

# Rural Pact Conference

Draft Agenda

## From vision to action: Empowering rural areas for the future

16 & 17 September 2025

**Venue:** Château du Biez. Rue de Lannoy 145

Pecq (near Kortrijk/Courtrai), Belgium

## 16 September 2025 (Day 1)

Tentative timing	Draft agenda items
13.00	<b>Shuttle busses departing from Courtrai/Kortrijk train station</b>
14.00 – 15.00	<b>Registration to the event &amp; welcome coffee</b>
15.00 – 15.45	<b>Welcome and opening interventions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <b>High-level opening</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mr Raffaele Fitto</b>, Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, European Commission</li> <li>• <b>Mr Christophe Hansen</b>, Commissioner for Agriculture and Food, European Commission</li> </ul> </li> <li>&gt; <b>Living in Europe's rural areas today: A citizen perspective</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms Lina Noreikaitė-Rimkienė</b>, Member of the Rural Pact Community, Lithuania</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
15.45 – 16.30	<b>Setting the scene: Integrating EU policies at EU and Member State levels</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <b>Advancing with the Rural Vision and Rural Pact in Member States</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms Sari Essayah</b>, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland</li> </ul> </li> <li>&gt; <b>Key challenges and opportunities ahead for the future of rural areas – Reinforcing Rural Resilience in OECD countries</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms Dorothée Allain-Dupré</b>, Head of the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance Division, Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and cities, OECD</li> </ul> </li> <li>&gt; <b>Amplifying rural voices through the Rural Pact</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mr Radim Sršeň</b>, Member of the Committee of the Regions and Chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
16.30 – 17.00	<b>Coffee Break</b>
17.00 – 18.15	<b>Key priorities for the future of rural areas</b> <p>Introductory remarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <b>Towards impactful and efficient action for rural areas for long-lasting results</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms Iliana Ivanova</b>, European Court of Auditors</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Panel debate: High-level representatives from EU institutions/organisations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>European Commission</b> <b>Ms Themis Christopidou</b>, Director-General for Regional and Urban policy</li> <li>• <b>Council of the European Union (DK presidency)</b> <b>Mr Hans Peter Olsen</b>, Deputy Permanent Secretary of State in the Ministry of Urban, Rural and Ecclesiastical Affairs of Denmark</li> <li>• <b>European Parliament</b> <b>Speaker to be confirmed</b></li> <li>• <b>Committee of the Regions</b> <b>Mr Radim Sršeň</b>, Member of the Committee of the Regions</li> <li>• <b>European Economic and Social Committee</b> <b>Ms Lidija Pavić-Rogošić</b>, Member of the Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment Section</li> <li>• <b>Rural Pact Coordination Group</b> <b>Ms Edina Ocsko</b>, E40 European Smart village network services, Vice-chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group</li> </ul>

18.15 – 18.30

### Transition to the Networking session

18.30 – 19.30

#### Networking session: the Rural Pact Community committing to action

Networking spaces led by key organisations within the Rural Pact Community for focused exchanges, networking and plan joint actions on key topics:

- > **Bringing the Rural Pact at local level through LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs)**  
European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD)
- > **Implementing the rural vision in Member States and Regions**  
Ministry of Agriculture of Hungary
- > **Village vibes: Smart villages for a rural future**  
Smart Villages Network
- > **Rural Youth: Together for the present and the future of rural development**  
Rural Youth Europe; European Rural Youth Observatory & Meridaunia Local Action Group, Italy
- > **Rural research & evidence-based policy making for the long-term vision for rural areas**  
University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland; Natural Resources Institute (LUKE), Finland; & European Rural Development Network (ERDN)
- > **Bottom-up village plans: Communities building their own future**  
Rural Pact Netherlands
- > **Sustainable rural development in mountain areas**  
Euromontana
- > **Environmental actions for community-led transition**  
European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability (ECOLISE)
- > **Community-led innovation in action**  
PREPARE Network
- > **Rural tourism**  
European Federation of Rural Tourism (Ruraltour)

19.30 – 21.00

### Conference Dinner

21.00

Shuttle buses departing to Courtrai/Kortrijk train station



## 17 September 2025 (Day 2)

Tentative timing	Draft agenda items
08.00	<b>Shuttle buses departing from Courtrai/Kortrijk train station</b>
09.00 – 09.30	<b>Registration</b>
09.30 – 09.50	<b>Introducing the 2nd day of the conference</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <b>Introduction of the agenda of the day</b> Rural Pact Support Office</li> <li>&gt; <b>Acting for rural areas under a new political landscape</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms Elisabeth Werner</b>, Director-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
09.50 – 10.00	<b>A closer look at Europe</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <b>Better rural statistics for evidence-based policymaking</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ms Teodora Brandmueller</b>, Team Leader, Eurostat, European Commission</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
10.00 – 10.15	<b>Transition to group discussions</b>
10.15 – 12.30	<b>Actions and recommendations to strengthen the rural society, economy and way of living (session 1)</b> <p><u>Group discussions:</u> Participants will engage with peers to exchange insights on inspiring local initiatives and policies around key topics. Through participatory discussions, participants will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the main outstanding needs and emerging opportunities which require focus or attention.</li> <li>• Exchange on actions and policy recommendations needed to advance.</li> <li>• Develop concrete proposals to update the Rural Action Plan or contribute to further develop ideas proposed by Commission services, and advance with the Rural Pact.</li> </ul> <p><b>Group 1: Rural society in the digital era</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Shaping rural futures with ‘3C Networks’ – Connectivity, Cloud, and Computing</b> <b>Mr Franco Accordini</b>, DG CNECT, European Commission</li> <li>• <b>5G for water supply management and emergency response and recovery for Ilirska Bistrica smart municipality</b> <b>Mr Goran Živec</b>, Vahta, (Slovenia)</li> <li>• <b>Rural schools boosting digital skills: Rural Wings academy</b> <b>Mr Nikos Zygouritsas</b>, Ellinogermaniki Agogi (Greece)</li> <li>• <b>Koknese – local communities embracing new technologies</b> <b>Ms Ieva Utena</b>, Koknese community member (Latvia)</li> </ul> <p>Questions for discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; How to overcome the last miles in digital infrastructure?</li> <li>&gt; How to boost the transfer and adoption on new technologies in rural areas?</li> <li>&gt; How to improve the provision of public services through digital technology?</li> <li>&gt; How to develop inclusive digital transformation strategies and policies in rural areas?</li> <li>&gt; How to enhance digital skills in vulnerable groups?</li> </ul>

## **Group 2: Rural areas as key players in the energy transition**

- **Supporting energy communities in rural areas**  
**Mr Achille Hannoset**, DG ENER, European Commission
- **Energy poverty and potential for rural areas**  
**Ms Clara Hormigos**, Joint Research Centre, European Commission
- **Development of rural energy efficiency roadmaps**  
**Ms Valerija Vrček Habazin**, North-West Croatia Regional Energy Agency (Croatia)  
**Ms Kristina Einfeld**, Climate Alliance (Germany)

### Questions for discussion

- > How to boost energy communities including renewable energies in rural areas?
- > How to ensure that vulnerable rural stakeholders have access to essential energy services?
- > How to boost Sustainable Energy & Climate Action Plans (SECAPs) in rural areas?

## **Group 3: Making rural areas attractive places for young generations**

- **Rural youth in the European Union: findings and future**  
**Mr Charampoulos Papaioannou**, DG EAC, European Commission
- **The European Youth Village Programme**  
**Mr Victor Cătălin**, Active Development Association (Romania)
- **Changemaker #Nature: Supporting youth-led projects that protect rural nature conservation and boost innovation**  
**Mr Ronald Würflinger**, Blühendes Österreich (Austria)
- **Rural volunteer programme: engaging young people in voluntary civic services that support rural development**  
**Ms Marélie Arrighi**, In Site organisation (France)

### Questions for discussion

- > What makes rural areas attractive for young people to live and work?
- > How can we support youth employment and business renewal in rural areas?
- > How can we support rural youth to take part in decisions and lead change?
- > How can we support vibrant rural communities for youth through culture, creativity and innovation?

## **Group 4: Empowering local communities to enhance resilience**

- **EU territorial approaches for rural and coastal communities to build resilient societies**  
**Mr Anton Schrag**, DG REGIO, European Commission
- **Implementing multi-funded CLLD in Czechia to foster rural resilience**  
**Ms Renata Kučerová**, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Czechia)
- **Fostering informed decisions about climate change**  
**Mr Dariusz Piechowiak**, Barycz Valley LAG/FLAG (Poland)
- **Community mobilisation for collaborative projects**  
**Mr Carlo Ricci**, LAG Maiella Verde (Italy)
- **Combining CLLD and ITI to enhance rural resilience**  
**Ms Sandra Rosario**, Associação In Loco (Portugal)
- **Communities getting ready for crises in a bottom-up way**  
**Ms Sofia Skörde**, Leader Västra Småland (Sweden)  
**Ms Åsa Westström**, Leader Linné Småland (Sweden)

#### Questions for discussion

- > How to design appropriate tools (including LEADER/CLLD) to empower local communities?
- > How can local authorities promote bottom-up approaches?
- > How to enhance resilience of local communities to crises?
- > How to foster voluntary and community action?
- > How to better empower of regions with special needs and constraints?

12.30 – 13.30

#### Lunch Break

13.30 – 15.45

### **Actions and recommendations to strengthen the rural society, economy and way of living (session 2)**

Group discussions: Participants will engage with peers to exchange insights on inspiring local initiatives and policies around key topics. Through participatory discussions, participants will:

- Identify the main outstanding needs and emerging opportunities which require focus or attention.
- Exchange on actions and policy recommendations needed to advance.
- Develop concrete proposals to update the Rural Action Plan or contribute to further develop ideas proposed by Commission services, and advance with the Rural Pact.

#### **Group 5: Boosting innovative and competitive rural economies and businesses**

- **Enabling rural businesses to thrive**  
**Mr Crispin Waymouth**, DG GROW, European Commission
- **Industrial and craft geographical indications fostering business development in rural areas**  
**Ms Audrey Aubard**, Fédération Française des Indications Géographiques Industrielles et Artisanales (France)
- **Rural Tourism EuroCluster supporting small-scale enterprises**  
**Mr Maurizio Malè**, Venetian Cluster (Italy)  
**Ms Frosso Dimitrakopoulou**, Ecoclub (Greece)
- **Academy of social entrepreneurship for the rural area**  
**Mr Márton Balogh**, Civitas Foundation for Civil Society Cluj (Romania)
- **Rural innovation ecosystems to foster business innovation**  
**Mr Simone Sasso**, Joint Research Centre, European Commission

#### Questions for discussion

- > How can collaboration and support ecosystems foster innovation in rural businesses, including SMEs?
- > How to foster business capacity (including social entrepreneurship), in particular of women and young people?
- > How can rural areas benefit from the new emerging economic opportunities?
- > How to foster industrial and craft geographical indications in rural areas?

#### **Group 6: Ensuring the 'right to stay' in rural areas: addressing demographic challenges through place-based approaches and access to services**

- **Cohesion policy as a powerful engine to ensure the 'right to stay'**  
**Ms Diletta Zonta**, DG REGIO, European Commission
- **Functional rural areas to deliver essential and other enabling services in 30 minutes**  
**Mr Cristian Garcia**, Ministry of ecological transition and demographic challenge (Spain)



- **Turning village shops into multiservice hubs**  
**Ms Antonia Husberg**, Ministry Agriculture and Forestry (Finland)  
**Ms Nina Nilson**, Rautio village (Finland)
- **Attracting health professionals to rural areas in Alentejo, Portugal**  
**Mr Tiago Teotónio**, Managing Authority of the Alentejo 2030 Regional Programme (Portugal)

#### Questions for discussion

- > What are the conditions to enable people to stay in and return to rural areas?
- > How to ensure quality health services in rural areas?
- > How to facilitate access to housing in rural areas?
- > How to roll out multi-service hubs in rural areas?
- > How to improve mobility in rural areas?

### Group 7: Building inclusive rural communities

- **European Social Fund for social inclusion in rural areas**  
**Mr Aurélien Mornon Afonso**, DG EMPL, European Commission
- **New trails: Social orientation and integration of newcomers in rural areas**  
**Ms Irene Almazán**, Fundación Cepaim (Spain)
- **Social Farming as a community-driven tool for social inclusion and rural sustainability**  
**Mr Brian Smyth**, Social Faring Ireland (Ireland)
- **The "Local Action Programme – Getting Women into Politics!"**  
**Ms Cécile Weidhofer**, EAF Berlin (Germany)

#### Questions for discussion

- > How can rural communities support the integration of newcomers and ensure a sense of belonging?
- > How can rural communities reduce isolation and improve long-term care?
- > How can we improve opportunities and visibility for women in rural communities?
- > How can we support vulnerable groups into work in rural areas?

### Group 8: Driving local prosperity through bioeconomy

- **The bioeconomy as a driver for local prosperity and competitiveness in rural areas**  
European Commission (tbc)
- **Regional bioeconomy strategy in Grand-Est region, France**  
**Ms Marie Clotteau**, Grand Est-Europe (France)
- **The green future for Bio-districts in the Netherlands**  
**Mr Michael Wilde**, Organic Embassy (the Netherlands)
- **Flemish food strategy 'Go4Food', Belgium**  
**Ms Katrien Dejong**, Flemish Land Agency (Belgium)

#### Questions for discussion

- > How to mainstream a bioeconomy in rural areas which benefits local communities?
- > How can bio-districts be further supported?
- > How to enhance connections between territories, food and people?

15.45 – 16.15

Coffee Break

## 16.15 – 17.15      **Key recommendations for the future**

Report back of outcomes from group discussions by keynote listeners

- **Mr Spyros Papadatos**, Rural Youth Europe (Greece)
- **Ms Karen Keaveney**, University College Dublin (Ireland)
- **Ms Jone Fernandez**, Hazi Foundation (Spain)
- **Ms Simone Sterly**, Institute for Rural Development Research (Germany)

Stakeholder panel: Key messages, conclusions and recommendations for future action and policies, and ideas to update the Rural Action Plan and advance with the Rural Pact.

- **Mr Kevin Grauwels**, Flemish Land Agency (Belgium)
- **Ms Hilkka Vihinen**, LUKE Institute (Finland)
- **Mr Ben van Essen**, European Rural Parliament and ERCA
- **Ms Anita Seļicka**, Latvian Rural Forum (Latvia)
- **Ms Charlene Lambert**, Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP)

## 17.15 – 17.30      **Closing the event**

### > **Final institutional remarks**

- **Mr Hugo Sobral**, Deputy Director-General, DG REGIO, European Commission
- **Mr Mihail Dumitru**, Deputy Director-General, DG AGRI, European Commission

## 18.00              **Shuttle buses departing to Courtrai/Kortrijk train station**