EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

European Parliament

# Research for AGRI Committee – The challenge of land abandonment after 2020 and options for mitigating measures

## KEY FINDINGS

- Around 30% (circa 56 million ha) of agricultural areas in the EU are under at least a moderate risk of land abandonment. Effective agricultural land abandonment in the EU-27 might total 5 million ha by 2030, or 2,9 % of the current Utilised Agricultural Area (173 million ha).
- Land abandonment is a local phenomenon with a complex set of drivers involving bio-physical, farming, structural, market, regional, institutional and policy factors. Management issues and structural adaptation are the key driving forces affecting this process.
- Harmful effects of land abandonment might threaten the future of semi-natural habitats. However, under specific conditions and in certain phases of the abandonment process, beneficial outcomes might be observed.
- While CAP policy tools can help mitigate land abandonment, their impact on land use changes, production concentration and abandonment trends differs between farm types and production groups.
- Current land abandonment trends will be compounded by external factors (climate change, globalisation, health crises). Key policy tools to minimize the impact of the drivers of land abandonment include the improvement of farming conditions, adapted support to areas with natural constraints, forestry and environmental measures as well as support to rural communities.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on «The challenge of land abandonment after 2020 and options for mitigating measures». The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: https://bit.ly/39ElcFJ

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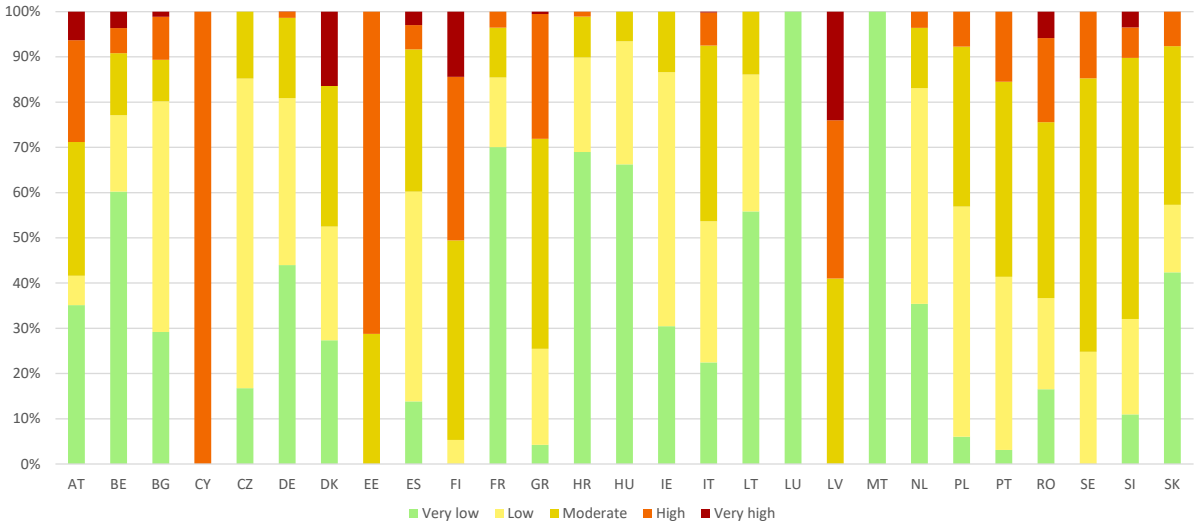
This study provides an overview of the possible future evolution of land abandonment in the EU by 2030, its historical evolution and current state of play. Based on desk research and case studies, this research project carries out an analysis of the drivers and effects of the phenomenon, considers mitigating actions to be implemented through EU policies, notably the CAP, and outlines different scenarios about land use changes, using as variables climate change, the globalisation of markets and a major health crisis.

# Territorial patterns and effects of land abandonment

Around 30% of agricultural areas in the EU are under at least a moderate risk of land abandonment. Such areas exist in almost half of EU Member States. The countries that are most severely affected by higher levels of land abandonment (nearing 30% of areas with high or very high risk) are Austria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Latvia and Romania (see Figure 1 below).

*Figure 1: The share of different levels of the risk of land abandonment at the MS level based on NUTS-3 data in percentage*




Source: Consortium, 2020, based on Perpiña Castillo et al., 2018. There is one value for the entire country for Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta.

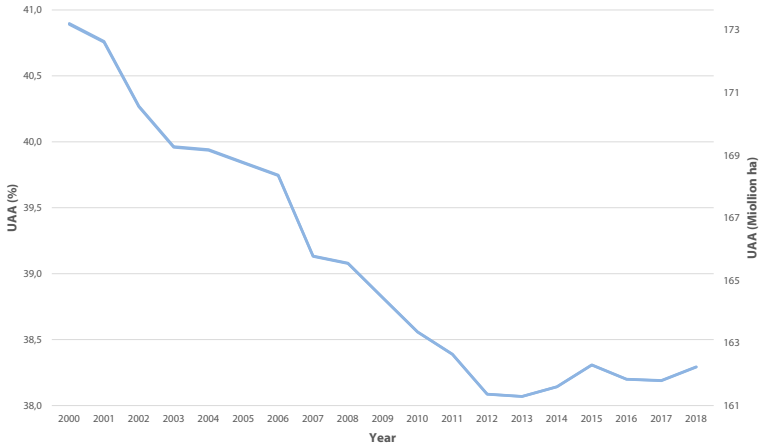
Despite an encouraging trend since 2013 (see Figure 2 below), effective agricultural land abandonment in the EU-27 might total 5 million ha by 2030, or 2,9 % of the current Utilised Agricultural Area (173 million ha).

Remote areas, mountains, islands, coastal and sparsely populated areas are particularly affected by the phenomenon. The prevalence of low and high risk of land abandonment for arable land, permanent crops and pastures is not particularly dependant on the type of land cover, but rather on the geography. In contrast, heterogeneous agricultural areas are affected by high risk irrespective of their location or geography.

The complex pattern of the drivers of land abandonment, as confirmed by the case studies, reveals an interrelated web of bio-physical, farming, structural, market, regional, and institutional and policy factors. Despite the wide array of factors, management issues and structural adaptation remain the key driving forces affecting land abandonment.

While land abandonment can result in harmful environmental effects which may threaten the future of semi-natural habitats, the quality of high nature value farmland, the green corridors linking NATURA 2000 sites and culturally important landscapes,it can also at the same time have beneficial outcomes, e.g. on biodiversity and habitat preservation.

*Figure 2: Historic trend of the share of Utilised Agricultural Area in the EU27 (2000-2018).*




Source: Consortium, 2020, based on Eurostat.

# Mitigating measures

CAP interventions are primarily positive, but can however have varied effects on the process and the extent of land abandonment.

### *CAP Pillar I*

If the mechanisms of Pillar I can mitigate land abandonment through farm income and competitiveness support, inadequate targeting, the greater share of financial support received by large, rather than and small and medium farms and a lack of environmental ambition might however result in increased land abandonment.

### *CAP Pillar II*

Pillar II measures are more focused on addressing spatial challenges, meeting the needs of marginalised and remote rural areas and incorporating farming and forestry within the rural economy through support to diversification, innovation, and value-added activities. The eight measures considered in this study account for over 60% of overall Pillar II funding:

*Figure 3: Pillar II measure percentage of total expenditure 2014-2020.*

| Measure | Measure Name | % Total | Selected |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Knowledge Transfer | 1.2% | |
| 2 | Advisory Services | 0.92% | |
| 3 | Quality Schemes | 0.39% | |
| 4 | Physical Investments | 22.83% | |
| 5 | Restoring Production Potential | 1.20% | |
| 6 | Farm and Business Development | 7.27% | ✓ |
| 7 | Basic Services and Village Renewal | 6.79% | ✓ |
| 8 | Investments in Forest Development and Viability | 4.40% | ✓ |
| 9 | Setting up Producer Groups | 0.44% | |
| 10 | Agri-Environment-Climate | 16.83% | ✓ |
| 11 | Organic Farming | 6.40% | |
| 12 | Natura 2000 and WFD Areas | 0.57% | |
| 13 | Areas Facing Natural Constraints | 17.01% | ✓ |
| 14 | Animal Welfare | 1.45% | |
| 15 | Forest-Environment and Climate Services | 0.24% | ✓ |
| 16 | Co-operation | 1.84% | ✓ |
| 17 | Risk Management Measures | 1.37% | |
| 18 | Direct Payments for Croatia | 0.07% | |
| 19 | LEADER/CLLD | 6.21% | ✓ |
| 20 | Technical Assistance | 2.05% | |
| OM Measure | 113 2007-2013 (early retirement) | 0.53% | |

Source: adapted from Dwyer et al., 2016, p.42.

# Scenarios and Policy recommendations

The current land abandonment trends will also be affected by three major external factors on which actors have little influence but which will have a significant impact on land use change:

- Climate change.
- Globalisation of markets.
- A major health crisis (such as the Covid-19 pandemic).

Policy tools to alleviate the effects of these external factors and impact the other drivers of land abandonment include:

- the improvement of farming conditions (education and training programmes, higher financial security, lower threshold for supporting small farms, new investment sources and easier access to land);
- support to areas with natural constraints (ANC), with a better tailoring to address the risk of land abandonment;
- forestry and environmental measures, which should be adjusted to the different vulnerabilities in different regions;
- rural services of general interest (SGIs) and investment in rural infrastructure, which should be developed making use of synergies between different European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF) and between land use and regional development policies.

# Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the executive summaries can be downloaded at: https://bit.ly/39ElcFJ

More information on Policy Department research for AGRI: https://research4committees.blog/agri/

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