

Introduction

SafeHabitus is a Horizon Europe funded research project that seeks to enhance working conditions of farmers and farm workers by improving farm safety and farmer health. In addition to undertaking research, project activities involve the organisation of a series of policy discussions. This seminar is the first SafeHabitus Policy Seminar and brings together EU policy makers, policy stakeholders and researchers to support the development of a policy brief with recommendations on enhancing the occupational mental health and wellbeing of farmers. By engaging in knowledge exchange, policy makers, practitioners and researchers will share knowledge and experience, develop a shared understanding of the challenges and identify potential actions or solutions for improving the mental health of farmers.

This document sets out some background information that:

- Presents basic information about SafeHabitus activities in this area
- Defines key concepts
- Provides an overview of selected research
- Outlines relevant EU policy initiatives
- Provides links to additional resources

Key trends and data

The idyllic vision of farming as a relaxing healthy outdoor life amongst nature is not an accurate representation of contemporary farming. Farmers and farm workers experience occupational health and safety risks including psychosocial challenges. These include uncertainty relating to weather conditions and financial viability, long working hours, isolation, concerns regarding succession and generational renewal (Brennan et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2019) [3][4]. These stressors can impact the overall wellbeing of some farmers. Research from Ireland established that many farmers considered their wellbeing to be relatively high with 42% recording 'good' or 'excellent' wellbeing scores on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale; whereas 20% and 15% (35% in total) respectively recorded 'below average' or 'poor' wellbeing.

To date, little comparative research into farmer mental health, mental illness or wellbeing has been conducted across the EU. The available evidence is drawn from a variety of national, regional or local cross-sectional studies. The results of this research highlight significant variation in the mental health experiences and outcomes of farmers, and hence it is not possible to extrapolate the findings of these studies to all farmers.

Having said this, the research broadly supports the view that farming is an occupation with multiple stressors resulting in farmers experiencing stress at high levels or for prolonged periods (Ristiluoma and Sipilainen, 2003; Brennan et al., 2022). Research undertaken in Ireland with over 800 participants established that a relatively small percentage, 13%, of livestock farmers experienced stress 'often or very often' (Van Doorn et al., 2020) [6].

A number of studies have drawn attention to differences in the experiences of farmers with different types of farm enterprise. Research from Ireland, Norway, and Finland indicates that farmers with livestock enterprises, particularly dairy, are more likely to experience stress compared with other enterprise types [3][7][8].



Stress can impact mental wellbeing for example by affecting feelings towards other, decision making, coping mechanisms and concentration [9]. Stress may also lead to increased risks to physical health and farm injury [10] (Mamady et al., 2014). Some farmers and farm workers experience serious mental health challenges resulting in mental illness including depression and anxiety [11] [12]. There are a small number of studies that indicate that death from suicide is higher amongst farmers [13][14][15] compared to other occupational groups; French data points to a higher suicide rate among farmers 20% above the average national suicide rate of other professions [16]. The latter research found that male farmers between 45 and 54 compared with those under 35 were more likely to die from suicide. Other personal and enterprise characteristics were also found to explain difference in the suicide rate including, operating a sole proprietorship compared with a partnership; being a full-time farmer; farming between 20 and 49 hectares compared to having a UAA of over 200 hectares; farming in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, Bretagne and Hauts-de-France compared to having a farm located in the Grand Est region.

EU Policy background

EU initiative on mental health:

People living in rural or remote areas, such as farmers, have particular mental health challenges associated with the risk of disconnection and lack of access to mental health services. CAP funds can support awareness raising activities including in the area of mental health for example via farm advisory services. In addition, other funds can also be mobilised, such as the European Social Fund+ or the European Fund for Regional Development, to enhance the investments into the social support services in rural and remote areas and thus guarantee that they are accessible to farmers and agriculture workers in need, regardless of their place of residence.



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Member States are encouraged to raise awareness of the mental health issues of farmers and populations in rural areas and develop and implement policies and best practices to help focus on prevention and strengthen the resilience of essential workers, including health professionals, teachers and farmers. To help Member States, the Commission will ensure that EU OSHA produces a report that addresses psychosocial risks in the agricultural sector.

The recently published [EP report on mental health](#) (adopted on 12/12/2023) supports this call to action. In the light of the growing body of international research and the increasing recognition of the challenges relating to farmers' psychosocial work environment and mental health, supports the Commission's proposal to focus on people living in rural or remote areas, such as farmers, particularly through targeting funds in a way that is tailored to their needs and calls for specific proposals to be put forward.

EU Strategy on OSH and EU OSH legislation - Section 3. Focus on psychosocial risks

As part of the Strategy, the Commission has committed to several actions to reduce the occurrence of psychosocial risks including actions implemented through the EU-OSHA healthy workplaces campaign.

Relevant EU projects

FARMRes

Farmers Assistance Resources for Mental Resilience, Erasmus+ <https://farmres.eu/>

Farmwell

Improving farmers' mental, physical and social wellbeing through social innovations, H2020 European Thematic Network <https://farmwell-h2020.eu/>

Rural Mental Health

Erasmus+ <http://ruralmentalhealth.eu/>

Non-exhaustive list of national resources for farmers

European Union

Belgium

- Campaign to support Farmers in their mental health, Flanders. In Flanders, regional government and agricultural support organisations, such as Boeren op een Kruispunt ([Farmers at the Crossroads](#)), are working together to raise awareness about farmers' well-being through a new [well-being action plan](#) and an [information campaign](#).

France

- French Government Roadmap on Prevention of ill-health and accompanying farmers in difficulty ([Prévention du mal-être et accompagnement des agriculteurs en difficulté](#).)
- Activities to prevent farmer suicide – Dedicated CCMSA [farmer support services & hotline](#).

Finland

- "Support the farmer" project, MELA Farmers' Social Insurance Institution. Since 2017, the Finnish government has funded the "Support the Farmer" project that promotes the mental well-being of farmers. The project will now be continued on a more permanent basis by the Finnish government.

Germany

- SVLFG, the social insurance company for agriculture, forestry and horticulture implements [online health and wellness training for farmers](#).

Ireland

- [Coping with The Pressures of Farming](#), a publication of TEAGASC, the Agriculture and Food Development Authority.
- "Make the mooove", led by [Macra na Feirme](#), is a programme promoting positive mental health among farmers and young people in rural areas.

Slovenia

- The Slovenian Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry is temporarily offering [psychosocial support for farmers](#) supported by the Rural Development Programme.

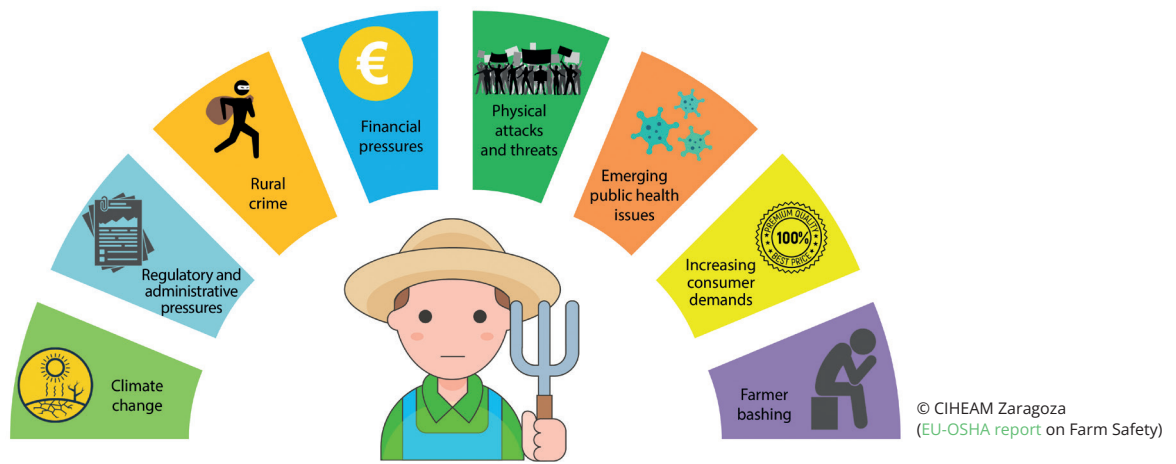
Non-EU resources

Australia

- [Farmer Wellbeing Toolkit](#) | National Centre for Farmer Health.
- [Managing Stress on the Farm](#), National Centre for Farmer Health, Australia, 2022.
- [ifarmwell Toolkit](#), University of South Australia.

United Kingdom

- [The little book of minding your head](#), a pocket guide to understanding mental health and stress management in agriculture, Farm Safety Foundation, 2023.



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Key definitions

Health

Is a state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.¹

Mental Health

A state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioural adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life.²

Mental Illness

While mental health is always there and may be positive or negative, mental illness affects a person's ability to function over a long period of time. Mental illness is not the same as feeling sad, unhappy, or stressed because of difficult situations. People with mental illness may feel distressed regularly and may not feel in control of their lives. Mental illness can impact how we see ourselves, how we see the world around us and how we interact with the world. It's important to know that it is possible to have good mental health even if you have a mental illness.³

Wellbeing

Wellbeing centres on a state of equilibrium or balance that can be affected by life events or challenges. Stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge.⁴

Stress

The physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave. For example, it

may be manifested by palpitations, sweating, dry mouth, shortness of breath, fidgeting, accelerated speech, augmentation of negative emotions (if already being experienced), and longer duration of stress fatigue. Severe stress is manifested by the general adaptation syndrome. By causing these mind-body changes, stress contributes directly to psychological and physiological disorder and disease and affects mental and physical health, reducing quality of life.⁵

Occupational Stress

A physiological and psychological response to events or conditions in the workplace that is detrimental to health and well-being. It is influenced by such factors as autonomy and independence, decision latitude, workload, level of responsibility, job security, physical environment and safety, the nature and pace of work, and relationships with coworkers and supervisors.⁶

Stressor

Any event, force, or condition that results in physical or emotional stress. Stressors may be internal or external forces that require adjustment or coping strategies on the part of the affected individual.⁷

Chronic Stress

The physiological or psychological response to a prolonged internal or external stressful event (i.e., a stressor). The stressor need not remain physically present to have its effects; recollections of it can substitute for its presence and sustain chronic stress.⁸

Quality of Life

The extent to which a person obtains satisfaction from life. The following are important for a good quality of life: emotional, material, and physical well-being; engagement in interpersonal relations; opportunities for personal (e.g., skill) development; exercising rights and making self-determining lifestyle choices; and participation in society.⁹

¹ <https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution>

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4. Same as 2. Dodge et al.

5. Same as 2. Dodge et al.

6. Same as 2. Dodge et al.

7. <https://dictionary.apa.org/stressor>

8. Same as 2. Dodge et al.

9. <https://dictionary.apa.org/quality-of-life>

SafeHabitus activities related to mental health in farming

Work Package 4 of the SafeHabitus Horizon Europe project, “**Anticipating farming futures**”, will carry out a desk-based study identifying current occupational stressors affecting farmers/farm workers to be published in June 2024. Key stakeholders will also be engaged in a foresight process to

assess how current and future trends may impact on farmer wellbeing, quality of life and the attractiveness of farming. Six pilot initiatives that support farmer/farm worker wellbeing or quality of life will also be developed, implemented and evaluated during the project.

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