



December 2024

# EDA Sustainability Paper

The European dairy sector is committed to achieving a net climate-neutral EU by 2050, all while ensuring food and nutritional security in the midst of geopolitical uncertainties and a sustainability crisis. This objective emphasises the importance of addressing sustainability in its three key dimensions: environmental, social, and economic.

The dairy sector also aims to address all four pillars of a healthy and sustainable diet (health, environment, economy, culture) as it is defined by both the [FAO and the WHO](#). A diet cannot be sustainable if it does not match the nutritional needs of individuals.

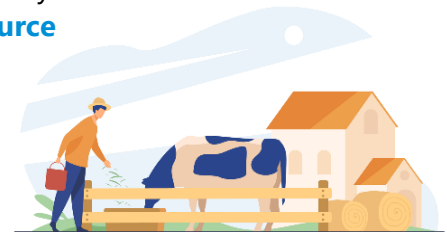
The European Dairy Association (EDA) is proud to showcase concrete examples of commitments taken by dairy companies and associations throughout the EU in our dedicated [EDA Factsheet on Dairy Commitments on Environment and Nutrition](#).

This climate-neutral EU objective will continue to empower the sector to grow and meet the increasing global demand for healthy, sustainable products, supporting the long-term development of Europe's rural communities. To achieve our objective, EDA will pursue initiatives that create an enabling environment for the dairy sector at [farm level](#), facilitate the green transition across the [supply chain](#) and at [consumer level](#) in delivering nutritious dairy products.

EDA advocates for an EU policy framework that facilitates the sustainability transition of the dairy chain while supporting its continued development.

## Farm level

The European dairy sector is consistently striving to enhance its unique circularity and sustainability. As we move toward a climate-neutral EU, the dairy sector will focus on advancing [carbon reduction methods](#) and [resource efficiencies](#) to reinforce its commitment to sustainable agriculture. Agriculture and dairy are inherently rooted in circular production cycles, and the dairy and agri-food sectors have a long history within a [circular economy](#).





Additionally, cows are kept on land that cannot be used for agriculture, meaning that they help to **maintain a landscape** that would otherwise be inefficient, or unused for food production.

A significant share of total protein intake of dairy cows in the EU stems from roughage, which is entirely grown on land that cannot be used for other cultures.

Moreover, dairy cows have a unique ability to consume what is for humans' non-edible food stock and **turn it into the highest value protein for human consumption**. This represents a key factor when it comes to environmental and economic sustainability, as well as circularity and efficient use of resources.



Use of manure components for biogases



Water reuse and recycling



Use of co-product from cheese manufacturing (whey) as a high-value food



Use of pastureland to feed dairy cows



Fertilising land with animals' waste

### Mitigating on-farm GHG emissions

The EU dairy sector is one of the most efficient in the world when it comes to carbon intensity, but we are committed to further reduce the carbon footprint of our operations. In this context, a key element to speed up carbon removals in agriculture is **carbon farming**. Carbon sinks such as dairy pasturelands are crucial in the transition towards a carbon neutral EU by 2050, and such contributions should be recognised and incentivised. EDA supports the development of a



framework that clearly recognises the origin of carbon credits, particularly from the agri-food sector, to acknowledge the efforts of food operators in meeting climate objectives. Conversely, any additional economic burden on the agricultural sector would have significant adverse effects on the European agri-food industry.



### Circularity for energy production

The dairy industry is also a provider of **natural energy**. For instance, animal by-products, such as manure, can be an alternative source of energy. Methane from manure can in fact generate heat, power and even be used as vehicular fuel. In large-scale dairy operations, anaerobic digestions can produce enough energy to cover internal requirements and even feed back into the public energy grid. These technologies allow the dairy sector to provide truly sustainable energy, while also reducing the manure-related emissions at farm level. Such use of biomass and animal by-products as a source of energy is particularly relevant in the context of bioeconomy.



### Animal welfare

EDA fully supports a practical legislation that ensures the highest possible degree of animal welfare from breeding to end-of-life as well as consumer confidence. This aspect is an essential sustainability criterion but must be coherent with the on-farm reality.



The above-mentioned efforts of farmers to increase the sustainability and resilience of the agricultural sector should be adequately rewarded and incentivised by frameworks such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the carbon farming scheme.

### Supply chain

The efficient use of resources is an integral part of the sustainability strategies of dairy processing companies.

### Energy transition

Dairies are reducing their reliance on fossil fuels by producing renewable energy onsite which is then fed back into the production plants. This can be in the form of photovoltaic and solar panels, wind turbines or biomass boilers using recycled wood pellets. Dairy companies have already made significant investments in renewable energy and continue to prioritise this as a key goal. However, the huge investments for our low margin industry will need financial support, particularly in today's challenging economic climate. Efforts in decreasing emissions in transport also contribute to the reduction of the use of fossil fuel resources and to the decrease of the overall carbon and environmental footprint of the sector.





### Responsible use of water



Water is essential to ensure safe, high-quality production of dairy products, as it is used in the dairy plants for heating, cooling, washing, and cleaning, which is why dairies always uphold the highest hygienic standards and maximum safety in all sectors of production. Water savings on dairy processing sites can be achieved through more efficient cleaning systems, identifying and addressing water 'hotspots,' increasing staff awareness, and implementing innovative water treatment technologies.

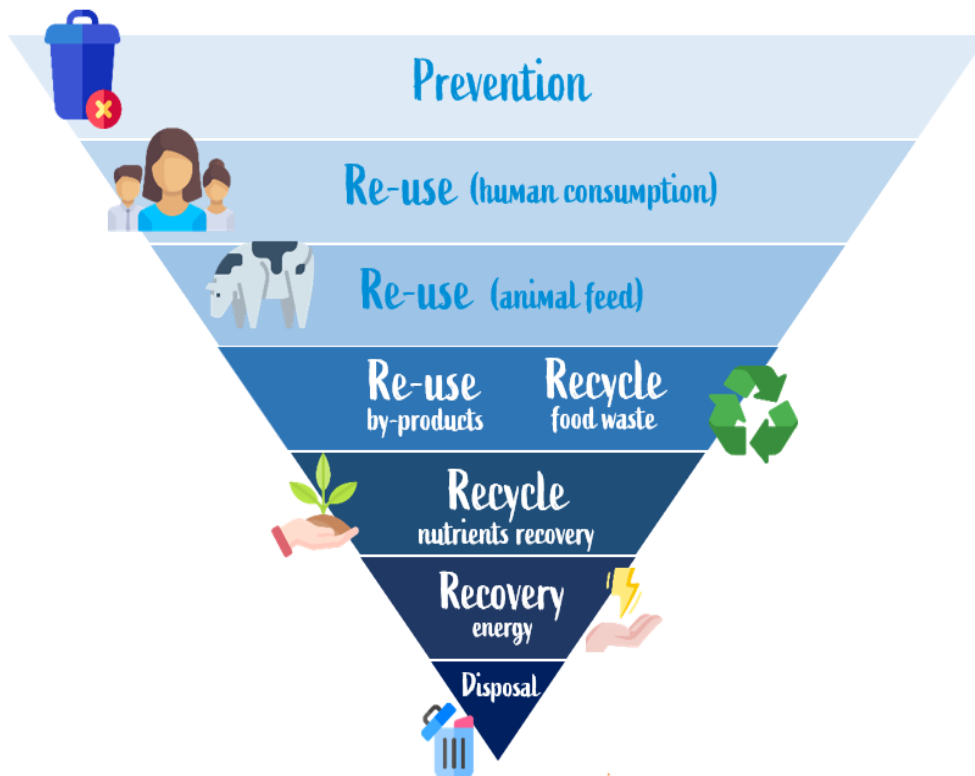
### Circular use of animal-by-products

The animal by-products incurred during processing, while mostly repurposed as feed, can also be used as a fertilizer that assists in other agricultural activities, such as growing crop for human consumption.



### Food loss and waste

The dairy sector is committed to contributing to the prevention and reduction of food losses along the value chain, and in our circular production approach every component of milk is fully used.





## Consumer level

Dairy products occupy a prominent place in **European culinary culture**, being an essential component of many gastronomic traditions across our continent. Cheeses, yoghurts, creams and butters are examples of the many different dairy products that we Europeans enjoy on a daily basis. The European dairy sector has a long tradition of ensuring the **high quality** of its products, also from a food hygiene perspective.



It is essential to maintain **food safety, hygiene and consumer protection** while also providing a secure food supply. Extending the shelf life of dairy products consequently reduces food waste, which makes a positive impact, especially since a significant portion of food waste occurs at the end of the supply chain. To address these challenges, the dairy sector is actively involved in raising consumer awareness and collaborates closely with partners across the supply chain, NGOs, and governmental bodies.

### Packaging



Packaging plays an integral and essential role in the food and drink value chain, from production to consumption stage, and supports resilient and sustainable food supply chains. We support the EU ambition to continue the transition to a more **circular economy for packaging**. Reducing packaging material and adopting increasingly sustainable packaging solutions is a key priority for the European dairy industry, which is actively pursuing innovative approaches to minimise its environmental footprint. In the dairy sector, packaging is essential, and its functions fully align with all pillars of sustainability with the notable example of its importance to **prevent food waste**.

### Consumer information

Providing consumers with the right information is necessary to advance towards more sustainable food systems and achieve the social pillar of sustainability. EDA members are committed to ensure an accurate and credible labelling information to the EU consumers.

The [EDA guidelines on voluntary origin labelling for milk dairy products](#) are part of the EDA commitment to ensure correct labelling information to the EU consumers when highlighting **origin labelling** on a voluntary basis. While supporting an EU harmonised voluntary origin labelling, EDA is concerned about the negative consequences of mandatory origin labelling, which could increase regulatory burdens, disrupt the single market, and have adverse economic and environmental effects for both producers and consumers.



Regarding **nutrition labelling**, we believe that any scheme should be grounded in sound scientific evidence and aligned with food-based dietary guidelines. EDA is in favour of clear, complete and understandable nutrition information to consumers and supports an EU-harmonised voluntary front-of pack nutrition labelling. Our key principles are outlined in the [EDA Position on Front of Pack Nutrition Labelling](#).

In promoting healthy and nutritious dairy products within the Internal Market, we would like to emphasise the importance of the [EU School Food Scheme](#) for children across the EU. Dairy products are a **significant contributor to the health and well-being of children and adolescents**, especially in the critical period of growth and development. The EU School Scheme plays a key role in educating younger generations on the importance of a healthy and balanced diet, and hence encourages the consumption of **highly nutritious foods such as milk and dairy**.



Finally, for **environmental claims**, a harmonised environmental assessment at the product level is crucial and should be based on the European Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) method.

## Dairy Product Environmental Footprint



EDA is proud to emphasise the significance of dairy within the broader context of environmental actions—not only in addressing climate change but also in considering water and land use and biodiversity. To support this, the dairy sector has developed the **Dairy Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) methodology**, which harmonises carbon and climate assessments alongside 15 other environmental indicators. These indicators evaluate the impacts across a wide range of environmental components throughout all stages of dairy production and consumption.

Building on its longstanding commitment, the sector aims to refine circular practices and sustainable resource use, ensuring dairy production continues to evolve in harmony with environmental objectives across the three pillars of sustainability.