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Seeds of change: Can Europe's organic farming shape the future of food?

EU-funded researchers are working across countries and sectors to boost organic farming, support farmers and shape policy to help meet the target of 25% organic farmland in Europe and a significant increase in organic aquaculture by 2030.

11 September 2025 - By MARIA VLASTARA

From fancy oat milk lattes to organically grown produce at the local market, organic food has moved from niche to mainstream. But Europe's farmers, weighing the complex rules and costs of green farming, are struggling to keep pace with demand.

In 2020, the European Commission set a bold goal: 25% of EU farmland under organic management by 2030. Yet by 2023, only 11% of farmland had been converted to organic.

To close that gap, EU-funded researchers, farmers and policy experts from 10 EU countries and Switzerland are working to identify barriers, test solutions and shape policy for a more resilient organic sector. Their research collaboration, OrganicTargets4EU, is running from 2022 to February 2026.

However, policy alone will not plant seeds or harvest crops. For farmers, adapting land and business models to organic standards brings uncertainty, and they must decide whether the risk pays off.

A shift built on policy, market – and trust

"Farmers need a reason to even consider going organic. And then they need confidence that it is viable," said Dr Nicolas Lampkin, policy work package leader from the Thünen Institute in Germany, a research body that advises the government on issues related to agriculture, forestry, fisheries, rural development and sustainability.

That confidence, he explained, depends on supportive policy, stable markets and accessible knowledge.

“If even one of those is missing, farmers hesitate. We’ve seen that in France and Germany, where conversion rates [to organic] are stagnating, while in Greece and Portugal, where policy support has improved, interest is growing fast.”

In southern Europe, attractive subsidies and better advisory support have helped more farmers commit. But conversion is a deeply personal decision. Some farmers worry about finding buyers for organic goods or fear being exposed if demand dwindles.

Organic farming can also require more manual labour, different machinery and new skills, especially in the early years. Without strong networks or locally adapted advice, many simply do not feel ready.

Lampkin estimates that 16 to 18% organic farmland by 2030 may be more realistic, but insists the target has already set valuable change in motion.

From policy to the fields

Turning strategy into workable solutions requires more than target-setting: it demands collaboration at ground level. That is why the OrganicTargets4EU team is testing solutions directly with farmers.

Eight “practice partners” – organisations in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Romania – run small, local-language workshops to explore real-world opportunities. In Austria and Portugal, where organic farmland already exceeds 25%, researchers are studying the success factors to replicate them elsewhere.

In Germany, the researchers have highlighted how agencies that safeguard drinking water are supporting organic farming in watershed areas — an innovation that could be scaled.

Workshop outcomes feed into a public database of “practice abstracts”, or farmer-friendly summaries in accessible language.

Retention is also a priority. “We can’t just focus on new conversions,” stressed Ambra De Simone, research and innovation associate manager at IFOAM Organics Europe, who coordinates the research team’s work.

“Keeping current organic farmers in the system is equally important.”

Follow-up clinics address real-life challenges, from certification renewals to market diversification, helping to ensure that experienced farmers do not revert to conventional methods.

Research, innovation and a broader vision

But local solutions are only part of the picture. To encourage change across the continent, the OrganicTargets4EU team is also strengthening cross-border research and policy links.

Via the CORE Organic Network, led by Ivana Trkulja from the International Centre for Research in Organic Food Systems (ICROFS) at Aarhus University in Denmark, the project connects to national funders, ministries, sectoral organisations and researchers.

“Organic farming is innovation- and knowledge-intensive, which requires continuous research funding and support, both on the national and European level,” Trkulja explained.

She stressed that organics are part of a broader agricultural shift.

“Organic farming is not a trend, it is a long-term commitment towards the transformation of agriculture built on over two decades of collaboration and innovation across Europe.”

Scenarios for the future

This ambition also applies to organic aquaculture. The EU has said it wants to see “a significant increase” in organic aquaculture by 2030, but growth seems to have stalled after an increase of 60% between 2015 and 2020.

Through an EU-wide review and stakeholder workshop, the OrganicTargets4EU team found the main barriers to organic fish farming, including costs, bureaucracy and weak incentives. The team explored different scenarios and supply chain changes to help organic aquaculture grow and guide future policy.

For the organic farming goal of 25%, the team is mapping four scenarios for how Europe might meet the target. Some are driven by EU or national environmental policy, others by market demand or grassroots pressure.

“These scenarios help us think through trade-offs and anticipate which policies might succeed under different conditions,” said De Simone. Their insights will feed into draft policy recommendations to be presented to the European Commission in late 2025.

As Europe’s organic landscape continuously evolves, the initiative’s focus is shifting from action and research to creating a lasting legacy.

Its final conference will take place on 4-5 November 2025, during the TP Organics ‘Organic Innovation Days’ in Brussels. It will coincide with debates on the next common agricultural policy and the EU Organic Action Plan.

“We’ve worked on EU organic policy for decades,” said Lampkin. “Now is the time to turn data into direction.”

Whether or not the 25% target is met, OrganicTargets4EU is laying the groundwork for a stronger, better-connected organic sector built on shared knowledge, smart policy and cross-border collaboration.

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More info

- OrganicTargets4EU (CORDIS)
- OrganicTargets4EU project website
- EU Organic Action Plan
- Farm to Fork Strategy
- Biodiversity strategies
- International Organic Day (22 September)