



Friends of
the Earth
Europe



THE TRUE COST OF FACTORY FARMING

A LOOK AT EUROPE'S INTENSIVE AGRICULTURE SECTOR

INTRODUCTION

Small-scale farms, particularly those specialised in animal farming, have faced an existential crisis in the last decades, with many forced out of business.

Capturing the meat processing and production industry, **corporate monoliths like Vion Food Group, Danish Crown, Groupe Bigard and Groupe LDC have tightened their grip, leaving smaller farms struggling to compete.** The **number of farms in the EU has plummeted, but the average size of those that remain is getting bigger, as factory farms - "a system of farming in which a lot of animals are kept in a small closed area, in order to produce a large amount of meat, eggs, or milk as cheaply as possible"** [1] - become more common. Very large farms now account for 72.2% of all the animals being reared in the EU [2].

This industrial agriculture business model prioritises cheap meat production, and **comes with a huge social, environmental and climate cost attached.** In emissions alone, the **agriculture sector contributes more than 10% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions** [4]. The 20 biggest meat and dairy companies produce almost one-third (131%) more greenhouse gas emissions than the Netherlands [5]. **Industrial farming is also connected to water and air pollution, poor health, biodiversity loss, deforestation and human rights abuses throughout their supply chains** - with consumers, communities and workers paying the social and environmental cost.

This brief outlines the state of play of European animal farming, particularly in the pig and poultry sector, and the environmental and social impact of the industrialisation of agriculture. It also presents some recommendations for the European Union to defend higher standards for the livestock industry and protect the needs of farmers, not big corporations.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A FACTORY FARM

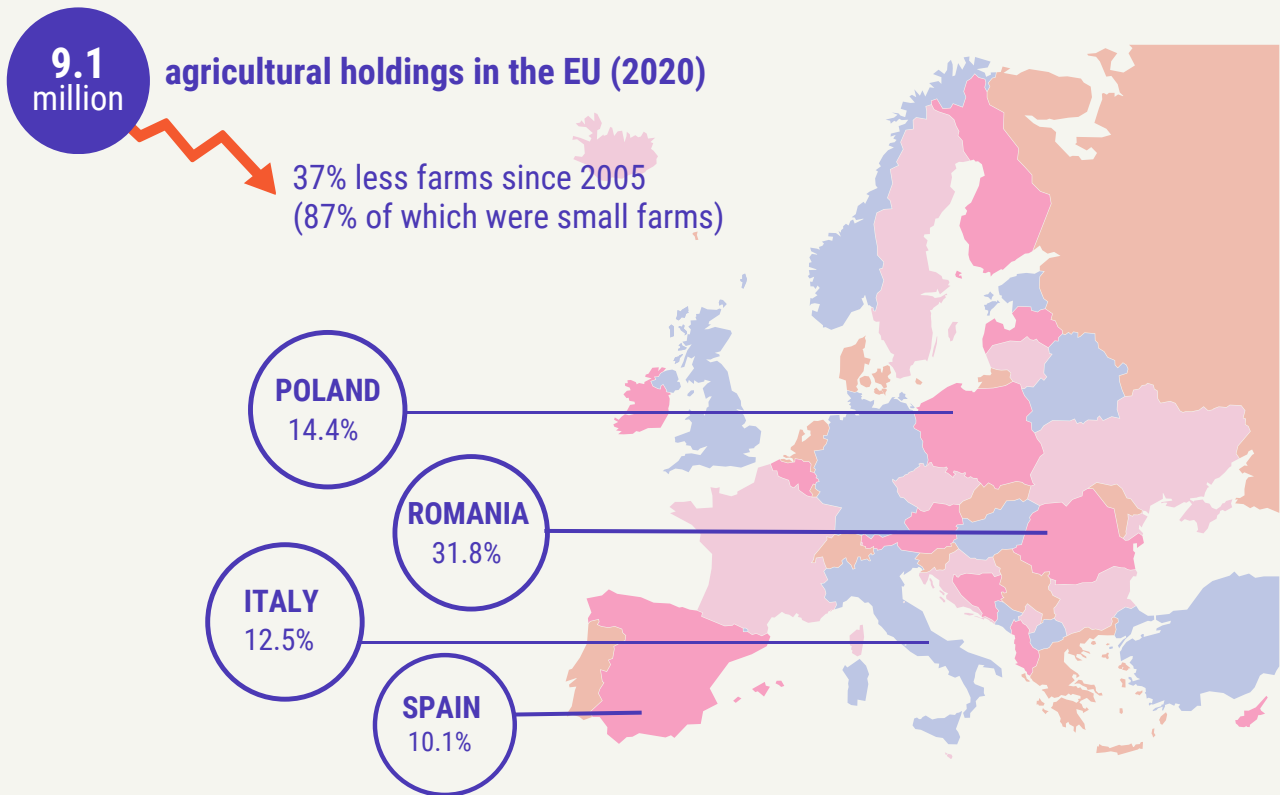
Factory farms, or 'intensive agriculture,' is broadly understood as a **system of agriculture in which a lot of animals are kept in a small closed area, in order to produce a large amount of meat, eggs, or milk as cheaply as possible.** Concerning chickens and pigs, it would be any farm with space for over 40,000 poultry, more than 2,000 spaces for pigs, and with more than 750 spaces for sows (Industrial Emissions Directive 2010/75/EU). Eurostat considers 'large agricultural enterprises' farms with a standard economic output of 250.000 EUR per year. In 2020, in this category fell 3.3% (299 000) of the EU total farms, most of which have a legal form.

[In contrast, 3.3 million farms had a standard output below EUR 2 000 per year, while a further 2.5 million farms had an economic output within the range of 2.000 – 8.000 EUR per year. Together, the very small and small farms accounted for two-thirds (63.7 %) of all farms in the EU in 2020.[3]]

General characteristics:

- Large number of animals are confined and concentrated on a small area;
- All or most of the feed comes from outside the farm, and is concentrated feed whose price relies on global markets;
- Uses a high amount of antibiotics in feed and/or water;
- Have insufficient land to spread the manure produced by the animals in a sustainable way;
- High level of specialisation;
- The farm is vertically integrated: one company (farm) owns the animals, feed and antibiotics.

THE STATE OF PLAY



One fifth (21.6 %) of the EU's farms were **specialist livestock farms**, with specialist dairy farms (5.1 %) and specialist cattle-rearing and fattening (4.2 %) the most numerous within this group [6].

There are two main models of production: integrated and non-integrated. In an **integrated model** - common in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain - **one corporation is responsible for the whole production chain, and contracts growers or producers to raise the livestock.** This means **the corporation dictates the terms of production, tells the producer how to run their farm, and leaves the producer with the burden of any attached costs such as equipment or materials needed to fulfil their demands.**

They also often pay producers based on the final live weight of the livestock.

The profits are then garnered by the integrator corporation [7].

Of the 5.6 million EU farms with livestock, **pigs are the largest group, followed by bovines, sheep and goats** – plus **countless poultry birds**. At the end of 2023, there were 133 million pigs, 74 million bovine animals and 68 million sheep and goats. The distribution of land and livestock varies a lot across EU farms, with **the smallest farms showing the greatest diversity in terms of on-farm activities** [8].

The pig and poultry sectors are known as the most intensive farming systems in the EU - their intensive system features high stocking densities, indoor rearing and the use of fast-growing breeds obtained by genetic selection [9].

PIGS

Pigs represent the largest livestock category in the EU. In 2018, almost three quarters of the EU's pigs were being reared in six EU Member States: Spain (20.8%), Germany (17.8%), France (9.3%), Denmark (8.5%), the Netherlands (8.1%) and Poland (7.4%) [10].

The major production basin extends from Central and North Jutland in Denmark through northern Germany into the Northern Brabant in the Netherlands and West Flanders in Belgium. Other regions with a relatively high density of pigs include Catalonia, Aragon and Murcia (Spain), Brittany (France), Lombardy (Italy) and Wielkopolskie in central Poland [11].

In **Spain, one of the major pig producing countries**. Pork production is controlled by vertically integrated companies providing the feed, pigs and production standards, while farmers are contracted to breed and fatten the animals. **In just a decade, the number of farms in Spain dropped 61%, and 80% of the remaining farms are intensive**. This has been **connected to record use of antimicrobials, and nitrate pollution affecting local communities** [12].

In **Denmark**, where they have the most developed integrated production system, **farms producing more than 5.000 pigs grew** from 198 in 200 to 940 today [13]. These farms have also **captured the political space, leaving locals with little recourse to resist their expansion**.

The number of farms holding pigs in the EU has decreased over the years from 3.8 million in 2005 to just under 2.2 million in 2015. However, pig production continued to increase until a peak in 2020 at 145.9 million. **As of 2022, 75% of the EU pigs are in large commercial farms** [14].

POULTRY

Poultry is the second most-produced meat in the EU, after pigs. In 2023, the EU produced an estimated 13.3 million tonnes of poultry meat. It is also one of the most intensive agriculture systems: **an estimated 90% of chickens are raised in intensive facilities** with cramped spaces, indoor rearing and the use of genetic selection to prioritise fast-growing breeds. **Facilities with more than 100,000 heads of chicken account for 38% of total poultry numbers** [15].

In 2023, the main poultry meat producers in the EU were Poland (representing 20.6% of EU production, with 2.7 million tonnes), Spain (12.8%, with 1.7 million tonnes), Germany (11.8%, with 1.6 million tonnes), France (11.5%, with 1.5 million tonnes) and Italy (10.0%, with 1.3 million tonnes) [16]. Integrated production systems are also common, such as Gradus, the largest poultry producer in Bulgaria, which controls the entire production cycle.

Poland, which has the biggest share of poultry meat production, **the total number of farms has dropped from 2.14 million in 2000 to 1.4 million in 2017, while the number of factory farms has doubled** [17]. In 2021, an **outbreak of an infectious viral disease in a Polish factory led to 18 million birds being culled**, which was linked to the cramped and unsanitary conditions of the farms. Meanwhile, **legal attempts to protect local residents from the health hazards of living close to factory farms have been stalled** for 20 years [18].

In **Germany**, an average of 10 farms went out of business every day for the last decade [19]. NGO investigations on factory farm broilers found evidence of extensive animal cruelty, and antibiotic resistance, in farms that were supplying meat to the European supermarket chain Lidl [20].

THE SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF FACTORY FARMING

The factory farming model is wreaking havoc on the environment, the climate, and putting workers' rights and human health at risk. As well as their contribution to greenhouse gases, intensive agriculture has reduced genetic diversity so drastically it puts the entire food supply chain at risk. **In Europe, half of the animal breeds that existed at the turn of the 20th Century have become extinct, and 53% of the remaining local breeds are at risk [21].**

Local communities living in the vicinity of those installations are left to bear the harmful consequences of this industrial meat production taking over the countryside. The **excessive nitrate and ammonia waste from factory farms** has left several million people in Europe drinking polluted water [22] and **increases the risk of outbreaks of waterborne diseases.** The cramped and unhygienic conditions of factory farms are also a major risk factor for future pandemics and increased antibiotic resistance. The working conditions in slaughterhouses were linked to the accelerated spread of Covid-19 in the US, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland and Wales [23].



The demand for low-cost production is also prompting companies to play fast and loose with health and safety regulations and fair wages - leaving workers in meat plants at increased risk of exploitation, exposure to air pollutants, injuries and death compared to the overall rates for the manufacturing sector [24]. Meanwhile, consumers are being sold poor quality meat that carries the increased risk of antibiotic-resistant viral outbreaks.

The impact of European agribusiness also stretches beyond the EU: soy production in Latin America has increased tenfold in the last fifty years, over $\frac{3}{4}$ of which is used for animal feed [25], and is driving widespread deforestation, illegal landgrabbing and more human rights abuses against local communities, workers and small farmers [26].

EUROPEAN LEGISLATION

The future of the animal farming sector in the EU has been a key part of political discussions during the Strategic Dialogue on the future of EU Agriculture taking place throughout 2024 [27].

The outcome report of this dialogue mentions a few next steps ahead for this sector [28]. Section 2.3., titled *Creating pathways for sustainable animal farming in the EU*, suggests there should be actions ensuring the sustainable transition in the sector and that the 'European Commission should set up a process for developing a strategy on the key role of animal farming based on robust scientific evidence and the consultation of all stakeholders concerned.'

Friends of the Earth Europe welcomes such a process. Below we share our list of essential points for this strategy.

OUR DEMANDS

The destructive impact of big agribusiness in the farming sector is clear. We also know that alternative food systems that protect and restore biodiversity, provide nutritious food and defend the rights of farmers are possible. But at the moment, **we lack sufficient legislative tools to regulate factory farming and hold corporations and their financiers to account, and support a sustainable food system transition.**

WE CALL ON THE EUROPEAN UNION TO

- Take urgent action and introduce concrete measures to **reduce production and consumption of industrial meat and dairy farming.**
- **Banning factory farming** and reducing the number of intensively farmed animals in the EU.
- **Stop the direct and indirect support for industrial livestock production through CAP subsidies**, and instead support sustainable small-scale livestock producers and other actors in the food chain involved in processing and marketing of animal products.
- **Enforce environmental and food legislation** to stop the damage of industrial livestock production, including implementation of the Water Framework Directive and the Nitrates Directive.
- Place **legally binding restrictions on feed imports**, such as soy, that are linked to deforestation and rights violations.

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