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Incentivising systemic and climate-resilient farming approaches through rewarding mechanisms

Barriers, challenges and recommendations

Main findings

Current climate-action rewarding mechanisms fail to recognise and compensate organic farming as a systemic approach, leaving organic and transitioning farmers facing significant access barriers.

Monetary, supportive and regulatory rewarding mechanisms serve as a key driver for organic and transitioning farmers in adopting and maintaining a systemic and climate-resilient approach.

The post-2027 CAP should provide income-positive payments that go beyond covering conversion and maintenance of organic farming, fully recognising and rewarding the broader public goods delivered by systemic farming approaches, overcoming restrictive interpretations of "costs incurred, income foregone" and "no double funding" rules that currently limit incentives for farmers to deliver additional sustainability outcomes.

The CRCF Regulation should incentivise and reward systemic approaches like organic farming, by recognising their long-standing and sustainable soil-carbon stewardship, reduced reliance on synthetic inputs, and broader sustainability contributions, backed by strong criteria that drive durable climate and environmental gains.

Advisory services and knowledge infrastructure are core enablers of systemic farming systems and remain an undervalued support mechanism. They should be strategically strengthened under the post-2027 CAP to maximise their contribution to systemic and climate-resilient agriculture.

Contents

1. Rewarding mechanisms in the organic sector 2
2. Categorisation framework of rewarding mechanisms 3
3. Barriers and challenges faced by the organic sector in accessing existing rewarding mechanisms 5
4. Incentivising systemic and climate-resilient farming approaches through rewarding mechanisms 9

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Abbreviations

AECM	Agri-Environmental Climate Measures
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CFD	Climate Farm Demo
CRCF	Carbon Removals and Carbon Farming
GAEC	Good agricultural and environmental conditions
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
MRV	Monitoring, Reporting and Verification
OCNET	OrganicClimateNET

1. Rewarding mechanisms in the organic sector

Organic farming is a systemic approach built on holistic practices delivering multiple benefits for climate change adaptation and mitigation. Closing nutrient cycles, fostering ecological processes and prioritising local resources are central to the concept of organic agriculture. By contrast, the use of external fossil-fuel-intensive synthetic fertilisers and synthetic pesticide inputs is not allowed. To ensure soil quality and fertility, practices like diverse crop rotation including legumes, cover crops and manure composting are used in organic farming. These common organic practices often result in higher soil organic carbon stocks (Gattinger et al.,2012), lower energy input (Scialabba et al.,2010) and lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions connected to production, transportation and use of synthetic fertiliser (Skinner et al.,2019) compared to conventional farming. Furthermore, they enhance biodiversity (Bengtsson et al.,2005), which is essential for ecosystem functioning. This makes organic farming systems more resilient to extreme weather events, such as heavy precipitation or droughts.

Organic agriculture is the only sustainable production system comprehensively regulated and certified under EU legislation[1]. The Vision for Agriculture and Food[2] highlights the benefits of organic agriculture for ecosystem services and soil health and emphasises that it must continue to be supported. Additionally, the EU Organic Action Plan[3] affirms: "Organic farming uses a number of management practices that contribute to climate change mitigation, with additional benefits for the environment and biodiversity."

In most Member States, organic farmers receive support under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Pillar 1 or 2 for conversion to or maintenance of organic farming on a per-hectare basis[4]. These payments compensate for additional costs (e.g., alternative weed and pest control and organic certification) and income foregone. The level of support varies across Member States, but calculations typically account for yields, stocking rates, variable input costs, and potential price premiums for organic products. Despite the maintenance support, organic farmers rely on price premiums on their products. However, they are volatile, as they depend heavily on consumer demand for organic products and on consumers' willingness to pay higher prices. In practice, producers often do not achieve the assumed price premiums (e.g. in Ireland). Moreover, the absence of price premiums during conversion, which typically takes one to three years depending on the production system, is often not reflected in the corresponding CAP payments. In fact, the costs for farmers associated with developing organic market channels to receive price premiums are usually not considered in the CAP calculations (Lampkin et al.,2024).

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[1] In the EU, the whole production process of organic products is strictly regulated. The Organic Regulation (EU) 2018/848 lays down the rules on organic production and labelling of organic products. This harmonised framework ensures that organic products sold in the EU meet uniform quality standards. It creates equal conditions for all operators in the system to guarantee fair competition. Additionally, it prevents fraud and ensures consumer trust in organic products. By maintaining a consistent set of rules, the Regulation underpins the integrity and credibility of the EU's organic market. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:02018R0848-20250325

[2] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0075

[3] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0141R(01)

[4] In July 2025, the European Commission published its proposal for the CAP post-2027 which is replacing the current two-pillar structure. However, it establishes 5 environmental and priority climate areas in Article 4 for which Member States have the obligation to provide support to farmers. The development of organic farming is part of these priorities, meaning that Member States have the obligation to provide support for organic farmers in their National and Regional Partnership (NRP) Plans.

CAP payments for conversion and maintenance of organic farming may, in most cases, compensate organic farmers for their income foregone. However, they do not reward the climate and biodiversity co-benefits that organic farming delivers, nor do they recognise the efforts of organic or transitioning farmers to implement additional climate-friendly measures.

Existing rewarding mechanisms for climate action often focus on single practices or outcomes, such as carbon, rather than supporting the holistic system approach of organic farming.[5] This policy brief outlines the existing rewarding mechanisms for organic farming (chapter 2), the barriers and challenges organic farmers face within these mechanisms (chapter 3), and policy recommendations for future mechanisms that better reflect the benefits of systemic approaches (chapter 4).

2. Categorisation framework of rewarding mechanisms

Rewarding mechanisms for agricultural practices are tools that incentivise farmers to implement specific practices or achieve desired outcomes. They can take multiple forms and can be sourced from public or private entities, or a mix of both. These mechanisms are particularly relevant as they encourage voluntary behavioural change among farmers using positive incentives. They play a role in promoting practices that reduce GHG emissions, enhance carbon sequestration, and support climate change adaptation. **In the context of organic farming, rewarding mechanisms are a key driver of transformation, supporting farmers in adopting and maintaining systemic and climate-resilient approaches.**

The current landscape of rewarding mechanisms in the EU and its Member States is broad, dynamic and constantly evolving, encompassing a wide range of scopes and characteristics. **Therefore, developing a categorisation framework helps navigate the various rewarding mechanisms and provides an overview of the available instruments.** The **Rewarding Mechanism Classification Framework** by Scheid et al. (2025)[6] adopts a three-tier structure to organise mechanisms by increasing levels of detail. This hierarchical structure enhances understanding of the different types of mechanisms and supports stakeholders in engaging with those that support climate-smart agricultural practices. These mechanisms follow three overarching categories:

- **Monetary**: Refers to the use of monetary rewards to incentivise the implementation of climate-friendly farming practices.
- **Supportive**: Refers to the use of non-monetary incentives to support the adoption of climate-friendly practices (which may be self-motivated).
- **Regulatory**: Consists of policies and regulations that create an enabling framework for the implementation of climate-friendly approaches.

Table 1 gives an overview of the categorisation framework, highlighting key rewarding mechanisms that are of particular importance for system approaches[7].

[5] *This is also true for many other systemic agroecological farming approaches, which are not in the scope of this policy brief.*
[6] *Scheid et al. (2025) is an outcome of the Horizon Europe project Climate Farm Demo, deliverable 6.1 'Incentivizing farm-level climate action through rewarding mechanisms. A categorization framework'.*
[7] *Not all rewarding mechanisms are important or beneficial for systemic farming approaches. For example, financial instruments, result-based payments, and voluntary carbon markets currently play a limited role in supporting organic farmers.*

Table 1 Categorisation Framework of Rewarding Mechanisms, highlighting the mechanisms most relevant for the organic sector (adapted from Scheid et al. 2025)

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Organic sector relevant
Monetary	**Subsidies**	Tax reductions	✓
		European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF)	✓
		Action-based subsidies	✓
		Result-based subsidies	
	Grants		✓
	Financial instruments	Green loans	
		Financial guarantee	
		Equity	
	Markets	Voluntary carbon markets (VCM)	
		Payments for ecosystem services (PES)	✓
	Labels		✓
	Price premiums		✓
	Insurances		✓
	Blended finance		✓
Supportive	**Advisory services/ upskilling**		✓
	Social rewards		✓
	Research and development (R&D)		✓
Regulatory	**Enabling policies**		✓
	Public procurement		✓

3. Barriers and challenges faced by the organic sector in accessing existing rewarding mechanisms

Organic farmers and those transitioning to organic farming face several barriers and challenges to accessing existing rewarding mechanisms. **The most fundamental barrier to current rewarding mechanisms for climate action is the lack of recognition and compensation for organic farming as an integrated system.** Incentives focused on single aspects, such as carbon dioxide, and corresponding measures, such as feed additives or nitrogen inhibitors, may create significant trade-offs in other environmental areas, such as biodiversity or soil quality (Harrison et al.,2021), undermining the holistic approach that defines organic agriculture.

The following section summarises key challenges for organic farmers and stakeholders in the organic sector in accessing a broad range of rewarding mechanisms. These challenges were identified during a stakeholder workshop, "How might climate rewarding work for organic farmers," held on May 26, 2025, and included organic farmers, certification bodies, and researchers associated with OrganicClimateNET. The challenges are grouped according to the rewarding scheme categories (Table 1), i.e. monetary (direct financial hurdles), supportive (knowledge and capacity barriers), and regulatory (policy and compliance frameworks). The discussions were guided by core questions relevant to these sub-categories, such as current barriers for organic farmers in accessing rewarding schemes and how CAP strategic plans may better address the needs of organic farmers (Mathivanan et al.,2026)[8].

Barriers and challenges related to monetary rewarding mechanisms

One of the most critical barriers for organic farmers in accessing additional monetary rewards is the additionality principle in carbon markets and other funding schemes. The principal rewards only "additional" climate actions that are beyond current management practices. This disadvantages organic farmers, who are already implementing climate-friendly practices. Organic farmers who are early adopters and pioneers of sustainable management practices do not benefit much relative to farmers with higher carbon footprints because of the additionality clause. This creates a situation in which farmers who employ simple carbon removal or emission reduction practices (e.g., enhanced crop rotation) receive greater financial benefits for comparably low climate efforts. By contrast, organic farmers need significantly more effort to achieve an "additional" climate impact beyond their existing organic climate achievements. Current carbon prices appear far too low and do not justify the high marginal costs for low marginal climate gains on organic farms.

Most existing rewarding mechanisms for adopting climate-friendly practices favour short-term measures over a long-term systemic approach, which is inherent to organic farming. This creates challenges for organic farmers who adopt multi-year crop rotations that may not align with short-term funding timelines. This undermines the holistic nature of organic systems, which require sustained, long-term investment to realise their full environmental benefits.

[8] *Mathivanan et al. (2026) is an outcome of the OrganicClimateNET project, deliverable 4.2 'Evaluation of MRVs and rewarding schemes'.*

Organic farmers face unique financial vulnerabilities due to their dependence on potentially volatile price premiums. Organic price premiums are vulnerable to fluctuating consumer demand. When organic prices are stagnant while input costs rise, net gains for organic farmers eventually erode. Volatility makes it difficult for farmers to justify additional investments in additional climate measures when core premiums are already under pressure.

The payment levels for climate-friendly management practices are often too low relative to the administrative effort required. The high administrative demands, combined with relatively low payment levels, have repeatedly been cited as reasons why, for example, voluntary measures under eco-schemes or Agri-Environmental Climate Measures (AECM) do not sustain. This problem is more prevalent among smaller farms, which face higher relative administrative challenges, reducing their participation rates in environmental schemes.

Small-scale organic farms often face structural barriers to accessing voluntary carbon markets due to their size and diverse production systems. The current infrastructure for certifying units for carbon markets is designed for larger, more uniform operations, creating barriers for the mixed-farming systems common in organic agriculture.

The costs of Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) and quantifying carbon removals and soil emission reductions pose a substantial barrier, particularly for smallholder organic farms. MRV costs could absorb most of (or even exceed) the income from result-based payments. For organic farmers already undergoing organic certification (EU Regulation EEC No. 2018/848 on Organic Production), participating in MRV systems is particularly challenging due to the additional data management and reporting requirements.

Case study for a monetary rewarding mechanism: "Gold level" for organic systems under eco-schemes

The Dutch eco-scheme[A] approach combines activity and result-based remuneration for sustainable farming practices and acknowledges the systemic nature of organic farming. For each of the possible 26 distinct measures (called eco-activities), farmers can receive "eco-points", i.e. sustainability scores across five possible priority areas: climate, soil and air, water, biodiversity, or landscape. Eco-points are awarded irrespective of the farm size. To be eligible for payments, farmers need a minimum score of eco-points on each domain (which are: climate: 1.50; soil: 0.75; water: 0.75; landscape: 0.50; biodiversity: 1.50). Only farms above the threshold qualify for top-up eco-scheme payments beyond "basic income support for sustainability" (BISS, i.e. conformity with good agricultural and environmental conditions (GAEC)). Payment levels are calculated based on the sum of all eco-activities (ranging from 28 to 4.221 EUR in 2023, with regional variation reflecting specific objectives). Numerous eligible activities can be stacked to hit threshold values and increase payment rates. Farmers are awarded a bronze level if their eco-scheme activities add up to at least 60 EUR/ha; a silver level is reached at 100 EUR/ha, and a gold level at 200 EUR/ha.

Organic agriculture as a system delivers 13 eco-points in total: 1 eco-point for landscape, 2 eco-points for "water" and "biodiversity each, and 4 points for "climate" and "soil" each. All of them are above the threshold (Jongeneel, R. et al., 2023). Organic farming is by default awarded at "gold level" and automatically qualifies as a production system for the maximum payments of 200 EUR/ha without further effort to prove any specific activities. This simplifies administration for organic farmers and recognises that organic management, per se, performs well across all key environmental and climate objectives. Despite this compensation for the production system, organic farms remain principally eligible for other multi-annual agri-environment subsidies (AES) under pillar 2 (rural development) that compensate for the provision of specific climate-friendly activities. With this design, the Dutch approach enables a coherent valuation of the public goods provided by the organic system as such, while compensating for additional effort on individual environmental measures.

[A] *Dutch CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027. https://www.farm-europe.eu/blog-en/netherlands-cap-strategic-plan-2023-27/*

Barriers and challenges related to supportive rewarding mechanisms

Although multiple climate-friendly agricultural measures are available, substantial obstacles to effective knowledge transfer remain. Organic farmers, in particular, often do not receive the region- or system-specific guidance needed to integrate additional climate mitigation and adaptation measures into their existing production systems.

The current advisory system is poorly equipped to provide integrated advice for organic farms taking organic certification requirements into account. Many advisors lack sufficient knowledge about eco-schemes, AECM and carbon farming options specific to organic systems. Additionally, the combination of publicly financed CAP measures and voluntary carbon markets is underrepresented in advisory systems and is especially challenging for organic farms. This creates a knowledge gap, leaving farmers unable to access the technical support needed to navigate complex funding landscapes.

Case study for a supportive rewarding mechanism: Advisory services for organic climate farming

Strengthening advice, mentoring, education and training is a key factor in the sustainable growth of the organic sector. In the emerging field of organic climate farming, peer-to-peer learning networks, like that built within the OrganicClimateNET[B] (OCNET) EU Horizon project, advance organic climate farming by drawing on and sharing best-practice experience. In OCNET, more than 250 farms in 12 EU countries, together with national advisory and certification organisations, pilot and further develop organic climate farming as a dynamic, cross-country "community of practice". In OCNET, peer-to-peer learning among farmers is organised in regional hubs (2 per country). Farm-system-specific cross-country visits enrich the learning experience and support the development of tailored organic climate farming strategies that explore not only the best climate practices for the farm but also suitable business and finance models.

[B] *https://organicclimatenet.eu/*

Barriers and challenges related to enabling policies and regulations

The current regulatory environment often opposes organic farming principles due to conflicting policy objectives. Several EU policies promote environmental sustainability, while the specific design of the rewarding schemes fails to recognise the integrated and holistic nature of organic systems. For example, the Carbon Removals and Carbon Farming (CRCF) Regulation focuses primarily on carbon outcomes without adequately accounting for a range of ecosystem services that organic farming provides, such as enhanced biodiversity, healthier soils, improved water quality, climate resilience and landscape conservation. Also, the CAP 2023-27 builds on 10 social, environmental, and economic objectives, many of which are critical to organic farming. However, in practice, voluntary CAP measures, including eco-schemes or AECM, predominantly prioritise isolated measures running counter to holistic organic principles.

The regulatory environment also lacks integration between existing organic certification systems and carbon certification under the CRCF Regulation, forcing farmers to duplicate reporting and verification processes rather than build on existing systems. Given that the CRCF certification process is expected to minimise administrative and financial burdens on farmers (as per Article 8(3)(h)), operational integration is yet to be achieved in practice.

A restrictive interpretation of the no double funding rules under the CAP could be a barrier to organic climate farming. In some countries, organic farmers are regularly excluded from numerous environmental payments, because they "already" receive organic support payments for conversion or maintenance. While double funding threatens the efficient use of public funds, this approach disproportionately penalises organic certification. It ignores that such payments only compensate for actual (yield) losses and additional burden associated with organic operations and certification, not the climate and biodiversity co-benefits organic farming delivers. Additionally, in practice, not all organic products receive premiums in markets. The double funding rules risk disincentivising organic farming, since additional efforts would not be adequately rewarded.

The implementation of the additionality rules under the CRCF Regulation is disadvantageous to organic farmers, with potentially high baselines and limited room for additional climate action. The current draft methodology of the CRCF proposes an activity-specific baseline[9] (i.e. the individual performance of a specific activity is the starting point). This disadvantages farms that are pioneering such activities with high environmental performance, and fails to acknowledge the historically high performance of organic farms, the sustainable accumulation of soil organic carbon, and provides no incentive to maintain or improve existing good practices.

Case study for a regulatory rewarding mechanism: Italian legislation on public procurement

In 2017, Italy introduced a national legislation on sustainable public procurement, establishing mandatory *Criteri Ambientali Minimi* (Minimum Environmental Criteria, CAM).[C] These criteria require that a minimum percentage of food procured, depending on the food category, must be organic. The CAM concern food procurement for schools (from nurseries to high schools), universities, hospitals, the army, and office canteens. While the impact was not immediate due to existing contracts, the introduction of CAM has significantly increased the demand for organic products as new contracts were tendered under the revised rules.

Under CAM, the contract is awarded based on a scoring system in which the technical quality of a bid accounts for 80% and the economic offer for 20%. Bidders receive additional technical points if organic products are sourced locally, through short supply chains, or produced by companies engaged in social farming[D]. Bidders that exceed the mandatory organic percentage also receive extra technical points. Compliance is reinforced through contractual clauses. Successful bidders must provide documentation demonstrating adherence to each environmental criterion.

[C] *Criteri Ambientali Minimi (CAM):* https://gpp.mase.gov.it/sites/default/files/2022-05/cam_ristorazione.pdf
[D] *Social farming is the use of farming activities as a means to provide health, social or educational benefits to a wide range of people.*

[9] *The current draft certification methodology for agriculture and agroforestry on mineral soils does not draw on a standardized baseline (as set under Art. 8a and 9), but suggests using an activity-specific baseline in line with Article 10, that refers to justified deviation from this rule including a lack of data or the absence of sufficient comparable activities.*

4. Incentivising systemic and climate-resilient farming approaches through rewarding mechanisms

Organic farmers are front-runners in delivering public goods such as climate mitigation, adaptation, and biodiversity through systemic management, but are rarely rewarded for these contributions. To ensure that systemic and climate-resilient approaches can realise their full potential, monetary, supportive and regulatory rewarding mechanisms must be improved.

Access to finance is key to maintaining and transitioning to systemic farming approaches. The CAP plays an important role in the maintenance and conversion to organic farming, but is insufficient to fully reward organic farmers for the benefits they provide. System approaches that deliver numerous benefits simultaneously should be prioritised over singular measures in the CAP. Additional voluntary climate-friendly practices implemented need to be remunerated adequately.

The CAP post-2027 should ensure funding levels for farmers proportionate to their environmental and climate ambitions. This may be achieved with a tiered system. The first tier would provide basic income support to all eligible farmers, ensuring critical ecological conditions are met. Farmers with moderately high to excellent environmental and climate performance would qualify for more financial support, respectively (from tier 2 to tier 3). Eligibility could be based either on activities or on verified performance that adhere to common agroecological and climate standards. Key performance dimensions may embrace climate, water, biodiversity and soil quality. By default, organic farming, as the only regulated and certified sustainable production system, would qualify for higher tiers on all dimensions.

The CAP post-2027 should provide income-positive payments beyond conversion and maintenance for organic farming, recognising the public goods organic and other systemic farming approaches deliver. The use of the cost incurred and income foregone calculation in the current CAP is taking a restrictive approach to organic farming systems. In some countries, the organic support payments cannot be combined with additional environmental payments due to strict readings of the "no double funding" rule. This limits the possibilities to adequately reward environmental and climate services and disincentivises organic farmers from making extra efforts.

The CRCF Regulation needs to be geared toward system approaches, such as organic farming, and to incentivise the bundling of activities. In its current state, the CRCF counts carbon in ways that omit systemic farming approaches. The additionality criterion disadvantages early movers, such as many organic farmers, and the sustainable accumulation of soil organic carbon. Past efforts to build up and maintain soil carbon are not recognised, while "new entrants" can more easily demonstrate additional removals. The CRCF needs to better incentivise and reward systemic approaches that not only increase but also sustainably maintain soil organic carbon. Additionally, the CRCF must include strong and ambitious sustainability criteria, including clear guidance on how farmers should demonstrate compliance with the obligatory and voluntary sustainability requirements.

Rewarding policies and methodologies for assessing the sustainability of farming systems should account for all externalities of agricultural systems and adequately reflect the benefits of systemic approaches, rather than focusing on singular measures. As a result, the full range of ecosystem services that organic farming provides will be rewarded, including enhanced biodiversity, improved soil and water quality, climate resilience, and landscape conservation.

Blended finance approaches could bridge the conversion gap to systemic farming approaches. The conversion to organic farming systems often requires substantial upfront costs and yields uncertain returns, limiting private investment participation. Although still limited in application, blended finance is gaining attention for its potential to bridge the gap between the financial needs of beneficiaries (e.g., financing transaction and opportunity costs, risk mitigation, long-term financing) and the requirements of classical investors (e.g., accountable outcomes, short turnarounds). By combining public and innovative private funding, blended finance can mitigate investment risks, making the transition to organic farming more financially viable, feasible, and attractive for both farmers and investors.

Advisory services and knowledge infrastructure are the backbone of systemic farming systems. Strengthening these would encourage farmers to adopt additional climate-friendly measures. Under the next CAP, organic-specific advisory services focused on climate mitigation and adaptation should be prioritised, and cooperation among organic advisory services should be strengthened.

Public procurement should promote the consumption of organic products to ensure stable, resilient markets. Organic farmers rely on premium prices in private consumer markets that are volatile and highly susceptible to external shocks. The forthcoming revision of the Public Procurement Directive, expected in 2026, should introduce mandatory minimum requirements for the share of certified organic food in public procurement across Member States.

The voluntary benchmarking system for on-farm sustainability assessments proposed by the European Commission's Vision for Agriculture and Food and the Strategic Dialogue should reflect the benefits of systemic farming approaches and recognise organic certification. Organic farming practices are already voluntarily third-party verified as highly sustainable under applicable law. Enabling farmers to monitor and record sustainability data only once by integrating existing organic certification systems with other MRV and reporting systems is key. Reducing administrative burdens and complexity will strengthen the competitiveness of organic agriculture as a business model.

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OrganicClimateNET is an EU-funded project with 17 European partners from 14 European countries. It aims to **enable farmers to integrate organic climate farming.** It establishes a pilot network of actors around **250 organic farms across 12 countries**, where the actors apply and test tools & methods to integrate climate farming practices into farming routines. The pilot network acts as a blueprint for further scaling of organic climate farming across Europe.

Climate Farm Demo is a unique pan-European network of nearly 1,500 Pilot Demo Farmers, including 421 (28%) organic Pilot Demo Farms, operating across 27 countries and all pedo-climatic areas. Its goal is to **accelerate the adoption of Climate Smart Farming practices and solutions by farmers and all actors of the Climate Smart Agriculture Knowledge & Innovation Systems**, supporting the adaptation of agricultural production systems to climate change and contributing to the EU objective of a carbon neutral agricultural sector by 2050.

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