



Policy brief / May 2026

Boosting intercropping in organic agriculture:

Reaping the diverse benefits of crop diversification

Recommendations

- In the post-2027 **CAP**, agri-environmental and climate actions should reward intercropping under voluntary transition towards resilient production systems to incentivise farmers to convert to organic.
- Measures that support intercropping and other practices compatible with organic farming must be compatible with organic support measures.
- EU and national **organic action plans** should allocate funding for organic advisory, AKIS, research and innovation specialised on intercropping.
- Develop intercropping value chains, adjust purity standards in the case of intercropped grains to allow for legume-fortified new products.
- The upcoming revision of the framework on public procurement could encourage **public procurement** of certified organic food and reward goods from intercropping with extra scores in tender processes.
- Support routes to market for organic **feed produced** by intercropping.
- National Restoration Plans** should require intercropping on cropland as a restoration measure related to agricultural practices and agriculture related habitats.

Introduction

Intercropping, also known as mixed cropping or species mixture, is the cultivation of multiple species in the same field at the same time, but not necessarily sown or harvested together. Intercropping is an agroecological practice that improves the sustainability of crop production and works well in low-input conditions and thus in organic agriculture. Intercropping relies on ecosystem services rather than synthetic inputs, which fits well with organic principles and enables yield gains and yield stability with lower external inputs and higher land use efficiency.^[1]

To increase the adoption of intercropping in organic farming and the conversion to and long-term continuation of organic practices, this policy brief provides recommendations for two current policy instruments: the EU Organic Action Plan (EU level) and National Restoration Plans (Member State level).



Intercropping is a versatile practice to achieve various strategic agronomic and environmental goals for the EU agricultural sector by diversifying cropping systems especially through cereal-legume mixtures. In intercropping cereals and legumes, the two types of species acquire nitrogen in complementary ways (from the soil and from the atmosphere through biological fixation), which increases acquisition efficiency and can result in higher or more stable yields compared to sole (legume) crops.^[2] The practice enhances crop water use efficiency, light acquisition, and capitalises on biological nitrogen fixation—decreasing dependency on N fertilisers. These inter-plant dynamics boost complementarity, cooperation, and compensation while mitigating competition for different abiotic resources.^[3]

Diversification not only enhances crop and soil health but can also support farm economics—diverse cropping systems can provide greater ecological **resilience** and economic robustness against pests or diseases, input limitations, or extreme weather events.^[4] That is why intercropping is a keystone practice in the sustainable transition of European food and farming systems, not only organic, offering all farmers opportunities for economic diversification and greater robustness, reducing input costs, improving soil and agroecosystem health, creating value chain innovation, and exploring routes to market for short and long value chains alike.

In the current geopolitical context and climate crisis-related weather variations, intercropping offers a robust policy option to boost the EU's preparedness and strategic independence. It is well-suited for lower-input conditions, increases resource efficiency, yield stability, self-sufficiency (e.g., of feed and food protein), and reduces production risks under conditions of higher abiotic and biotic stresses, making it a critical piece of the puzzle for **EU strategic autonomy** and preparedness for food security and competitiveness. More diversified systems are better able to deal with crises.

Organic agriculture is a key component to bolster the EU's competitiveness, rural development, and strategic autonomy.^[5] Both intercropping and organic production are, therefore, aligned with EU strategic priorities. The EU food system needs coherent policies across agricultural, biodiversity, nature, climate, and economic policy instruments.



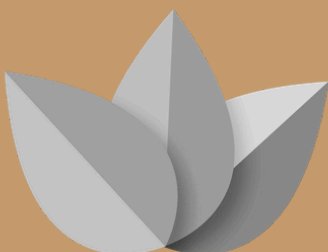
Intercropping can bridge farming and nature policies and promote European competitiveness in a **robust**, sustainable way. It offers pathways for scaling agroecological production with economic, social, strategic, and environmental benefits.^[6] Linking biodiversity and resource efficiency, farmers should be rewarded for the delivery of environmental, health, and socioeconomic services and public goods beyond food production.

Farm incomes should reflect the multiple benefits of organic and intercropping systems—similarly, the socioeconomic, health, and environmental costs of industrial farming need to be reflected in food prices and subsidy allocation. Intercropping is pioneered by organic farmers. They need support from the regulatory environment to drive the transition of EU agriculture.^[7]

Policy recommendations

EU Organic Action Plan

The following recommendations target EU and national policymakers to **incentivise the adoption of intercropping in organic farming** through the EU Organic Action Plan revised in 2026 and the National Restoration Plans of Member States to be drafted by August 2026.



1

Position intercropping as a pathway to organic conversion

The 2026 revision of the EU Organic Action Plan (OAP) can send a powerful message to Member States to prioritise organic production in their National and Regional Partnership plans and other mechanisms.

The 2028-2034 common agricultural policy (CAP)^[8] must ensure maintained funding for the development of organic farming and associated value chains. **Agri-environmental and climate actions** (Article 10)^[9] should reward intercropping under voluntary transition towards resilient production systems (§1/b), to incentivise farmers to convert to organic. Member States should award higher financial support to farmers whose **transition action plan** (§4) includes the adoption and continuous development of intercropping. Other measures that support intercropping and other practices compatible with organic farming (coupled income support, farm stewardship, and agri-environmental and climate actions)^[10] have to be **compatible with organic support measures**.

2

Invest in capacity building and knowledge exchange

The European Commission can encourage Member States to invest in capacity building focused on intercropping, among other agroecological practices, for organic farmers and processors associations. EU and national organic action plans should allocate funding for regional, national, and international knowledge exchanges, field visits, and trainings to promote information on crop diversification.

The EU OAP need to emphasise strengthening **organic advisory and agricultural knowledge and innovation systems (AKIS)** specialised on intercropping to provide farmers with contextual advice and support to increase the adoption of the practice. **Research and innovation funding** should be allocated towards further understanding intercropping best practices and conditions to boost its adoption on farms and acceptance along value chains, particularly, species interactions, breeding and selecting varieties and adapting mixtures to production objectives, machinery and processing technology, as well as market dynamics.

3

Develop markets for organic products from intercropping

The revised Action Plan should provide support for intercropping throughout the value chain, from field and processing (funding for harvesting and sorting equipment^[11]) through the development of short value chains to marketing. When grain species mixtures are harvested and cleaned, separation remains challenging. The Commission should adjust **purity standards** in the case of intercropped grains to allow for a greater proportion of other crop species (with appropriate allergens labelling), e.g., allowing legumes in cereal grains. This will improve market access and drive market innovation, for example, through the development of new products such as legume-fortified breads or baked goods, benefitting from higher protein and mineral content without negative impacts on taste. Such innovations can also produce food with better taste and nutritional value.

Sustainable public food procurement holds a strong potential to increase the uptake of intercropping products, if the upcoming revision of the framework on public procurement^[12] is designed to encourage public procurement of certified

organic food, especially for school canteens and hospitals, and establishes minimum target shares for organic in public catering. Green public procurement criteria can be revised to reward goods from intercropping with extra scores in tender processes, acknowledging the multiple benefits the practice carries along the value chain.

Last, intercropping offers a market opportunity for **organic feed**, closing farm cycles and providing additional income to farmers. For farmers, intercropping provides the opportunity for simultaneous fodder and food production, decoupling land use competition between these production systems. Such intercropping systems improve feed availability and quality for organic farmers and can help meet the requirements of 100% organic feed for livestock from organic production systems in the EU, as stipulated by Regulation (EU) 2018/848.^[13] If supported in routes to market, intercropping can close this gap, strengthening autonomy for organic animal feed production and protein crops, e.g., by maize-soybean intercropping.

To implement the Nature Restoration Regulation adopted in 2024, Member States are obliged to submit their NRPs by August 2026 to collectively restore at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030 and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. Organic agriculture, with practices such as intercropping, can play a pivotal role and thus needs to be promoted in each national strategy to restore agroecosystems.

National Restoration Plans

The Commission's typology of restoration measures related to agricultural practices and agriculture related habitats lists adapting soil management practices in agriculture (NRPM_009 MA08), including **"promoting the use of enhanced intercropping practices."**^[15] Member States should design restoration measures in their NRP requiring the adoption and development of intercropping on cropland as a way of diversification, and benefit from its positive impacts for pollinators, habitats, soil, and water on national farmland at scale. Organic farming is also mentioned as a restoration measure, allowing to reap the additional benefits of combining the two.

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