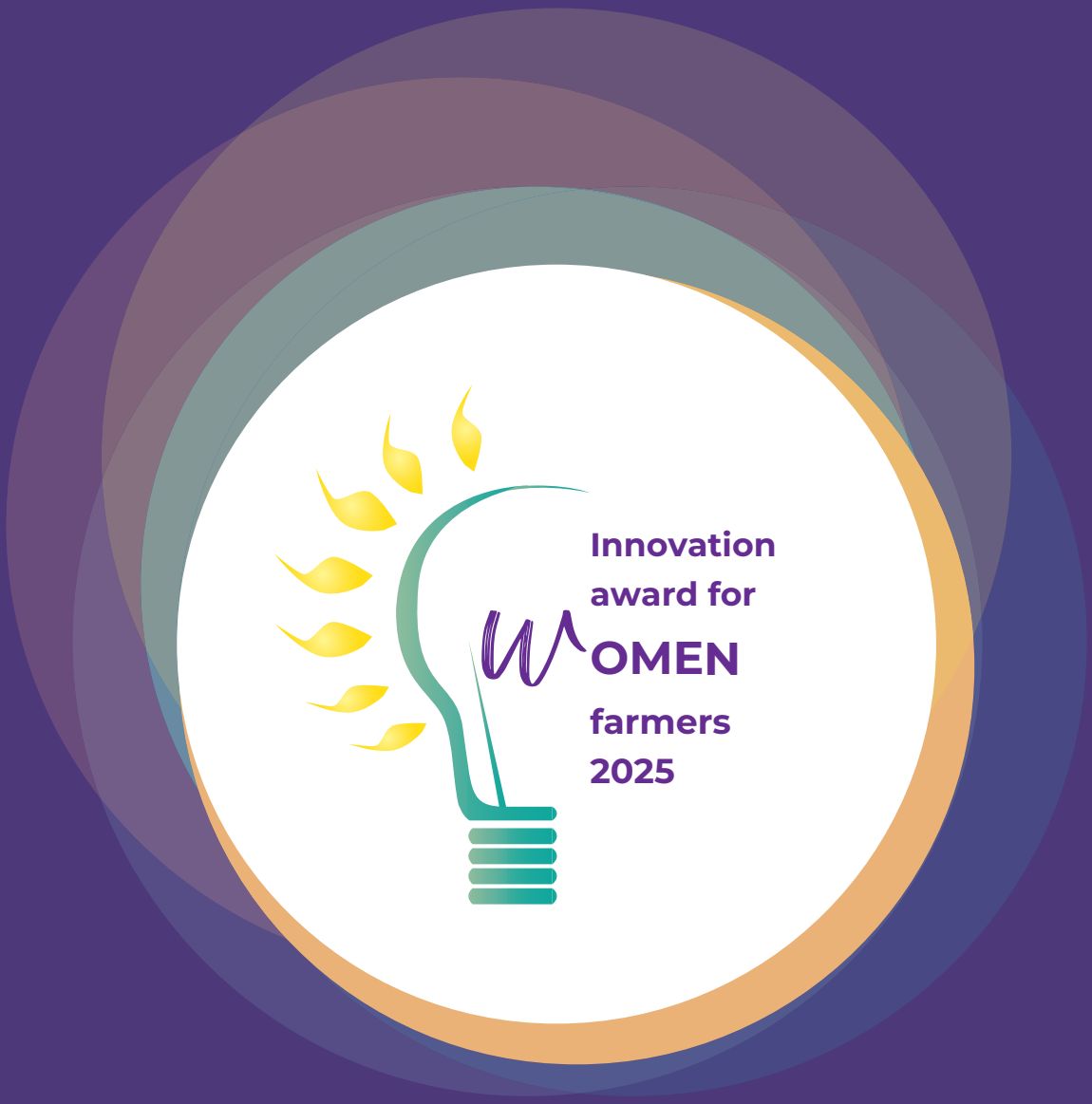

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INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the Women's Innovation Award, the political and practical landscape of European agriculture continues to evolve. The European Commission's Vision for the future of agriculture and food is setting a new direction for the sector, still under increasing pressures from climate change, high input prices, instability and geopolitical tensions.

The agricultural and forestry sector needs now more than ever, innovative, and entrepreneurial people in order to continue the transition to a more sustainable rural economy. Women farmers are key players in achieving this goal. According to Eurostat data from 2016, women represent 42% of the European Union's agricultural workforce, but only 30% assume managerial positions.

Over the years, the initiatives and businesses models presented by these women demonstrate their capacity in finding new solutions to the challenges faced by farmers and agri-cooperatives and by rural areas. The recognition, support and dissemination of these impactful initiatives is essential for the sector to be able to meet increasing societal expectations and continue to bring innovative solutions to , climate and political challenges.

The eight edition of Copa-Cogeca's Innovation Award for Women Farmers will be entitled **"Women making waves in sustainable water systems"**.
Whilst we talk about the need for a transition towards more sustainable food systems, it's not possible to reach sustainability objectives without looking at the three dimensions: economic, environmental, and social as well as the needs for financial and technological tools.

For that reason, for the 2025 edition Copa-Cogeca wishes to showcase, with the particular focus on water, the innovative and novel solutions implemented by women farmers that are contributing to all the three pillars of sustainability and are a concrete of example of the diversity of our EU agriculture sector. Whether that be on the farm, in their business decisions or to the benefit of the wider local community.

CHECK LIST

The 5 finalists were chosen based on the fulfilment of the following criteria. This criteria will be used as a guide in enabling the judges to choose the winner and special mention recipient.

THE USE OF INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS IN ADAPTING TO AND/OR MITIGATING CLIMATE CHANGE

Innovation may include working methods, organisational approaches and new forms of technology that contribute to adaptation and/or mitigation of climate change.
Adaptation solutions may refer to the use of new strategies and adaptation tools in geographical areas where they were not previously used, aiming at making the sector more resilient to the impacts of climate change. This may involve the development of risk management tools, new forms of active land management and irrigation systems allowing for more efficient water management. Other examples may include the creation of new plant varieties able to withstand more extreme weather conditions and more resistant to pests and diseases.
Approaches focusing on mitigation should focus on reducing carbon emissions. This may include carbon sequestration and different ways in dealing with emissions from arable land, livestock management and the substitution of traditional fossil fuels by biofuels or renewable energy. Additionally, increasing efficiency in food production through circular economy should also be considered, creating added value with by-products allowing for the creation of more sustainable business models and new value-chains.

INNOVATION TRANSFER

Innovation must not be limited to one single farm but should have a potential impact or effect on all holdings in the same production sector or region, or on the area's relations with the outside world.
In this context, innovation not only refers to those aspects which affect the farm itself, but also to the whole value chain, including machinery, the packaging of products, channels of distribution and export methods for agricultural or forestry products.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE INNOVATION

The innovation must be socially viable and promote green growth by tackling climate change, mitigating pollution and optimising resource efficiency.
It must also have a certain longevity and should stand the test of time in order to have an impact, instead of appearing and disappearing in a short space of time.
The innovation should also promote the maintenance and creation of jobs in rural areas, entrepreneurship and new business models.

NEW COMMUNICATION METHODS AND TOOLS

New communication methods and tools are used to improve farm or forestry education for children and adults and/or improve consumers' knowledge of farm or forestry production methods, or of the nutritional value of agricultural products. Conveying how farmers are at the forefront of innovation regarding solutions to tackle climate change.

THE 5 FINALISTS

SARAH DESCAMPS

MONIKA ZSUZSANNA HORVÁTH

LIDIA MOROŃ MORAWSKA

ALESSANDRA PIGHIN

CHERYL POOLE

SARAH DESCAMPS

BELGIUM – BOERENBOND

Sarah Descamps, mother of two sons, Léon and Félien, has recently taken over the management of D&V Plant Production, a family-owned nursery specialising in shrubs, herbs, and small fruit plants for garden centres. With a degree in Economics and an early professional experience in another company, Sarah chose to return to her roots by joining her parents' business. She values the seasonal variety inherent in horticulture and enjoys the combination of administrative responsibilities with the more practical, hands-on elements of her work. This balance of roles provides her with both professional fulfilment and a deeper connection to the rhythm of the natural environment.

Under Sarah's leadership, the nursery has embraced forward-looking strategies to address one of the most pressing challenges of modern horticulture: water management. Recognising the risks posed by climate change and the increasing scarcity of water, she and her family have undertaken significant investments in technological and infrastructural solutions. Central to this approach is the introduction of a horticultural computer system capable of monitoring and analysing water use in detail. This digital tool enables the nursery to operate with precision, ensuring that every litre of water is used efficiently and sustainably.

A cornerstone of their innovation is the installation of two foliage wells, each with a storage capacity of ten million litres. These exceed legislative requirements and ensure that the nursery is well-prepared for prolonged dry periods. With a total storage capacity of 24 million litres, the business is no longer dependent on external deliveries or vulnerable to drought conditions. Instead, rainwater is carefully collected and reused, creating a closed-loop system. Each summer night, approximately 250,000 litres are used for irrigation, with half of this amount recovered and reintegrated into the cycle. The long-term security provided by this infrastructure not only stabilises production but also demonstrates a practical response to environmental concerns.

The farm's commitment to sustainability extends beyond water management. Solar panels and battery storage systems power the water pumps, ensuring energy efficiency and reducing reliance on conventional energy sources. Biodiversity is actively promoted within the nursery grounds through the installation of insect hotels and birdhouses, while beneficial insects are used for natural pest control. Together, these practices reflect a philosophy that integrates productivity with ecological responsibility.

The outcomes of Sarah's innovation are significant on multiple levels. Environmentally, the nursery now operates with reduced pressure on surface and groundwater resources, contributing to the conservation of natural ecosystems. Economically, the stability of water supply secures long-term viability for the business, protecting it from climatic risks and enabling consistent production. Socially, the farm has become a source of inspiration and learning, hosting visits from fellow growers and partners who come to see the integrated water system and digital monitoring tools in action. By sharing knowledge and best practices, Sarah extends the benefits of her approach beyond her own enterprise, helping to guide the wider horticultural community towards more sustainable methods.

Through her vision, Sarah Descamps has transformed her family nursery into a model of resilience and ecological innovation. By uniting tradition with modern technology, she demonstrates how family-run horticultural businesses can thrive in the face of environmental challenges, setting an example that others can follow across the sector.

MONIKA ZSUZSANNA HORVÁTH

HUNGARY – NAK

Monika Zsuzsanna Horváth, born in Oradea in 1971, has led a life defined by resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of community. After moving to Hungary through marriage, she raised three sons, supported by her second husband, a livestock engineer. With a background in chemical technology and professional experience in the catering industry, Monika decided to redirect her life towards farming and rural development. Together with her husband, she settled in the small village of Szentistvánbaksa, where they began rearing goats. Initially, their focus lay on cheese production, yet Monika soon drew inspiration from her grandmother's Transylvanian soap-making tradition. Using her own knowledge of chemistry, she transformed this heritage into a modern enterprise. Thus, in 2017, "Gidatitok" was born – a line of high-quality artisan goat milk soaps. What started under a public employment programme grew into a private enterprise, supported by a Budapest family business, and it quickly became a symbol of renewal for the village and its people.

Monika's farm and manufactory have adopted an innovative approach that links animal husbandry, resource management, and sustainable product development. A key aspect of her model is the replacement of water with goat milk as the primary raw material in soap production. This method not only preserves water but also elevates the value of the final product. By contrast, cheese-making demands extensive water use at multiple stages, making soap a more resource-efficient alternative. Her commitment to sustainability extends further: goats are fed using local green waste from households and municipal services, reducing landfill pressure and improving soil quality through natural fertilisation. The cycle remains firmly rooted in the local ecosystem, as hay harvested from riverside meadows along the Hernád River provides fodder while helping maintain flood defences.

In production, water is used only sparingly for equipment cleaning, with careful measures in place to prevent unnecessary waste. The environmentally conscious ethos also shapes the broader farm activities, which integrate grazing, waste reduction, and natural soil enrichment. These decisions demonstrate Monika's dedication to protecting local water resources, fostering biodiversity, and minimising ecological impact.

The results of this innovation are manifold and extend beyond environmental benefits. Economically, the enterprise contributes to the local tax base, supports municipal functions, and has invigorated tourism by linking soap-making with the Hernád River's recreational opportunities. Property values in the village have risen, and new investments have been encouraged. Socially, the initiative is transformative: in a village of just 264 residents, Gidatitok now employs six individuals, offering meaningful work, stability, and renewed confidence to those involved. Many employees have overcome personal difficulties, rebuilt family ties, and regain a sense of purpose through their engagement with the manufactory. The project, once a modest local experiment, has grown into a recognised county treasure, listed in the County Value Registry and celebrated in national media.

Gidatitok exemplifies how a rural community can thrive when local traditions are combined with innovative, sustainable practices. It represents an approach that is both replicable and transferable, inspiring other villages to harness their unique resources. For Monika, the venture embodies more than business success: it is a testament to how collective will, respect for tradition, and a vision for sustainability can bring life back to even the smallest communities.

LIDIA MOROŃ MORAWSKA

POLAND – KRIR

Lidia Moroń Morawska's journey into agriculture and beekeeping reflects both a strong family tradition and a deeply personal transformation. Raised within a family that valued farming, she was particularly influenced by her mother, who managed an organic farm, and later by her husband, who ran a conventional apiary of 150 hives. Since 2011, Lidia has been co-managing the apiary with her husband, gaining both technical expertise and a profound understanding of the natural world. However, it was a significant period of health challenges that prompted her to reconsider her professional path. This experience inspired her to pursue a life more closely connected to nature, regeneration, and meaningful work. Motivated by these values, she established her own organic apiary, rooted in ecological principles and a personal commitment to sustainability.

The structure of Lidia's farm is built upon organic beekeeping practices that prioritise environmental harmony and biodiversity. Unlike conventional methods, her apiary is guided by ecological integrity, ensuring that every stage of production respects natural cycles. The farm focuses on maintaining bee health through natural management techniques, avoiding synthetic treatments, and creating conditions that support strong colonies. Central to her approach is the promotion of diverse forage landscapes, achieved by integrating the apiary into organically managed farmland and surrounding ecosystems. This ensures that bees not only thrive but also contribute to local biodiversity. By cultivating honey and other bee products within these ecological frameworks, she has developed a farming model that is both sustainable and commercially viable.

Lidia's innovation lies in her transition from conventional beekeeping methods to a fully organic and ecologically aligned system. This shift required extensive learning, adaptation, and investment in environmentally friendly techniques. She has embraced methods that strengthen the natural resilience of bee colonies, thereby reducing dependency on artificial inputs. In addition, her practices enhance pollination services, which in turn benefit the wider agricultural landscape. This holistic approach demonstrates how beekeeping can be both economically productive and ecologically restorative.

The outcomes of her innovation have been significant. By creating an organic apiary that functions as a model of ecological farming, Lidia has demonstrated the value of aligning agricultural production with natural systems. Her bees produce high-quality organic honey and other hive products, which reflect not only a commercial success but also a testament to the health of the environment in which they are produced. Furthermore, her work has had a broader impact on awareness within her community, showcasing the benefits of organic beekeeping and inspiring others to consider sustainable practices. The farm has contributed to biodiversity by encouraging the growth of wild plants and improving pollination for surrounding crops, thereby reinforcing the interdependence between farming and ecological health.

Through her resilience, innovation, and dedication, Lidia Moroń Morawska has created a farm that balances productivity with environmental stewardship. Her story illustrates how personal challenges can be transformed into opportunities for renewal, and how agriculture, when guided by ecological values, can become a source of both livelihood and regeneration.

ALESSANDRA PIGHIN

ITALY – COLDIRETTI

Alessandra Pighin is a horticultural entrepreneur from Rivignano Teor (Friuli Venezia Giulia), where she works with her husband in their family nursery, Floricoltura Odorico. With roots in farming since childhood, she has helped steer the company towards a model that blends tradition, environmental protection, and innovation. Located in a highly regulated riparian area along the Stella River, the nursery specialises in ornamental plants and species suited to this delicate ecosystem.

Alessandra has championed water-efficient cultivation, biodiversity conservation, and reduced-impact production methods. A central achievement is the creation of a large-scale rainwater recovery and recycling system, enabling the company to collect and reuse up to 40,000 m^3 of rainwater per year, significantly reducing groundwater use and strengthening resilience against drought. Her commitment to sustainability extends to biological control, inspired early in her career by observing how chemicals affected plant moisture. She now promotes more natural plant protection methods and engages in active knowledge-sharing with schools, local communities, and the University of Udine.

In recent years, the business has faced significant challenges, including severe flooding in July 2023 that damaged structures and interrupted operations. Nevertheless, Alessandra views the event as a moment of shared resilience, reinforcing the team's commitment to rebuilding and further strengthening their sustainable practices. The ongoing recovery underscores the importance of their water-focused innovation and the deep connection between the company, its landscape, and the community it serves Alessandra's work shows how a family-run nursery can thrive while protecting a fragile environment, turning innovation and responsibility into long-term resilience.

CHERYL POOLE

IRELAND – ICOS

Cheryl Poole, Ph.D., is a dairy farmer based near Gorey in County Wexford, Ireland, where she lives with her husband Alan and their three children. The Poole family farm, spanning 103 acres, has been in the family since the early 1700s, making Cheryl and Alan the thirteenth generation to steward the land. Their enterprise centres on a 72-cow high-EBI dairy herd, with a focus on milk solids, herd health, and environmental sustainability. Cheryl's scientific background, holding a BSc from NUI Galway and a doctorate in Chemistry, underpins her evidence-based approach to farming. Her doctoral research examined the mechanism of action of an anti-cancer drug, equipping her with skills in critical analysis and problem solving that she now applies to agriculture.

Although farming was not always her expected path, family circumstances brought Cheryl and Alan back to the land, where they resolved to demonstrate that an intensive, conventional dairy farm could achieve sustainability across economic, environmental, and social pillars. This conviction was also shaped by personal experience: their eldest son Jacob, who has a severe disability, finds joy and therapy in the River Bann, which runs through their land. Protecting this waterway became both a personal and professional mission.

The farm structure reflects a balance between productive dairy farming and ecological stewardship. More than 20% of the land is dedicated to biodiversity, including wildlife corridors, orchards, and hedgerows. Careful nutrient management ensures high nitrogen efficiency, while slurry storage and roofing minimise waste and water contamination. Rainwater harvesting is used for tasks such as cleaning the parlour, reducing reliance on mains water. The Pooles also engage in national programmes, such as the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, bat and moth surveys, and regular biodiversity monitoring. Recently, their stretch of the River Bann achieved "Blue Dot" status, recognising it as a high-quality waterbody.

Water-focused innovations form the cornerstone of the Pooles' sustainability model. These include a rainfall garden, sediment tanks, and a constructed wetland to filter and slow water flow before it enters the river. They have also diverted road drainage away from the river, channelling it through filtration systems on their land. These measures improve water quality, protect aquatic ecosystems, and demonstrate collaboration between farmers, government bodies, and local schools. Their projects not only benefit the farm but also contribute to wider community resilience, with local students using the wetland as a learning site for climate action.

The results of these innovations are far-reaching. Environmentally, nutrient run-off has been reduced, biodiversity has flourished, and the river has been safeguarded. Economically, fertiliser and energy costs have declined, while milk solids and herd performance have been maintained. Socially, Cheryl and Alan's work fosters community engagement, through school partnerships, public talks, and farm walks. Their farm has attracted national and international recognition, from European Commission officials to researchers from Zambia and Armenia.

Cheryl Poole's project demonstrates that sustainability in farming can be achieved without sacrificing productivity. By combining her scientific background, personal values, and dedication to her community, she has transformed her family farm into a model of water stewardship and environmental leadership. Her story illustrates how modern innovation, rooted in tradition and care for the land, can secure the future of both farming families and rural communities.

ALL THE APPLICANTS

ANGELA CENA

ITALY – CONFAGRICOLTURA

La Canova farm combines beef cattle farming with innovative precision agriculture on 317 hectares. Using advanced technologies like soil probes, satellite monitoring, and variable rate irrigation, the farm optimises water and fertiliser use. These systems reduce soil erosion, improve crop health, and support sustainable, data-driven farming. A pilot project also explored fertigation using treated wastewater, reinforcing the farm's commitment to regenerative agriculture and future AI integration.

BEATA PLEŚNIEROWICZ

POLAND – KRIR

Family-run farm focused on the sustainable fattening of beef cattle and crop production. The farm adheres to QMP quality standards, ensuring high animal welfare. Her innovation integrates no-till cropping systems (reducing erosion, improving soil moisture retention, and lowering CO_2 emissions) with a dry cattle fattening system that eliminates water-intensive silage production. This dual approach substantially reduces water usage and fuel consumption—by up to one-third—while also improving environmental performance.

DARIA POPIÓŁ

POLAND – KRIR

Water innovation strategy integrates permaculture, rainwater harvesting, greywater reuse, and water-sensitive landscape design to create self-sustaining systems that teach children about water conservation. By engaging daily, children learn how natural design supports life and regenerates resources. Environmentally, it reduces water waste and boosts biodiversity; socially, it fosters early environmental awareness and community engagement; economically, it lowers costs and attracts sustainability-minded families. Practices are shared via workshops, interactive materials, and online platforms to inspire wider adoption.

DENISE CICUTO

ITALY – CONFAGRICOLTURA

Pomis, founded in 1980, blends innovation with tradition in apple farming. Guided by environmental, social, and economic sustainability, the company promotes gender equality, inclusion, and respect among staff. Environmentally, Pomis uses disease-resistant varieties, organic and low-impact farming, regenerative agriculture, and water-saving technologies. Apples are carefully processed for freshness, juice production, and by-products are converted into biomethane. All operations are powered by rooftop photovoltaic panels, reflecting a commitment to sustainable, circular practices throughout the company.

DESIREE NIEVES

ITALY – CONFAGRICOLTURA

Since 2017, the farm has implemented Israeli subsurface drip irrigation, reducing water use by 40–60% while delivering nutrients directly to roots, minimizing soil erosion and nitrate leaching. This method enhances crop performance, improves yields, and reduces input costs, supporting environmental and economic sustainability. Socially, it increases farm productivity, work-life balance, and investment in innovation. The farm president also mentors' women and young farmers through monthly meetings, sharing knowledge and addressing challenges to foster broader agricultural innovation.

ELEONORA MASSERETTI

ITALY – COLDIRETTI

An integrated farm and agriturismo featuring traditional livestock, permaculture gardens, and an innovative aeroponic Tower Farm system. These towers allow for vertical, high-density vegetable production with up to 95% water savings and 80% space reduction, all while eliminating the use of fertilisers and minimising energy input. The system is highly efficient and ideal for people with specific dietary needs, as it avoids heavy metals and nickel. The farm is also powered in part by solar panels, making it largely energy self-sufficient.

JUDITH ANGER

AUSTRIA – LKÖ

Terraces and seven retention ponds were created to capture rainwater, nourish soil, and protect against erosion. These changes allow cultivation of fruit trees, berries, herbs, and vegetables, while improving microclimates and water springs. Excess water now flows naturally, reducing supplemental irrigation needs. Over ten years, these measures have transformed the farm into a highly productive, sustainable, and resilient system that benefits both the land and neighboring areas.

KATIJA SINCOVIC ZERAK

SLOVENIA – CHAMBER OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY OF SLOVENIA

Sinkovid Farm, with over 60 years of tradition, began processing its milk in 2013 into yoghurts, cheeses, spreads, frozen yoghurt, and freeze-dried products. Sold on-farm and to schools, restaurants, and hotels, the products combine local ingredients with innovation. Young farmer Katja developed the popular Frozi frozen yoghurt during the pandemic, demonstrating entrepreneurship and adaptability. Using whole, non-homogenized milk, the farm continually expands its range, maintaining quality, tradition, and creativity in every new product.

LUCIA ZIRIZZOTTI

ITALY – CONFAGRICOLTURA

Farm and agritourism business with an underground cistern to collect 60 m^3 of rainwater from building roofs, used for irrigating her vegetable garden and chestnut grove. The water system operates using a solar-powered electric pump, resulting in lower water costs and improved sustainability.

MARIANNE VAN DEN HOEK-HUIJBREGTS

THE NETHERLANDS – LTO

Initiated Freshwater Focus: an underground rainwater storage (ASR) system storing 55,000–77,000 m^3 annually. The system allows self-sufficiency for irrigation, supports sustainability via energy efficiency and real-time monitoring. It prevents runoff, enhances soil and water quality, and is aligned with EU water and environmental objectives. The scalable project serves as a model for water-scarce delta and coastal regions.

MICHELA NATI

ITALY – CIA

Focus on sustainable hop cultivation and education. The PowerHop project includes micro-irrigation for water efficiency and a Decision Support System (DSS) using precision farming. Results show improved sustainability, water use, and product quality. The project promotes biodiversity, organic practices, and women's empowerment. Supported by Emilia Romagna Rural Development Programme 2014–2020.

MILENA BENKO

SLOVENIA – CHAMBER OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY OF SLOVENIA

Operates an organic farm focused on biodiversity, traditional crops, and sustainable land use. Her innovative approach includes permaculture practices, water retention swales, and engaging the public through workshops and community education. Promotes a holistic view of farm sustainability and natural resource preservation.

OMBRETTA MASSITTI

ITALY – COLDIRETTI

Integrating green-certified sustainability and restoration of medieval water infrastructure. Stores and reuses rainwater, and leads environmental education projects using the restored water mill. Promotes sustainable tourism and cultural heritage in the Sibillini region through events and media.

ROSE MARY MCDONAGH

IRELAND – ICOS

Group Water Scheme manager and farmer using riparian zones, rainwater harvesting and fencing to reduce water pollution and enhance biodiversity. Leads stakeholder partnerships to implement EU water policy, and mentors farmers through the Corrib Catchment Partnership and Farming for Water EIP.

SLAVKA GROBELNIK

SLOVENIA – CHAMBER OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY OF SLOVENIA

Historic farm focused on viticulture, grape and herb processing, and agri-tourism. Implements circular water use practices and a blue-green infrastructure system to harvest and reuse rainwater for farm and tourism purposes. Strong innovation transfer and local engagement through tourism and education.

TEUNIKE VAN 'T HOF

THE NETHERLANDS – LTO

Runs an arable farm using drip irrigation since 2018, growing sugar beets, grains, seed onions and seed potatoes. Innovations include underground water storage, rainwater harvesting, fertiliser application through irrigation, and desalination pilots. Actively shares experiences through www.dutchfarmtrading.com and community events.

Innovation award for WOMEN farmers 2025

The Women's Committee of COPA-COGECA represents at European and EU level Women in agriculture, whether they be farmers, rural entrepreneurs, farming families, agricultural cooperatives or associated with agricultural and other rural activities.
The Committee provides a platform to highlight the challenges faced by women in agriculture and rural areas, as well as ensuring a gender perspective to agricultural and rural policies.

www.womenfarmersaward.eu

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