



Kirchberg Declaration on Near-Natural Grazing

BACKGROUND PAPER

*Near-natural grazing – a key factor for biodiversity,
resilient ecosystems and sustainable landscapes*

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Background and rationale for this paper

The year 2026 has been declared by the United Nations as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP 2026). It draws attention to landscapes, farming practices and the associated livestock keepers and other stakeholders who shape a large proportion of the world's land area. In many parts of Central Europe, however, these issues have lost visibility; above all, the economic basis for them has been lost. Added to this is the realisation that our biodiversity has, to a large extent, arisen through interactions with grazing animals and is dependent on them.



In Germany, the Alliance for Grazing Landscapes and Pastoralism, founded in 2024, brings together activities from the fields of nature conservation, landscape management, agriculture, science and civil society. The key event for Germany as part of the IYRP 2026, to be held at Kirchberg Castle, builds on this collaboration. The focus is on the role of grazing animals as 'landscape architects', triggering ecologically essential processes that cannot be replicated by purely technical management methods.

The Kirchberg Declaration summarises the shared underlying principles. This detailed background paper explains the declaration's key messages, contextualises them from a technical perspective and demonstrates that near-natural grazing induces natural dynamics, develops structural diversity, ensures long-term landscape management and, at the same time, supports many other overarching societal goals. It also sets out how near-natural grazing can be utilised as a method in nature conservation, agriculture and landscape planning, and how it can be taken into account in funding policy. The Kirchberg Declaration is intended as an invitation to greater dialogue with policymakers, public authorities, local authorities, funding bodies, agricultural businesses, landowners, the scientific community and nature conservationists, with a view to fostering greater acceptance of this important issue and translating it into concrete action.

Near-natural grazing is neither a one-size-fits-all solution with guaranteed success nor a blanket substitute for other tried-and-tested forms of landscape management, but it significantly expands the available 'toolbox'. Near-natural grazing can also be practised on parts of a farm and provide an additional source of income. Other forms of land management within farms can help to safeguard near-natural grazing on less productive land.

The guiding principle of the Kirchberg Declaration is that near-natural grazing links biodiversity, landscape, climate, water, soil, animal welfare, regional value creation and cultural heritage. Its particular value lies in the integration of these benefits within a living, adaptive land-use system.

What is near-natural grazing?



The degree to which grazing is close to nature and its benefits for biodiversity are determined by the interaction between the type of grazing animal, grazing management and site-specific conditions. These benefits increase the more closely grazing is modelled on natural patterns, particularly the key functions of large herbivores in grazing that takes place throughout the year wherever possible.

Characteristic features include a moderate average intensity of disturbance adapted to the vegetation growth, as well as a high spatial and temporal heterogeneity of vegetation and structures, with slow dynamics and no abrupt, large-scale changes.

Near-natural grazing does not describe a rigid procedure, but rather a continuous gradient dependent on many factors. At one end of the gradient are extensive, production-oriented grazing operations that produce high-quality food whilst also providing benefits for nature and the landscape. At the other end are large-scale nature conservation pastures or 'wild grazing areas', where biodiversity, ecosystem functions and the protection of natural processes take centre stage (Figure 1). In between lie numerous practical combinations. From a legal and operational perspective, a distinction must be made between whether livestock – such as cattle, horses, water buffalo, sheep, goats or donkeys – or wild animals such as bison are used.

Near-natural grazing systems are based on the following fundamental principles:

- The stocking density is determined by the vegetation growth and remains moderate on an annual average, allowing for the simultaneous existence of short-grass areas, taller vegetation, edge zones and temporarily unused sub-areas.
- The grazing animals utilise the area unevenly in terms of both space and time. Grazing, trampling, resting places, wallows, watering holes and dung patches create a diverse mosaic.
- Various biotopes, such as solitary trees, shrubs, wooded areas, pasture grasslands, old grass stands, tall herbs, deadwood, bare patches of ground, rocks, small bodies of water, floodplains and others, are expressly encouraged and regarded as functional and dynamic components of the pasture.
- In addition to the current structural diversity, the spatial and temporal continuity of the biotope composition is also crucial. Perennial vegetation, grazing residues, rarely used sub-areas and other refuges unaffected by grazing must be permanently available so that all organisms within the native biocoenoses can complete their development, reproduction and hibernation cycles.
- Management responds flexibly to weather conditions, forage availability, soil conditions and animal health. The outcome and development of the land are more important than fixed dates on the calendar.
- Near-natural grazing systems are characterised by spatially differentiated, continuous use by grazing animals that is predictable for the organisms within the biocoenosis.
- Year-round grazing reflects natural processes particularly well, but requires suitable climatic conditions, suitable sites, sufficient forage, access to water, shelter from the weather, dry resting areas and reliable animal care. With regard to water and shelter, natural structures such as water bodies or groups of trees

are to be preferred over technical solutions such as watering systems and shelters. Where the aforementioned conditions are not met, seasonal systems with the longest possible grazing period are appropriate.

- Grazing during the dormant season is of particular ecological importance. During this period, the effects of grazing, browsing and trampling have a particularly strong influence on the total biomass present, the grass-to-herb ratio and the development of woody plants, thereby creating the conditions for herb-rich and structurally diverse stands in the following growing season.
- Large, contiguous areas facilitate natural spatial and temporal patterns, require less management effort and are more cost-effective. However, smaller, isolated areas are also valuable despite the increased effort involved, particularly when they act as stepping stones within a network of habitats and the individual areas are linked through grazing with herds of appropriate size.

Near-natural grazing systems are also usually embedded within a broader agricultural context. In particular, where year-round grazing is not possible, winter fodder must, at best, be obtained from extensively managed meadows. Near-natural pastures and species-rich meadows are therefore not mutually exclusive. In a diverse cultural landscape, they can complement one another.

Due to an ongoing discussion, the following terms have not yet been definitively defined. In practice, the varying use of these terms leads to uncertainty; consequently, there is a need in the long term for a uniform clarification and classification of the following terms:

- Production-oriented grazing
- Extensive grazing
- Nature conservation-oriented grazing
- Near-natural grazing
- Wild grazing

1. Near-natural grazing promotes biodiversity

Grazing animals as part of the evolution of species and ecosystems and their ecological development

Europe's biological diversity has developed over long evolutionary periods under the influence of large herbivores and numerous large predators. Before the widespread extermination and displacement of large grazing animals, the landscape was shaped by the warm-period mammoth (+), forest elephant (+), forest rhinoceros (+), steppe rhinoceros (+), woolly rhinoceros (+), hippopotamus, giant deer (+), broad-fronted elk (+), aurochs (+), bison, wild horse (+), European water buffalo (+), Eurasian wild ass (+), elk, fallow deer and red deer. Later, domesticated cattle, horses, donkeys, sheep and goats took over many of their ecological functions. Thus, unregulated forest-pasture management, historical grazing grounds, common lands, woodland pastures, transhumance and 'wild pastures' – all sub-categories of near-natural grazing – did not simply keep areas 'open', but created diverse and constantly shifting transitions between open



areas and those characterised to varying degrees by woody vegetation. Many open-country habitats and species that are now protected are therefore ecologically very closely linked to evolutionary processes and histories of land use in which large grazing animals played a central role.

Beginning with the dissolution of common land, forestry reforms in the 19th century and accelerating rapidly through industrialisation and the intensification of agriculture, these management systems have largely disappeared and now exist in the landscape only as relics and are limited to specific regions. By contrast, the strict spatial separation of arable land, grassland and woodland, the widespread practice of keeping livestock in stables, and the almost exclusive management of large grassland areas through mowing are, by comparison, very recent developments.

The ecological mechanisms

Near-natural grazing does not merely act by removing above-ground biomass. Its benefits for biodiversity arise from several processes occurring simultaneously:

- Grazing promotes varied plant communities on a small scale and prevents a few highly competitive species from dominating.
- Trampling and rolling create patches of bare ground, compact the soil locally or break up the vegetation cover. Trampling, in particular, leads to the transport of carbon into the soil. This creates seedbeds, pioneer sites, small bodies of water and warm microhabitats, whilst also promoting humus formation.
- Seeds and small animals are transported in the fur, on hooves and claws, or after passing through the digestive tract. Grazing animals thus functionally connect sub-areas.
- Dung and urine distribute nutrients unevenly. Dung beetles, flies, fungi and numerous other organisms form complex food webs around them. These, in turn, serve as food for birds, bats and other insectivores.
- Browsing, bark stripping, scratching, wallowing and the creation of trails alter woodlands and vegetation structures. Edges, glades, islands and transitions emerge in place of sharp boundaries between different land-use types.
- Overmature vegetation, old grass stands, scrub, deadwood and, where appropriate, carcasses or individual animal remains managed in accordance with nature conservation principles expand the range of habitats that have become rare.
- From an ecological perspective, grazing animal species have different effects and are not interchangeable at will: body size, body mass, footprint, different use of space, mouth width, forage selectivity, digestion type, social behaviour, and the effects of browsing, trampling, rooting and bark stripping significantly influence which vegetation structures, microhabitats, biotopes and material flows develop.
- Mixed grazing can combine the complementary effects of different herbivores, thereby triggering a greater diversity of ecological processes.

Heterogeneity and diversity are crucial. A pasture kept permanently short across its entire area can be just as species-poor as homogeneous and heavily fertilised meadows. Natural conditions arise where the average intensity of disturbance remains moderate and, at the same time, areas subject to heavy use on a small scale coexist alongside areas that have been undisturbed for a long time.

High Nature Value grassland and biotope networks

High Nature Value (HNV) areas are areas used for agriculture that possess high natural value. Near-natural grazing systems can preserve existing biotopes and HNV grassland, enhance areas lacking in structural diversity, and create new connections to species-rich habitats. Large-scale systems that link dry and wet sites, mineral and organic soils, woodlands, forest edges and water bodies are particularly effective. Migratory or herded livestock are important for the connectivity of habitats. They transport seeds and organisms over long distances and link otherwise isolated habitats. Stationary, large-scale pastures and mobile grazing systems fulfil different yet complementary functions in this regard.

In a recent study, the European Environment Agency (EEA) highlights that a significant proportion of the habitat types protected under European nature conservation law are associated with extensive livestock farming. Near-natural grazing therefore makes a practical and essential contribution to Natura 2000 under the Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC), to the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, to the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and to the EU Regulation on the restoration of nature (Regulation (EU) 2024/1991).

Combining pastures and meadows effectively

Based on nature conservation objectives, landscape-based management combines different approaches. These may include extensive, nature-oriented and near-natural grazing, mowing, mosaic and staggered mowing, strips of old grass, temporary fallow land and targeted initial maintenance, all of which can complement one another. Grazing is particularly suitable where long-term structural diversity and natural dynamics are desired. Mowing remains important where specific meadow communities or extensive forage production make this advisable.

However, the advantages of near-natural grazing do not justify a blanket devaluation of species-rich meadows and the associated mowing. Hay meadows mown once or twice a year support plant communities worthy of protection and provide essential winter fodder for grazing animals. Particularly problematic are large-scale, simultaneous, frequent or very deep cuts carried out across extensive areas without leaving any remaining refuge areas, e.g. for insects or amphibians, as these directly harm them, abruptly remove cover and food, and eliminate developmental stages.

Similar risks also arise from inappropriate grazing management. Grazing animals introduced at high densities to previously unused, overgrown areas during the growing or breeding season can likewise eliminate vegetation, breeding sites, developmental stages and refuge areas over a large area within a short period of time. Intensive rotational grazing can then functionally resemble large-scale mowing. Key factors include the proportion of land under pasture, stocking density, duration of grazing, grazing rest periods, grazing frequency and the consistency of structures and refuges.

Wild grazing

Wild grazing is a sub-category of near-natural grazing. It applies the ecological effects of large herbivores to large areas throughout the year, primarily serving nature conservation and the development of dynamic ecosystem complexes. It combines near-natural grazing with the protection of natural processes, as well as with a modern, evolutionarily grounded understanding of wilderness. This does not involve completely uncontrolled livestock management. Animal welfare, animal health, safety and legal responsibility remain guaranteed; however, ecological development and dynamics are given more scope than in traditional, target-oriented management.

Such systems can reduce the need for technical, long-term maintenance, allow for nuanced dynamics and develop new habitat mosaics. Scientifically monitored real-world laboratories, in which different animal species, stocking strategies and landscape types are compared, are particularly valuable. Their findings can be applied to protected area management, local land management and agricultural practice.

2. Near-natural grazing shapes landscapes



Near-natural grazing landscapes are characterised by extensive transitions (ecotones): short-grass feeding areas alternate with areas of old grass, patches of bare ground, edge structures, water bodies, scrub and overgrown areas, individual trees, groups of trees and wooded areas. This mosaic is not only ecologically effective but also frequently creates varied landscapes that are easily interpreted by people. Semi-open, park-like spaces open up visual connections without completely clearing the landscape.

Such landscapes are of great value for recreation and tourism. Visible grazing animals convey a sense of land use and vitality, whilst regional produce links the landscape experience with economic value creation. Paths, viewing points and nature interpretation facilities bring ecological processes to life. Prerequisites for this include forward-thinking visitor management, safe crossings, clear information on how to behave around grazing animals, and refuge areas for animals and sensitive species.

Landscape planning can utilise near-natural pastures as spatial connectors. Along river valleys, dry slopes, forest edges, former military training areas or municipal green corridors, large and small areas can be linked to form functional grazing landscapes. This creates 'green infrastructure': a network of productive ecosystems that simultaneously supports species migration, water retention, climate adaptation and local recreation.

The aesthetic impact is not merely an added benefit. Landscapes whose formation and use remain transparent foster a sense of identification, responsibility and acceptance of nature conservation and environmental protection. Nevertheless, the design should not be fixed to a static ideal. Near-natural pasture landscapes thrive on slow change and on the fact that structures which may at times appear disorderly are permitted.

3. Near-natural grazing preserves cultural heritage and opens up prospects for the future



Pasture landscapes have been part of European cultural history for millennia. Herding routes, common lands, cattle tracks, grazing rights, regional breeds, types of fencing, field names, festivals and traditional craftsmanship bear witness to this past. With the decline of pastoral farming, it is not only livestock populations and farms that are disappearing, but also practical knowledge about sites, animal behaviour, forage, weather, conflict resolution and communal land use.

Preserving cultural heritage does not mean conserving historical systems unchanged. Modern grazing projects can combine traditional knowledge of pastoralism with GPS-assisted herd management ('virtual fencing'), contemporary livestock protection, mobile watering points, cooperative land use, regional marketing and scientific monitoring. The involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders in local authorities and districts are key factors for success. This creates a sustainable form of living heritage.

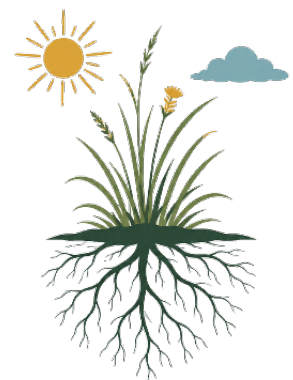
Livestock farmers play a special role. Their daily work creates the conditions necessary for animals to have a lasting impact on the landscape. Fair and economically viable long-term conditions, reliable representation, expert advice and social recognition are therefore not merely matters of agricultural policy, but form part of safeguarding our natural and cultural heritage.

Regional pasture-based products can make the landscape both visible and tangible through taste. Meat, milk and cheese from traceable, animal-welfare-oriented systems tell the story of a region and can link together tourism offerings, the catering industry, direct marketing and public procurement. The balance between nature conservation benefits and food production is not the same in every system; however, both can be described transparently and appropriately rewarded.

4. Near-natural grazing contributes to climate protection and climate adaptation

Permanent grassland as a carbon sink

Permanent grassland stores large quantities of carbon, primarily in the soil. Its permanent ground cover, extensive root penetration and the absence of regular tillage all contribute to this. Grasses respond to grazing by increasing root formation. Near-natural grazing thus enhances carbon sequestration. The preservation of carbon-rich grassland soils is therefore a reliable contribution to climate protection; ploughing up such land releases carbon stocks that have built up over a long period.



The climate impact of a pasture depends on site-specific factors (in particular water supply, soil type, climate, etc.) and management factors such as stocking density, grazing frequency and other factors. In suitable locations, grassland soils have very high carbon reserves, exceeding those of many forest soils. In semi-

open grazing landscapes, copses, hedgerows and forest patches can also sequester carbon above ground and through horizontal nutrient transport, without completely displacing the functions of open land.

Climate balance of near-natural pastures

Ruminants produce methane emissions. This must be included in any comprehensive carbon footprint assessment. At the same time, grazing animals can convert grassland biomass – which is unsuitable for direct human consumption – into food suitable for human consumption. A meaningful assessment can therefore only be made by taking a systems-based approach that considers soil and vegetation carbon, fertilisation, feed origin, intensity of use, animal productivity, alternative land uses and other ecosystem services collectively. It can be considered established that, in the case of grazing systems that do not rely on arable-based feed and where any necessary winter feeding is based on the farm's own grassland forage, the ruminant-related, climate-damaging methane emissions are more than offset by the climate-positive carbon sequestration on the pastures, and that near-natural grazing systems can be regarded as climate-positive.

Resilience and preventive fire management

Structurally diverse, deep-rooted and site-adapted grazing systems are more resilient to harmful environmental influences and can, for example, better withstand periods of drought than homogeneous, shallow-rooted stands. Flexible stocking densities and alternative grazing areas help to prevent overgrazing during periods of drought. Semi-open systems spread the risks: woody vegetation provides shade and shelter from the elements, whilst open areas support light- and heat-loving species.

In fire-prone landscapes, grazing reduces dry biomass and thus the fire load. The structural diversity induced by grazing also reduces the potential for wildfires to spread. Experience from southern Europe and from former military training areas contaminated with munitions indicates particular potential for application where mechanical maintenance is risky or virtually impossible.

5. Near-natural grazing protects water and strengthens the landscape's water balance



Grassland protects groundwater and surface water because it reduces soil erosion and, compared to intensively farmed arable land, often has lower levels of nutrient and pesticide inputs. Near-natural grazing systems do not require mineral fertilisers or the use of pesticides. This can reduce nitrate, phosphate and active substance loads. The restoration and grazing of floodplains along watercourses also creates buffer zones between these areas and more intensively farmed arable land, thereby reducing the input of nutrients and pollutants into groundwater and surface water. This not only relieves pressure on aquatic ecosystems but also, in many cases, supports drinking water supply for the local population.

Soils with extensive root systems and rich in structural elements absorb rainfall more effectively and release water at a slower rate. Trodden areas, depressions, small bodies of water, damp patches, old grass stands

and copses increase the roughness of the landscape and slow down runoff. At the catchment level, interconnected grassland and pasture areas thus contribute to water retention, flood prevention and also to groundwater recharge.

As with the previous points, the effect depends on management practices, land characteristics and land area. However, excessive grazing frequency, high stocking densities and concentrated gatherings at watering holes or feeding sites – particularly when grazing exclusively on heavily waterlogged organic soils – can also cause soil compaction or erosion. Adaptive management spreads out pressure points, relocates facilities where necessary, protects sensitive areas and suspends use during critical phases. As the size of the area increases and it becomes more natural – ultimately extending to wild grazing – these management risks diminish due to the grazing animals' natural choice of habitat.

Near-natural grazing thus offers a tool for integrated water and nature conservation projects. Water suppliers, local authorities, the agricultural sector, landscape conservation organisations and nature conservation bodies can jointly define land-use objectives and secure ecosystem services through long-term cooperation.

6. Near-natural grazing preserves and enhances soils



Soil is a finite resource and, at the same time, the foundation for production, biodiversity, the water cycle and climate protection. Permanent grassland protects it from wind and water erosion through year-round cover. Dense root systems stabilise the soil structure, organic matter promotes soil life and water storage, and the avoidance of ploughing preserves established soil horizons.

Grazing animals influence soils differently on a small scale. Moderate trampling can work litter into the soil, create open germination sites and increase the diversity of microhabitats. Manure provides organic matter and food for soil organisms; as an interface between the gut and soil microbiomes, it ensures the biodiversity of microorganisms. In contrast, localised heavy pressure can seal pores or open up scars in the vegetation. These contrasts are part of the natural dynamics, provided that compacted or erosion-prone areas remain spatially limited and are able to regenerate.

Incorporating as many biotope types as possible – from open land to woodland – along with suitable animal species and breeds, stocking levels adapted to the vegetation and area size, and sufficient natural watering holes and feeding areas, helps to reduce risks. In wet habitats, for example, water buffalo can fulfil specific ecological functions; at the same time, sensitive bog soils require particularly careful management. Soil protection is therefore not an automatic consequence of grazing as such, but rather the result of a system tailored to the specific site.

7. Near-natural grazing combines animal welfare with sustainable nutrition

Near-natural grazing enables species-specific behaviours and natural herd development: animals forage for themselves, move over longer distances, form social groups, rest in places of their own choosing and react intuitively to weather and vegetation. Near-natural systems also provide varied forage, shade, shelter from the elements and mental stimulation. They therefore offer high potential for animal welfare.



Grazing alone does not guarantee animal welfare. Even near-natural grazing systems require daily monitoring of the animals, sufficient feed and water, preventative health care, suitable shelter from the weather, secure fencing, herd protection and calm handling. For year-round outdoor rearing, robust animals and site-appropriate shelter and resting areas are essential. Animal welfare and ecological objectives are planned jointly from the outset. This also includes enabling the animals to be removed and slaughtered without stress, in their familiar surroundings and whilst remaining with the herd. In this context, the so-called 'pasture slaughter' in conjunction with a mobile slaughter facility is often the most animal-friendly solution and supports regional value chains, including locally based processing and marketing options.

The tension between animal health and biodiversity also involves the ecologically responsible use of veterinary medicines. Antiparasitic drugs, which are excreted in faeces, often remain effective for weeks and damage the ecologically important dung biocoenoses. These are not only vital food sources for numerous species of great importance to nature conservation (such as birds, amphibians and bats), but also prevent mineralisation and the transfer of carbon into the soil. Antibiotics should therefore only be used when necessary and under no circumstances prophylactically. They should be administered in such a way that residues do not end up on pasture where possible. The appropriate choice of active substance, timing of treatment, diagnostics and, where necessary, the temporary separation of treated animals are all part of an integrated health management system.

The *Planetary Health Diet*, developed by the EAT-Lancet Commission, describes a sustainable food system that is guided by planetary boundaries and recommends a shift in the global human diet towards more plant-based and fewer animal-based foods. Accordingly, per capita consumption of animal products decreases, whilst the origin and production methods of these products become increasingly important. Ruminants can convert grass and other biomass that is inedible to humans into food. On permanent grassland unsuitable for arable farming, this produces food without directly competing for land with plant-based food production. At the same time, the production of animal feed on arable land can be significantly reduced under pasture-based systems and thus no longer competes with food production.

Near-natural grazing products form part of a quality-oriented, sustainable, regional diet: smaller quantities, high animal welfare standards, traceable origins and remuneration that also takes into account nature conservation and landscape management. Depending on the system, food production may be the primary purpose, a by-product or of secondary economic importance. These differences should be communicated transparently.

8. Near-natural grazing landscapes are indispensable for effective nature conservation

Contribution to overarching objectives

Many of the objectives of international, European and national nature conservation relate not only to individual species, but to functioning, interconnected and resilient ecosystems. These include the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the European Natura 2000 network of protected areas, EU Regulation 2024/1991 on nature restoration, the National Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (NBS 2030) and the Natural Climate Protection Action Programme (ANK).



Near-natural grazing offers a multi-faceted building block for their implementation, one that has an impact on a wide variety of ecosystems. It can preserve existing protected areas, restore degraded land, create buffer zones and corridors, and re-establish natural processes across large areas. In the National Restoration Plan and in regional strategies, it can be established as a distinct family of measures alongside water-course restoration, forest development and species-specific programmes, and can be combined with them.

An expanded toolkit for nature conservation practitioners

A phased approach can be used for planning and implementation:

1. Clarify the baseline situation: Which habitats, species, soil and water functions, and traditional land-use practices are present? What developments can be expected without intervention?
2. Select a set of objectives: Is the focus on High Nature Value (HNV) grassland, a specific species, process protection, biotope connectivity, landscape management, ecosystem services, food production, or a combination of these?
3. Design a suitable grazing system: Animal species, area size, grazing period, stocking rate, frequency, infrastructure and refuge areas are derived from the set of objectives.
4. Supplement with other methods: Initial maintenance, mowing, strips of old grass, woodland management or watercourse measures are employed where they usefully complement the grazing effect.
5. Monitoring development: Vegetation, fauna, soil, water, animal health, labour requirements and economic viability are considered together. Management is further developed based on the results.

This approach facilitates a transition from rigid action plans to evolving systems. At the same time, it ensures transparency for authorities, funding bodies, livestock farmers and the public.

Integrating process protection, cultural landscape and production

Near-natural pastures with primarily ecological objectives and agricultural grazing operations practising extensive grazing are not competing models, but rather different parts of a spectrum. For instance, a large-scale rewilding project can create space for autonomous dynamics; sheep grazing can connect dry habitats, whilst migrating herds of cattle can strengthen the network of biotopes as they move between areas; a herd of water buffalo can maintain rewetted moors and renaturalised floodplains for agricultural use; and

an extensive dairy farm can increase biodiversity in a productive landscape through grazing, reduced fertilisation and strips of old grass.

The choice of system depends on the location and the societal objective. This also allows for the creation of a biodiversity-promoting transition between the anthropogenic categories of ‘wilderness’ and ‘cultural landscape’. Large herbivores can fulfil key ecological functions in both contexts.

Practical examples as learning environments

The projects presented during the conference at Kirchberg Castle – including Döberitzer Heide, Schäferhaus and Geltinger Birk, Schmidtenhöhe, Oranienbaumer Heide, projects by the Working Group for Biological Environmental Protection on the Lippe, pasture landscapes near Crawinkel, common pastures in the southern Black Forest and the Alpine foothills, the Senne, Grinden pastures in the Black Forest National Park, the Alperstedter Ried, the Naab Valley, the ‘Wilde Weiden Taubergießen’, floodplain pastures in the White Elster catchment area, projects by the Günztal Cultural Landscape Foundation and other regional initiatives – demonstrate the range of possible systems.

There is great potential for further developing expertise in the field of near-natural grazing through the sharing of experience:

- Which land-conservation approaches are effective?
- How can livestock farming and nature conservation objectives be reconciled?
- What infrastructure is sustainable in the long term?
- How can communication be successful?
- Which combinations of funding schemes have proven effective?

A nationwide network of demonstration and learning sites, supported by a nationally coordinated training centre, can make these findings accessible to new projects, develop a robust framework of competencies, impart skills and evaluate existing projects.

9. Near-natural grazing requires suitable framework conditions



The societal benefits of near-natural grazing systems have so far only been partially remunerated by the market. At the same time, grazing farms face significant pressures from daily animal care, land fragmentation, challenging locations, livestock protection, infrastructure, documentation and funding risks. Without farms that are economically viable in the long term, there will be a lack of both the animals and the people needed to develop grazing landscapes sustainably.

The further development of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) from 2028 onwards and its national implementation, the Joint Task ‘Improvement of Agricultural Structures and Coastal Protection’ (GAK), nature conservation and climate programmes, such as the Action Programme for Natural Climate Protection, as well as the implementation of the Restoration Regulation, form the key political and financial framework for action to secure near-natural grazing in the long term and to permanently establish its benefits for biodiversity, the climate, soil, the water cycle and the landscape. The following building blocks should be understood as proposals for action. They can be combined according to the respective areas of responsibility at European, national, federal and regional levels.

Various conference papers highlight the risks associated with the current CAP proposal: a reduced overall budget for the EU agricultural budget, as yet undetermined minimum budgets for environmental and animal welfare services, and higher requirements for national co-financing could restrict the scope for action available to the federal government and the Länder.

9.1 Making terminology and eligibility criteria practical

Near-natural pastures should, as far as possible, encompass all habitats and include woody vegetation, old grass stands, rocks, wet areas, unpaved paths, field margins and other structures that are ecologically desirable but which, in area-based funding schemes, may lead to risks of misclassification and sanctions. A definition of agricultural activity based on ecosystem services can explicitly cover not only food production but also the provision of public goods – biodiversity, climate, soil and water protection, and landscape conservation.

For the definition of grassland and eligible agricultural production area, a regulation that can be harmonised nationwide is appropriate, one that includes extensive local farming practices and an appropriate proportion of dynamic landscape features. Land-use codes (defining agricultural activities on a given area) for ‘permanent grassland under established local practices’, ‘extensive permanent grassland use making a significant contribution to public goods’, ‘wild pasture’ or ‘wild grazing area’ can be further developed or newly introduced for this purpose and harmonised across the federal states. In this way, closeness to nature remains a funding objective and does not inadvertently become a ground for exclusion.

Proof of active farm management can be based on existing, easily verifiable criteria. This ensures that farms whose primary focus is on nature conservation and landscape management retain access to agricultural support schemes; a second, parallel system of farm management and funding is thus avoided.

9.2 Simplifying administration and ensuring rules are compatible

Farms with grazing livestock often report land areas, animals, grazing periods and funding payments across multiple systems. Data collected once can – whilst ensuring data protection and compliance with the purpose for which it was collected – be made available across application, animal identification and monitoring systems. Digital tools are particularly beneficial when they actually replace documentation rather than merely generating additional evidence.

A cross-state basic catalogue of definitions, stocking densities, permitted structures, grazing periods, grazing frequency and inspections would make work easier, particularly for farms in border regions. Regional additions remain possible where climate, location or nature conservation objectives warrant them. Results-oriented inspections can focus more on verifying whether the agreed environmental performance is being achieved, rather than prescribing every operational decision in advance.

Coordinating bodies – such as landscape conservation associations, biological stations, Natura 2000 stations, grazing cooperatives or regional project organisers – can centralise the application process, land allocation, monitoring and communication. This reduces the burden on individual farms and, at the same time, on the authorising and monitoring authorities.

9.3 Offering a reliable modular funding framework

The future CAP architecture can support grazing through a range of coordinated instruments. Planning certainty is achieved when one-year introductory schemes, multi-year land-use programmes, animal-related support and investments can be combined, and when funding includes an incentive component that goes beyond merely compensating for additional costs and reduced yields.

Support should not be linked solely to livestock numbers or days on pasture. Rather, remuneration must be based on the specific biodiversity benefits and the ecological quality of the pastureland, which can be determined in particular by parameters such as site-appropriate stocking rates, long grazing periods, functionally suitable animal species and combinations of animals, spatial heterogeneity, grazing residues and permanently available refuges, as well as demonstrable biodiversity impacts. Misaligned incentives leading to high livestock numbers, short-term land use or landscape homogenisation must be ruled out.

Agri-environment and climate actions

The planned consolidation of organic farming schemes and agri-environment and climate measures into agri-environment and climate actions (AUKA) offers the opportunity to create a clear, modular framework. Basic modules that can be integrated nationwide can be supplemented by regional schemes. Suitable building blocks include, for example, grazing, extensive summer, winter and year-round grazing, wild grazing, woodland grazing, herding, cross-farm systems, areas of old grass and structural elements, as well as extensive grassland management and programmes for indicator species that have been proven to promote biodiversity.

Reliable budgets and longer-term commitments facilitate investment and operational decisions. A tiered remuneration system based on proven difficulties can create additional scope, provided that management risks are fairly distributed and advisory services and monitoring are guaranteed.

In addition, the Natural Climate Protection Action Programme, national species conservation programmes, regional programmes and local or private partnerships can fund projects and investments that go beyond the scope of agricultural support schemes. Advance or instalment payments reduce the pre-financing burden on small and medium-sized farms when undertaking investment measures.

Livestock-related income support

Coupled payments for suckler cows, ewes and does already help to stabilise grazing livestock farms today. This support approach can be further developed to include additional groups of animals that actually graze and to recognise on-farm grazing services, whilst providing separate compensation for biodiversity-related constraints. Combining this with area-based environmental services avoids blanket incentives for livestock numbers and directs support towards systems adapted to local conditions.

Conversion and cooperation plans

The transitional action plans envisaged in the proposals for the CAP from 2028 onwards can support farms in their transition to resilient production systems. For near-natural grazing, particular consideration should be given to securing land, herd development, fencing and watering systems, adapting stables or shelters, marketing, advisory services and bridging the start-up phase. Transitions can also be organised across farms or through cooperatives.

Natura 2000 compensation and compensatory allowance

Natura 2000 payments can compensate for additional costs and restrictions on land use in protected areas. A coordinated combination with voluntary environmental programmes strengthens cooperative nature conservation. The compensation allowance remains a simple tool for mountain areas and other areas at a natural disadvantage to maintain pastoral farming on land that is difficult to manage. In both cases, a clear distinction should be made between compensating for existing disadvantages and rewarding additional services.

Productive and non-productive investments

Near-natural grazing systems initially require infrastructure investments that can rarely be financed by product prices alone: fences, watering points, catching facilities, mobile shelters, livestock protection, paths, the purchase of animals, scrub clearance, the creation of small water bodies, planning services and, where necessary, land acquisition or long-term leases. Funding schemes for productive and non-productive investments can lower this initial threshold.

The recent study presented by the Scientific Advisory Board for Natural Climate Protection as part of the further development of the ANK illustrates such an investment approach along three lines:

1. Funding for infrastructure and one-off initial measures to restore and safeguard grassland biotopes
2. The development of potential areas into High Nature Value (HNV) and biotope grassland with the aim of creating semi-open pasture landscapes, including the exemplary development of landscape conservation farms and flagship projects modelled on the 'Bunde Wischen' project (Schleswig-Holstein)
3. Site-specific transitions to woodland pasture, agroforestry or near-natural woodland where open-land objectives and grazing infrastructure do not offer a viable prospect.

The indicative cost figures of 30, 50 and 20 million euros cited there for the three development pathways mentioned above illustrate the scale of a potential nationwide start-up programme and should be regarded as a basis for discussion regarding the development of the ANK.

9.4 Strengthening farms, advisory services and regional organisations

Funding instruments are more effective when people are able to implement them competently. Regional biodiversity and pasture advisory services combine expertise in animal husbandry, farm management, funding regulations, species, habitats, soil and water. Landscape conservation associations and other recognised organisations can act as an interface between agriculture, nature conservation, public administration and landowners.

For business start-ups and generational succession, business and conversion plans tailored to grazing farms, investment grants, guarantees and central points of contact are recommended. Extensive systems in particular require appropriate assessment criteria, as their income is derived from a combination of products, management contracts and funding.

The starter package for young farmers set out in the CAP proposal can combine start-up grants, top-ups, higher investment subsidy rates, loans or guarantees, advice and partnerships to this end. In this way, grazing and landscape conservation farms can be promoted as independent, sustainable business models.

Farm support services and suitably qualified replacement staff enhance social sustainability. Livestock farming ties farmers down 365 days a year; illness, family commitments, holidays or further training can only be managed with reliable cover. Training modules on managing extensive herds can create new capacity in this regard.

Collaborations broaden the scope for action: several farms can jointly organise herds, equipment or marketing; local authorities and nature conservation organisations can provide long-term land packages; water suppliers or tourism partners can co-fund services. This gives rise to regional grazing systems that endure beyond the scope of a single project.

9.5 Implementation as a shared learning process

Near-natural grazing landscapes bring together areas of responsibility that have often been dealt with separately up to now. A regional development process can bring together agriculture, nature conservation, veterinary services, water management, forestry, local authorities, landowners and the public at an early stage. Clear points of contact, reliable approval procedures and jointly agreed objectives help to minimise conflicts later on.

Monitoring supports this learning process. In addition to genetics, species and habitats, vegetation structure, soil, water, animal health, working hours, costs, regional value creation and social acceptance are relevant factors. Not every project requires a comprehensive research programme; a few well-chosen floristic and faunistic indicators can already show whether developments are moving in the desired direction.

To assess pasture quality, suitable documentation and monitoring tools should be developed to record stocking density, herd size, grazing frequency, grazing animal species, combinations of grazing animals, spatial utilisation, grazing residues and refuge areas. Furthermore, the development of horizontal and vertical structural diversity can be documented.

Scientifically supported model regions and real-world laboratories can address outstanding issues: suitable combinations of grazing animal species, managing woody plant dynamics, animal health in extensive systems, fire safety, carbon sequestration, visitor management, land monitoring and results-oriented funding. The findings are then incorporated into advisory services, training, administration and funding programmes.

Joint proposal of the Kirchberg Declaration

The Kirchberg Declaration calls for the use of near-natural grazing as an essential component of modern nature and cultural landscape policy. It does not claim exclusive representation for any single type of farm operation or any specific nature conservation model. At its core lies the recognition that large herbivores fulfil ecological functions that are lacking in many landscapes and ecosystems and which are virtually impossible to replace by technical means.

For nature conservationists, this broadens the spectrum from targeted species management to large-scale process protection. Agricultural holdings gain additional opportunities to combine public services with food production and regional value creation. Politicians and administrators gain a toolkit of measures with which biodiversity, restoration, climate, water, soil, animal welfare and rural development can be addressed collectively.

Where site conditions, animal welfare, land availability and management arrangements align, near-natural grazing can expand from individual projects to cover wider areas. The Kirchberg Declaration provides a common language and a basis for cooperation across disciplinary and jurisdictional boundaries.



Abbreviations and key terms

Term	Meaning
ANK	Federal Action Plan on Nature-based Solutions for Climate and Biodiversity
AUKA	Agri-environment and climate actions; proposed set of measures under the CAP after 2027
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
EEA	European Environment Agency
GAK	Joint Task for the 'Improvement of Agricultural Structures and Coastal Protection'
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union
LU	Livestock unit; a standardised measure for livestock numbers
HNV	High Nature Value; agricultural land with high natural value
IYRP	International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (UN);
Natura 2000	European network of protected areas established on the Habitats and Birds Directives
NRP Plan	National and Regional Partnership Plan within the proposed funding framework from 2028
WBNK	Scientific Advisory Board for Natural Climate Protection
WVO	Regulation (EU) 2024/1991 on nature restoration

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List of illustrations:

- **Cover image:** G. Weber: Grazing project run by the Günz Valley Cultural Landscape Foundation, with Original Braunvieh cattle on a floodplain pasture along the Western Günz, Unterallgäu district, Bavaria
- **Illustrative images:** created by G. Weber using ChatGPT 5.6 SOL

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