million from donors and philanthropy, \$129 million from government and public sources. Tools include results-based public budgeting, environmental taxes, conservation levies, and market-based mechanisms such as green loans, biodiversity credits and carbon credits.

“No single financing source alone can tackle this issue,” Ms Enkhtur said. The PFP's power lies in combining public, private and philanthropic funding towards the same goal – “the only way to move forward is to work together.”

She gave two examples of PFP in action: a complementary sustainability-linked loan scheme which targets the agriculture sector directly, and a digital impact verification system.

Major lessons from Mongolia's experience

How did they achieve alignment, asked Mark Titterington. Initially a purely market-based initiative, one key lesson was to involve government earlier: the private sector alone cannot sustain the transition indefinitely; policy signals, public incentives and a mandated longer-term vision are essential. “I know there's urgency, but it's also critical that we really recognize the importance of permanence, consistency, and patience,” she said.

How important is verification? “At the core of everything,” said Ms Enkhtur - crucial to demonstrate outcomes whatever the funding source. “Whenever there is a financing discussion, we need to think backwards: start with what impact, what outcome, what are we going to achieve, and then link your financing system from there.”

Panel session 3 – CAP and Land use – what governance do we need to deliver it?

Dialogue session

Delphine Babin-Pellier

Senior Advisor, Food and Agricultural Systems (FAS) team, IUCN

Barry Cowen

Member of the European Parliament

Jörg-Andreas Krüger

President, NABU

Ricard Ramon I Sumoy

Head of Unit, Policy Perspectives, DG AGRI,
European Commission

Jürgen Tack

Secretary General,
European Landowners' Organisation



CAP and Land use – what governance do we need to deliver it?

The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – and the governance structures needed to deliver it – was the focus of the third panel. Five panellists offered sharply different but often complementary perspectives on what needs to change, and how fast.

A new direction of travel from the Commission

One of the key architects of the overhaul of the future CAP set out the direction of travel. “Simplification, less administrative burden for farming and for operators” were the goal, said Ricard Ramon I Sumoy, Head of Unit, Policy Perspectives at DG AGRI.

He described a shift away from top-down regulatory mechanisms from Brussels towards more bottom-up, market-based solutions with greater cooperation across the food chain. Flexibility is central: policies need to be able to adapt to a rapidly changing reality. Two-thirds of the actions promised in that vision, he said, are now being implemented.

The future CAP sees a rebalancing of powers between the EU and member states: some areas will gain more national flexibility; others will retain clear direction from Brussels. “Very importantly, the farmer should get more autonomy,” he said. The new green architecture replaces mandatory conditionality set at EU level with a system in which member states define basic parameters. Mr Ramon highlighted two flagship initiatives illustrating the new approach. The On-Farm Sustainability Compass to help the farmer navigate multiple sustainability standards, and the Farmland Observatory, responding to growing pressure on land access.

“We think that with all these different aspects... we will be better placed to empower our farming communities to better address the big challenges ahead.”



“Ambition without funding will fail”

The ambition in the Commission’s proposals is real, but the budget proposed to deliver it is not: there is a 20% gap. That was the blunt assessment from Barry Cowen, Member of the European Parliament and Renew, Ireland. “How it can be delivered is dependent solely and totally on finance and on budget,” he said. “It’s as simple as that, and it’s as plain as that.”

He said funding had to deliver generational renewal, a rewards-based system, and simplification – and not forgetting the vast number of smallholdings. He understood the need for defence and security spending but “you can’t have a commitment on defence and safety without a pro rata commitment on food security”. He suggested that frontloading Mercosur safeguard funding and redirecting rural development spend, currently outside the CAP envelope, could bridge the immediate gap.

“Innovation is the only answer”

Jurgen Tack, Secretary General of the European Landowners’ Organization, brought an unconventional visual aid: a ‘living graph’ banner showing the changing division of land between nature, agriculture and urban areas over time. Agricultural land has decreased through producing more on less land, he said. The growing pressure on agriculture comes from urban expansion, yet the environmental and farming communities talk to each other rather than to the encroaching cities.



But producing more on less called for innovation – something which is now stifled. “The only way we can cope with climate change, a growing population and environmental problems is innovation,” he said. Europe develops biocontrols, precision farming tools and feed additives – but consistently fails to bring them to market. A company with a market-ready biocontrol faces three options: go bankrupt waiting for regulatory approval; sell to a larger company with the resources to wait a decade; or move to the US or Brazil, where approval takes two to three years. Europe then blocks imports of the crops grown using the very products it helped develop.

Innovation sent Artemis II around the moon – and he called on policymakers to take their lead from that.

More of the same will not be enough

The ability of the new CAP to future-proof agriculture was also questioned by Jörg-Andreas Krüger, President of NABU. The CAP to date has not addressed agriculture as a primary driver of biodiversity loss in Europe and a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. Nor has it dealt with deep structural distortions - unequal land access, global competition, labour cost differences or the steady loss of farm holdings. “We were surprised that the proposal is more of the same... not setting priorities on the protection of the environment and of the ecosystem services for the future.”

Among the changes he wanted to see: an ambitious ring-fencing target for environmental and climate measures within the CAP, revised co-financing arrangements to shift the balance from direct payments to agri-environmental measures, and payments tied to performance rather than the status quo.

He highlighted “a few good ideas”, such as a robust EU-wide farm stewardship approach that genuinely rewards sustainable land use. “We have to come to a solution where ecologically better farming is economically better farming as well,” he concluded.

Competitiveness and nature are not in conflict

Delphine Babin-Pelliard, Senior Advisor for Food and Agricultural Systems at the IUCN, framed her contribution around “a false choice”. The debate is not environment versus competitiveness and food security - the question is how to secure Europe’s production systems for the next 10, 20 or 30 years. The answer is by investing in nature, she said.

The IUCN Congress in 2025 was clear: the transition towards nature-positive agriculture must accelerate. This produces three governance priorities: first, aligning EU policies and improving coordination and accountability; second, building inclusive platforms; third, governance must guarantee non-regression.

On eco-schemes, Ms Babin-Pelliard said early evaluations show many are not ambitious or targeted enough to drive real transformation. The question, she said, is what they need to become - refocused on soil fertility, water regulation, carbon storage and pollination. “Competitiveness increases when nature is part of the system...and protecting nature is a long-term investment in food security and the economy,” she ended.



The discussion: governance in practice

Among the issues discussed was the proliferation of Commission initiatives: how would they be coordinated and work on the ground, asked Rose O’Donovan. Ricard Ramon was clear that these are not new regulations but bottom-up initiatives responding to identified gaps, for example, the Farmland Observatory was requested by young farmers and backed by a European Parliament resolution.

Rose turned to the new governance structure: does it risk fragmenting the ‘common’ in the CAP? Barry Cowen said that he was broadly open to new structures and architecture, if they can deliver and if they are adequately funded, although there were discussions still to be had.

Coming back to regulatory speed, Jurgen Tack expanded on his biocontrols example, arguing that omnibus simplification packages are moving in the right direction but not fast enough. Jörg-Andreas Krüger cautioned that public acceptance of environmental legislation remains strong - evidenced by NABU’s continued membership growth even in times of economic hardship. The challenge is to make processes faster and simpler while keeping them safe; there is, he felt, more common ground between the different sides than the public debate implies.

The last word went to Mr Tack: keeping agriculture stable, he said, is like keeping a patient stable. It requires a doctor capable of making urgent decisions.



At the edge of the World: Lessons from Antarctic exploration and extreme conditions

Antarctica has a way of shrinking human ambition to its proper size – that was the message from Henri de Gerlache, Belgian explorer, filmmaker, and great-grandson of the pioneering polar explorer Adrien de Gerlache, brought to the Forum in his inspirational talk followed by a conversation with Mark Titterington.

Mr De Gerlache has visited Antarctica three times, including an ascent of Mount Vinson, at 5,140 metres the continent's highest peak. He is currently preparing a documentary series on the heroic age of polar exploration. His talk took the audience from adventure to what Antarctica reveals about nature, about limits, and about humility.

"Because in those frozen expanses, everything reminds us of human fragility. The cold, a force that seeps in, exhausts and destroys. The wind, capable of erasing tracks, disorienting, isolating. And the silence, immense and almost oppressive," he said.

The great explorers of the early 20th Century set out to plant flags and trace routes. "Very quickly, Antarctica imposed its own rules," said Mr de Gerlache. "It slowed them, blocked them, broke them." The Antarctic Treaty of 1959 dedicated an entire continent to peace and scientific research and a rare collective acknowledgement that some limits must be respected.

What Antarctica is telling us

Today, scientists from across the world live and work there, not to conquer the continent, but to listen to it, he said. "Antarctica is now speaking and what it tells us is deeply concerning. Sea level rise, for instance, depends on what is happening in Antarctica." The history of Antarctic exploration can be seen as a journey from ignorance to knowledge, from audacity to mastery. But another view is that it is a slow learning of humility.

"At every stage, the history reminds us that nature is not a backdrop. It is not merely a setting in which humanity evolves freely. It's a force, a complex system, upon which we entirely depend. Where humanity believed it could impose itself, it had to adapt."

Mr de Gerlache concluded: "If these icy lands, so long perceived as a desert, have something to teach us, it may be this: that the greatness of humanity lies not in its ability to dominate nature, but in its capacity to respect it."

Cooperation as survival

Asked by Mark Titterington about the power of collaboration, Mr de Gerlache replied that in Antarctica, cooperation is not optional: "If you are alone there, you are almost dead." He highlighted Amundsen - the first to reach the South Pole, in December 1911 - as the explorer who understood this most clearly. Amundsen learned from the Inuit, travelling light, working with the ice rather than against it.

And what gives him hope, Mark asked? The answer was that spirit of enforced collaboration across nations and across disciplines. He hoped the Antarctic Treaty would be renewed in 2040, because what it represents - nationalities obliged to collaborate to survive – may become a model not just for one continent, but for the planet.

Annual Conference 2026

Session 4 – How will AI redefine what’s possible for a profitable, climate-smart, nature-positive agri-food system?

Dialogue session

Jessica Agnew

Director of the GAP Initiative and Managing Editor of the Global Agricultural Productivity (GAP) Report, Virginia Tech

Martin Clough

Head Digital, Collaboration & Sustainability, Crop Protection Research, Syngenta

Justin Rose

President, Worldwide Agriculture & Turf, Small Agriculture and Turf Care, Europe, Africa, and Asia, Deere & Company

Ethan Soloviev

Chief Innovation Officer, HowGood



How will AI redefine what’s possible for a profitable, climate-smart, nature-positive agri-food system?

The final panel turned to artificial intelligence – and whether it can genuinely redefine what is possible for a profitable, climate-smart, nature-positive agri-food system. Moderator Stephen Sackur challenged the panel to “convince ourselves and everybody listening and watching that AI really can do big things in food production and agriculture.”

AI for policymakers, not just farmers



A gap in the current AI landscape was highlighted by Jessica Agnew, Director of the GAP Initiative and Managing Editor of the Global Agricultural Productivity Report at Virginia Tech. Only around 5% of AI solutions being developed for agriculture are targeted at decision-makers rather than at farm level. Policymakers, ministers and development banks are still operating with fragmented and out-of-date data - making decisions by intuition despite the technologies available.

The GAP Initiative is working on a platform integrating total factor productivity data with climate, economic and other datasets, designed around user experience. The goal is to allow policymakers, investors and researchers to interact with large volumes of data - published research, quantitative datasets, images - to assess the potential impacts of different scenarios on productivity, biodiversity, food security and soil health.

Her message to the sector: “The AI train has left the station. We need to engage not just with Silicon Valley but those in other world regions... and work towards addressing these data challenges that have stopped us from creating stronger, more climate-smart, nature-positive food systems.”

Data as a new crop

Data was also the topic for Ethan Soloviev, Chief Innovation Officer at HowGood. His organization is the world’s largest database for food and agriculture sustainability, tracking the carbon footprint, water footprint, biodiversity impact, labour risk and animal welfare credentials of 33,000 ingredients and around 4.5 million products globally, for clients ranging from Danone and Nestlé to major retailers.

Farmers should be able to own their data and be compensated for it, he said - “data can be a new crop”. With data, agriculture is uniquely positioned among economic sectors to move from being a source of emissions to a net carbon sink, through regenerative approaches that simultaneously enhance biodiversity and improve farmer livelihoods.

He also pushed back on the framing of Jurgen Tack’s living graph from the previous panel, which



presented urban, agricultural and nature as competing land uses. His view was that they are nested systems: “agriculture is within the economy, which is within the social system, which is within nature.” AI, he suggested, offers the tools to optimise holistically across all of them simultaneously, rather than forcing trade-offs.

Agricultural intelligence

An optimistic perspective came from Martin Clough, Head of Digital, Collaboration and Sustainability in Crop Protection Research at Syngenta. He saw this as an “epic time” to be in research and development, driven by the convergence of generative AI, big data capability and breakthroughs in ‘omics’ science - the understanding of how chemistry and biology interact.

His concrete example was multi-parameter optimization: using generative AI to design new crop protection products by addressing multiple challenges simultaneously - efficacy, operator safety, consumer safety, environmental safety, sustainability - rather than solving them sequentially and making trade-offs. He likened it to a Rubik’s Cube: solving one side at a time inevitably scrambles the others, whereas AI allows all sides to be solved at once. He saw potential to cut years off the time-to-market for new products, delivering more and better solutions to farmers faster.



Safeguards were vital: Syngenta has put in place a trusted data mesh governing all R&D data, and a digital growth academy to build data literacy among scientists. “I have to demonstrate that the AI we’re using is trustworthy, or our scientists will not use it,” he said. “That means it needs to be explainable and understandable.”

From horsepower to smart power

Justin Rose, President of Worldwide Agriculture and Turf, Small Agriculture and Turf Care, Europe, Africa and Asia, at Deere & Company, joining online from the company’s headquarters in Illinois, said AI is already reshaping what happens in the field every day - a shift “from horsepower to smart power”.

Why is this important? He gave a striking illustration: in Europe, 23 trillion individual weed plants must be controlled every year to protect small grain cereal and oilseed crops. Research shows that weeds cover only 1-5% of arable land – but today, farmers broadcast-spray entire fields with herbicides. Deere’s AI-enabled sprayer can identify individual weeds and apply herbicide only where needed, at the rate of 10,000 weed identifications per second across a 36-metre boom moving at 20 kilometres per hour. “This can’t be done without AI,” he said. “AI allows machines not just to move, but to see and decide and act in real time under real farming conditions.”

Other advantages: autonomous systems - tractors that can operate day or night, supervised remotely – help with labour shortages and an ageing workforce; AI can help to make farming a high-tech, data-driven profession with new career paths. His message on regulation echoed others on the panel: “We need to regulate the outcomes and risks, not the innovation itself.”

The discussion: accountability, data and the social media lesson

Stephen Sackur drove the discussion with a pointed challenge: are we at a naively optimistic stage in our relationship with AI, one that mirrors the early days of the internet and social media? He said that the platforms that seemed to democratise information flow turned out to empower vast corporations scraping user data for profit. The question for agriculture is who controls the technology, who benefits, and how much autonomy stays with farmers.

Jessica Agnew urged the sector not to sit back, saying “we have the opportunity to engage now and help design those governance frameworks.” Martin Clough returned to Syngenta’s safeguards – it was vital to prepare in advance and be careful about how you are using AI.

Ethan Soloviev made a case for working simultaneously from the bottom up and the top down: open-source models and transparent datasets alongside outcome-focused regulation that identifies likely harms without stifling innovation. Europe could fall behind “if we slow down innovation with AI here”.

Stephen closed by noting that whether skeptical or optimistic, the panel had made one thing clear: AI is coming to food and agriculture regardless. The real question is whether it can be shaped to deliver the public and planetary good, rather than simply the interests of those who control the technology. The panel’s answer, broadly, was yes – but only if the sector engages now, builds the right governance structures, and ensures that the farmer, not just the platform, captures a fair share of the value created.



Presentation of the Soil Award

The conference closed with the presentation of the European Land and Soil Management Award, introduced by jury president Martin Gerzabek. This edition saw the strongest field in his recollection with over 30 applications from 13 countries.

The criteria, Mr Gerzabek said, were innovativeness, social and economic viability, and scalability. He thanked supporting organizations including the European Landowners' Organization, the European Commission, the Joint Research Centre, Syngenta, and the Universities of Ljubljana, Leuven, and Vienna.

Winner: Asociación Semillistas

Semillistas is a non-profit based in Andalusia dedicated to reversing desertification through direct seeding. Their method replaces conventional nursery-grown sapling transplantation with seed priming, protective pelleting, and contour barriers to prevent erosion. Semillistas has published its seeding and pelleting machine blueprints as open source. The award was accepted by Óliver Ruiz Garrido.

Diplomas of Recognition

Silvija Aile, Deputy Head of Land use and management, DG ENV presented three additional diplomas.

- **Alnarp's Agroecology Farm (Sweden):** a youth-led project combining soil regeneration, sustainable agriculture, and social inclusion, engaging over 3,000 people.
- **Shyrokostup Farm:** an innovative model implementing Plant Health Management (PHM) to restore biodiversity and reduce chemical inputs.
- **Rock Harvst (Ukraine):** a resilient, high-tech farming initiative reducing soil erosion and fertilizer use by 50% while restoring soil health under challenging conditions.



Closing remarks

Co-moderator Rose O'Donovan brought the day to a close with thanks to all involved, and invited delegates to the Forum's regional edition in Dublin on 2 June - a timely gathering after Ireland assumes the Council Presidency.

More information

All the summaries in this document and videos of all sessions, including exclusive interviews are available on www.forumforag.com



About the Forum for the Future of Agriculture

The Forum for the Future of Agriculture (ForumforAg) is one of the leading international forums committed to help building a more resilient, sustainable, climate-smart and nature-positive food and agriculture system.

The Founding Partners came together in 2008 to create a new, open and inclusive place in Europe where all stakeholders interested in contributing to a more sustainable agriculture system could come together to debate and share knowledge and expertise on how this could be achieved.

The Forum's Annual Conference, which takes place in Brussels every spring, has established itself as one of the premier meeting places in Europe and globally for stakeholders meeting in open dialogue on the future of the food and agriculture system.

The Forum's Secretariat, under the guidance of the Forum Chairman and the Advisory Council, work with our founding, strategic and supporting partners to achieve the mission of the Forum to contribute to the development of a more sustainable food and agriculture system.

Our partners support the mission of the Forum to contribute to the development of a more sustainable food and agriculture system. The Founding and Strategic Partners also act as a sounding board and provide counsel on our thought leadership activities and positions, such as the Call to Action. The Partners also exchange knowledge and expertise on what works on the ground, as well as constructively challenging each other, as well as other stakeholders in their community, to help create a more sustainable food system.

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