# European farmers confront driest spring in a century with urgent calls for climate adaptation



When drought struck Hendrik Jan ten Cate’s farm in 2018, it decimated his onion yield to a dismal 10% of what he would normally expect. Compelled to work tirelessly to siphon water from canals, he faced a harrowing incident that left him with a broken arm. As spring unfolds in 2025, Ten Cate finds himself in a familiar scenario. With crops already in the ground, the desperate need for water now weighs heavily on his mind. “It’s a critical time,” he remarked, highlighting that his 100-hectare farm, where he cultivates potatoes, onions, cereals, carrots, and sugar beet, is once again at the mercy of an unyielding sky.

Farmers from the UK to Germany are bracing for what could be the driest spring in a century, with a blend of anxiety and resilience characterising their atmosphere. Sven Borchert, a farmer managing a 1,700-hectare cereal and vegetable operation in Saxony-Anhalt, noted that while his better-quality soil has retained some moisture, he has received only half of his normal rainfall this year. “There are questions, such as how you’ll pay back the bank, that keep you up at night,” he said. Such sentiments echo widely among farmers facing similar financial pressures as extreme weather events, attributed to climate change, threaten their livelihoods.

The European Union (EU) faces staggering losses due to extreme weather, costing agriculture an average of €28.3 billion annually—approximately 6% of its total crop and livestock production. A report by Howden revealed that over half of these losses are due to drought, yet only 20-30% of farmers insured their crops against such eventualities. The impact of climate change on European agriculture is expected to intensify, with projections indicating average crop losses could rise by up to 66% by 2050, particularly affecting vulnerable regions like southern Europe, where countries such as Spain and Italy could experience annual losses of €20 billion during catastrophic years.

Recognising the urgent need for adaptation, farmers are actively exploring various strategies. This includes increasing soil organic content, sowing drought-resistant crop varieties, and investing in improved irrigation systems. Ten Cate mentioned that following the severe drought of 2018, local farmers had begun implementing advanced technological solutions for water extraction and distribution. The changing climate is demanding ingenuity, as farmers are not only reacting to immediate challenges but also reshaping their long-term practices to accommodate the uncertainties of the future.

In response to mounting pressures, the European Commission is drafting plans to provide subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to encourage better water management practices among farmers. Valued at €387 billion, the CAP aims to facilitate a transition towards more sustainable agricultural practices. The proposed subsidies could fund projects that promote drought-resistant farming techniques and precision irrigation, crucial components for improving water efficiency in an era of dwindling resources.

Despite his proactive stance, Ten Cate, like many farmers across the continent, is caught in a holding pattern as they await the rains. By the end of April, nearly a third of Europe was facing orange drought warnings, with 0.7% of the land in the critical red alert stage. This precarious situation leaves farmers like Peter Boysen, an organic farmer in Schleswig-Holstein, grappling with the economic ramifications of insufficient rainfall. With grass struggling to grow and only a couple of weeks' worth of feed left, Boysen expressed the uncertainty looming over his operations: “If rain comes soon, perhaps we’ll see losses of 20-30%. If no rain comes, it will of course be much worse.”

As Ten Cate watches the weather forecasts, the overarching message from farmers across Europe is a clarion call for both immediate and long-term climate action. Gelsomina Vigliotti, vice-president of the European Investment Bank (EIB), stated, “Climate-related risks are an increasing source of uncertainty for food production.” Highlighting the essential nature of mitigating these risks, she argued for enhanced insurance and de-risking mechanisms to support farmers’ investments.

Given the interconnectedness of global food systems, the stakes are not merely confined to European shores. The ramifications of climate change—manifested through unpredictable weather patterns—pose a significant threat to food security worldwide. As climate projections indicate the potential for worsening conditions, the urgency to address the complex challenges facing the agricultural sector has never been more critical.

In the backdrop of these events unfolds a broader narrative of adaptation and resilience where farmers are urged not just to endure the challenges but to innovate and evolve in response to a rapidly changing climate. As they wait for the rains that may or may not come, their fortitude and adaptability will be tested in such turbulent times.

### Reference Map

1. [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/22/its-a-critical-time-european-farmers-struggle-through-driest-spring-in-a-century)
2. [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/cop/extreme-weather-costs-eu-farmers-28-billion-euros-year-eu-says-2025-05-20/)
3. [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/eu-plans-new-subsidies-farmers-save-water-draft-shows-2025-05-15/)
4. [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/sustainable-switch-climate-focus-eu-water-saving-funds-melting-glaciers-2025-05-19/)
5. [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/weather-set-hit-harvest-russias-largest-grain-region-2025-05-20/)
6. [[6]](https://time.com/6152615/ipcc-report-climate-change-agriculture/)
7. [[7]](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/drought-over-large-parts-europe-raises-concern-2025-05-05_en)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/22/its-a-critical-time-european-farmers-struggle-through-driest-spring-in-a-century> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/cop/extreme-weather-costs-eu-farmers-28-billion-euros-year-eu-says-2025-05-20/> - Extreme weather events, driven by climate change, are costing the European Union's agriculture sector an average of €28.3 billion annually, accounting for 6% of its total crop and livestock production. A report by insurance broker Howden revealed that only 20-30% of these losses are insured, leaving most farmers without adequate financial protection. The report warns that without stronger climate action, average crop losses could rise by up to 66% by 2050, with droughts currently responsible for over half of the damages. Southern European countries like Spain and Italy are particularly vulnerable, with potential annual losses reaching €20 billion during catastrophic years. Amid growing pressure on both environmental sustainability and farmer livelihoods, the European Commission recently proposed easing some environmental conditions tied to subsidies and accelerating emergency support for disaster-hit farmers. The European Investment Bank plans to use the analysis to guide future agricultural support, including increased funding for water-related projects and irrigation infrastructure.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/eu-plans-new-subsidies-farmers-save-water-draft-shows-2025-05-15/> - The European Commission is drafting plans to offer new subsidies to farmers under the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to promote better water management and reduce waste. The CAP, valued at €387 billion for 2021-2027, constitutes nearly a third of the EU's overall budget. As EU countries prepare for negotiations on the post-2027 budget, the Commission’s proposal suggests "transition packages" that provide guidance and financial support for farmers adopting environmentally sustainable practices. These funds could assist with the adoption of drought-resistant crops and precision irrigation systems to address mounting pressure on water resources due to climate change and industrial use. European agriculture has been significantly impacted by increasing drought and flooding, which have hurt crop yields. However, the EU has recently eased some environmental regulations in response to farmer protests over regulatory burdens. The draft also mentions plans for the European Investment Bank to increase investments in water-related projects, including wetland restoration to mitigate flooding. Details on funding amounts are still under discussion, with the full strategy expected to be published in June.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/sustainable-switch-climate-focus-eu-water-saving-funds-melting-glaciers-2025-05-19/> - The May 19, 2025 edition of the Sustainable Switch Climate Focus newsletter highlights key climate-related developments across Europe and beyond. A primary focus is the European Union’s proposal to provide new subsidies under the next Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to support farmers in using water more efficiently. The plan aims to address growing pressure on water resources due to industrial demand and climate change. These subsidies could fund drought-resistant crops and precision irrigation tools. The European Investment Bank will also boost water sector investments, such as ecosystem restoration. The EU’s CAP, worth €387 billion, is due for renegotiation later this year. Other topics covered include Argentina's melting glaciers and growing tensions between India and Pakistan over the Indus River. In the UK, Thames Water continues to face financial instability, with 98.78% of its creditors backing a debt restructuring plan, and the company recently partnered with KKR to secure additional equity. Additionally, a pilot project off England’s south coast is testing ocean-based carbon dioxide removal from seawater.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/weather-set-hit-harvest-russias-largest-grain-region-2025-05-20/> - High temperatures and a lack of rainfall are threatening the 2025 grain harvest in Russia's largest grain-producing region, Rostov. Following damaging spring frosts, Rostov Governor Yuri Slyusar declared a farming emergency, enabling farmers to seek compensation. The combination of frost and drought is impacting both winter and spring crops, with soil moisture insufficient in deeper layers. Experts from the Russian Grain Union and Sovecon consultancy predict reduced yields, despite some recent rainfall. Rostov is the third region after Voronezh and Belgorod to declare a farming emergency this year. In 2024, Rostov saw a 22% drop in grain output, including a 38% reduction in wheat harvest. Nationally, Russia’s grain production declined by nearly 14% last year. Although earlier forecasts anticipated a 20% increase in Rostov’s 2025 harvest, ongoing adverse weather and economic pressures—including a sharp rise in farming costs and a drop in profit margins—cast doubt on achieving that target. Agriculture Minister Oksana Lut noted that while frost damage this year is estimated at only 10% of last year’s, soil moisture scarcity remains a significant risk for crop development.
6. <https://time.com/6152615/ipcc-report-climate-change-agriculture/> - The latest report from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) emphasizes the severe and widespread impacts of global warming on humanity and the planet. The findings indicate that climate change is already causing irreversible damage, with nearly half of the global population living in highly vulnerable areas. The most significant effects are expected to hit agricultural systems, leading to food and water scarcities that could incite conflicts, migration, and increased poverty. Small-scale farmers, responsible for a third of the world's food, are particularly at risk, and significant agricultural production losses are predicted globally. This situation will exacerbate grocery bills, including in wealthy countries, due to the interconnectedness of global food systems. There is an urgent need for rapid fossil fuel emission reductions to limit warming and prevent the worst outcomes. Although adaptation is possible through innovation and changes in farming practices, the window for action is narrow, with current trends pointing towards worsening conditions.
7. <https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/drought-over-large-parts-europe-raises-concern-2025-05-05_en> - Low rainfall, dry soils, and shrinking rivers are pressuring ecosystems, farming, and transport routes across Europe and neighbouring regions. Latest data show dwindling river flows and worsening drought: these conditions are triggered by warmer-than-average weather and lower precipitation across much of the continent since the beginning of the year, according to the Drought in Europe – April 2025 report, published by the JRC. With forecasts up to June showing drier-than-average conditions in northern and western Europe, there are growing concerns about the impact on agriculture river transport, and ecosystems, the report says. March 2025 was the driest March ever recorded in Germany. On 12 April 2025, the water level of the Rhine River in Cologne measured 1.54 metres – about half the usual level for the period. Driven by a lack of rainfall and above-average temperatures, central, eastern, and south-eastern Europe, as well as the eastern Mediterranean region, are experiencing broadening warning drought conditions. Similar conditions are emerging in north-western Europe. This analysis by JRC scientists also points out that large parts of the Mediterranean and the Middle East remain under warning and alert drought conditions. In contrast, most of Portugal, Spain, western and central France experienced a rainy winter, with northern Italy having a wetter start of the spring. In some areas, heavy rainfall events caused fatalities, affected vegetation and damaged infrastructures. Copernicus emergency maps were sent to first responders and regional authorities to help them manage the crises. Soil moisture in late March 2025: darker ochre shows drier than normal soil, while darker blue depicts wetter than normal conditions. Heat and low rainfall deplete soil and water reserves Between January and March 2025, most of Europe experienced warmer-than-average conditions. In the Alps, eastern Europe, and northern Scandinavia mean temperatures were more than 3°C above normal. Scarce rainfall and intense heat dried out the land, leaving soils in the eastern Mediterranean and northern Africa significantly depleted of moisture. Drought in Europe is affecting key rivers Drought effects became more evident across European rivers by early April. Large areas in northern Europe and parts of the western Alps are currently the most affected regions. Eastern Mediterranean countries and western Russia are also showing signs of hydrological stress. It is worth to highlight how in just a few weeks the conditions along the Rhine River changed significantly, with water levels dropping sharply in early April, especially in the upper basin. Following a dry winter and spring, reduced discharge is already impacting river navigation in the Middle Rhine.