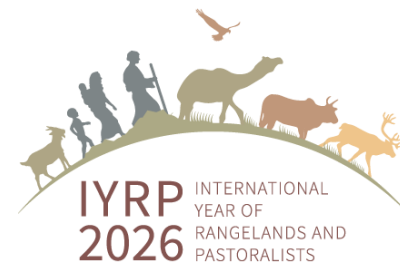


Near Natural Grazing—Benefits for Nature Conservation, Land Use, and Society



Statement on the Congress at Kirchberg Castle (September 18–20, 2026)

The UN International Year of Range Lands and Pastoralists (IYRP 2026) draws attention to landscapes, economic practices, and bodies of knowledge that have lost their visibility and economic foundation in many parts of Central Europe. With the Kirchberg Declaration, the supporters call for a renewed understanding of grazing animals as “landscape architects”: They trigger ecological processes that cannot be replicated by purely technical management methods. Near-natural grazing is neither a one-size-fits-all solution nor a blanket substitute for other proven forms of landscape management. It expands the available toolkit—and connects biodiversity, landscape, climate, water, soil, animal welfare, regional economic value creation, and cultural heritage within a dynamic, adaptive land-use system.

What is near-natural grazing?



The degree of naturalness and the biodiversity benefits of grazing 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 modeled after natural patterns, particularly the key functions of large herbivores in grazing that continues throughout the year as much as possible. Characteristic features include an average, moderate impact adapted to the vegetation, as well as a high degree of spatial and temporal heterogeneity in vegetation and structures, with dynamic changes.

1. Near-natural grazing promotes biodiversity

Europe’s biological diversity has developed over long periods under the influence of large herbivores. Grazing, trampling, rolling, browsing, wallowing, and manure create open patches of ground, forest edges, stands of old grass, patches of woody vegetation, and numerous other microhabitats. Seeds and small animals are transported in the fur, on hooves, or through the digestive tract; grazing animals thus functionally connect habitats. Where moderate disturbance intensity on an annual average coincides with areas that are heavily used at times and left undisturbed for long periods, the crucial diversity of structures and development areas emerges.



Near-natural grazing systems can preserve biotope grasslands, enhance structurally poor areas, and strengthen the biotope network. In doing so, they provide a practical pathway to meeting the requirements of Natura 2000, the EU Restoration Regulation, and the goals of the Global Biodiversity Framework. Grazing, mowing, strips of old grass, and targeted management measures can be combined in a site-specific manner. Mixed grazing with large grazing animals can combine the complementary effects of different herbivores, thereby triggering a greater diversity of ecological processes.

2. Near-natural grazing shapes landscapes



Near-natural grazing landscapes develop extensive transitions across the landscape: short-grass feeding areas alternate with taller vegetation, open ground, water bodies, shrubs, isolated trees, and wooded areas. This dynamic mosaic is ecologically effective and creates varied, often semi-open landscapes. Visible grazing animals, regional products, trails, and nature education programs make landscape development directly tangible and can combine recreation, tourism, and regional economic value creation. In river valleys, along forest edges, on dry slopes, or in municipal green corridors, pastures thus become natural infrastructure for species migration, water retention, climate adaptation, and local recreation.

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



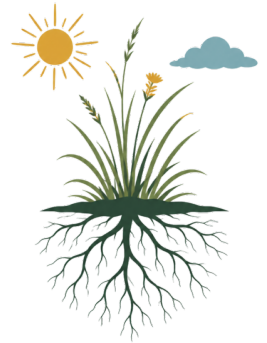
Communal lands, migration routes, herding trails, regional livestock enclosures, and communal grazing rights have been part of European cultural history for millennia. They are linked to a rich body of knowledge regarding animal behavior, habitats, forage, weather, and communal land use. Modern grazing projects can combine this knowledge with GPS-supported herd management, modern livestock protection, cooperative land use, regional marketing, and scientific monitoring. In this way, cultural heritage is not merely preserved in a museum but is developed in a sustainable manner for the future. Regional grazing products make the landscape both visible and tangible; fair economic conditions, expert advice, and social recognition provide livestock owners with long-term prospects.

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

Permanent grassland stores large amounts of carbon, especially in soils that are permanently covered, deeply rooted, and not regularly tilled. Preserving these reserves is a reliable contribution to climate protection. In semi-open grazing landscapes, shrubs, hedgerows, and forest islands additionally sequester carbon without completely displacing the functions of open land.

A complete carbon footprint must also include methane emissions from ruminants. Therefore, only a consideration of the entire system is meaningful: soil and vegetation carbon, stocking rates, forage sources, intensity of use, alternative land uses, and other ecosystem services. Near-natural grazing systems have a positive impact on the climate, as carbon sequestration in the soil outweighs the effects of methane emissions.

Site-adapted, deep-rooted, and structurally rich pastures are better able to buffer dry periods. At the same time, grazing in fire-prone landscapes reduces dry biomass; the resulting mosaic can hinder the spread of wildfires.



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



Near-natural grazing systems do not require mineral fertilizers or pesticides. They protect groundwater and surface water from soil erosion and reduce the input of nutrients and pollutants. Soils with deep root systems, old grass stands, woody plants, depressions, compacted areas, and small bodies of water increase the landscape's roughness: precipitation can be better absorbed and released at a delayed rate. Interconnected grasslands and pastures thus contribute to water retention, flood prevention, and groundwater recharge—particularly through the revitalization of floodplains and the rewetting of wetlands. Adaptive management takes sensitive soils and critical weather conditions into account, spreads out stress points, and allows spatially limited areas to regenerate. This creates opportunities for long-term cooperation among water suppliers, municipalities, agriculture, landscape conservation, and nature conservation.

6. Near-natural grazing preserves and enhances soils

Permanent grassland protects the finite resource of soil through year-round cover, dense root systems, and the avoidance of tillage. Moderate trampling can work litter into the soil and create open germination sites; manure provides organic matter and food for soil organisms. Localized high levels of stress are part of the natural dynamics, as long as they remain spatially limited and regeneration is possible. Animal species, stocking rates, land area, soil moisture, and the location and number of natural watering holes and feeding areas are therefore considered together in a way appropriate to the specific site. In this way, the soil remains the foundation for biodiversity, water management, climate protection, and production.



7. Near-natural grazing combines animal welfare and sustainable food production



Near-natural grazing systems allow for species-specific behaviors: Animals largely choose their own forage, areas for movement, social groups, resting places, and shelter from the weather. This high potential for animal welfare is ensured through daily animal monitoring, preventive health care, sufficient feed and water, secure fences, herd protection, and suitable areas for retreat and resting. The needs-based, biodiversity-friendly use of veterinary medications and slaughter methods that minimize stress as much as possible are also part of an integrated approach.

In line with the Planetary Health Diet, as consumption of animal-based foods decreases, the origin and production methods of these foods become increasingly important. Ruminants can convert grass and other biomass that is inedible to humans into food—especially on permanent pastureland that is unsuitable for arable farming. Natural pasture products thus combine traceable origin, high animal welfare standards, regional value creation, and compensation for the ecological and landscape services they provide.

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

Near-natural grazing provides a multifaceted building block for functional, interconnected, and resilient ecosystems. It can preserve protected areas, restore degraded areas, create buffer zones and corridors, and reestablish natural processes across larger areas. This opens up a distinct set of measures for the National Restoration Plan and state strategies that can be combined with watercourse restoration, forest development, and species-specific programs.



In practice, a learning-based approach is recommended: clarify the initial situation and set of objectives; design a suitable grazing system comprising animal species, land area, grazing period, stocking rate, and infrastructure; strategically supplement other methods; and jointly monitor developments in nature, animal health, labor requirements, and economic viability. Model projects, real-world laboratories, and a nationwide network of demonstration and learning sites can make experiences accessible and support new initiatives. Near-natural conservation pastures, agricultural grazing operations, herding, and wild grazing areas do not stand in opposition to one another but rather form a site-specific spectrum.

9. Grazing Requires Appropriate Framework Conditions



Near-natural grazing systems provide public goods for which the market has so far only partially compensated. At the same time, daily animal care, fragmented land parcels, livestock protection, infrastructure, documentation, and funding risks place a burden on farms. The further development of the Common Agricultural Policy starting in 2028, the GAK, the Action Program for Natural Climate Protection, and the implementation of the Restoration Regulation offer an opportunity to permanently integrate these services into the landscape. The Kirchberg Declaration views the following building blocks as a combinable framework for action:

- **Making “closeness to nature” eligible for funding:** Interoperable definitions and land-use codes can incorporate woodlands, old grasslands, wetlands, rocks, field margins, and other dynamic landscape elements as desirable components. In this way, ecological quality remains a funding objective and does not inadvertently become a reason for exclusion.
- **Organizing administration for interoperability:** Data collected once can be reused multiple times while ensuring data protection and adherence to the intended purpose; cross-state baseline criteria can be harmonized; and inspections can be more closely aligned with agreed-upon outcomes. Regional agencies and grazing cooperatives can consolidate application processing, land coordination, monitoring, and communication.
- **Establish a reliable, modular funding framework:** Combinable entry-level programs, multi-year land management programs, animal-specific support, and investment incentives provide planning certainty. Funding can be based on biodiversity benefits, long grazing periods, site-appropriate stocking rates,

heterogeneity, grazing residues, and permanent refuges. Funding opportunities for fences, watering stations, capture facilities, livestock protection, animal purchases, initial maintenance, or long-term land preservation lower the barrier to entry.

- **Strengthening People and Regions:** Integrated grazing advisory services combine livestock management, business administration, funding regulations, and nature conservation. Start-up and conversion plans, substitute services, partnerships, and long-term land packages from municipalities and nature conservation organizations turn grazing and landscape conservation operations into sustainable models for the future.
- **Learning Together:** A few well-chosen indicators can shed light on vegetation structure, species, soil, water, animal health, costs, value creation, and public acceptance. Scientifically supported model regions translate findings into advisory services, training, administration, and funding programs.

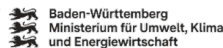
Near-natural grazing is not tied to any single farm model or specific conservation philosophy with a claim to exclusivity. Rather, it offers a common language and a practical toolkit of measures. Where site conditions, animal welfare, land availability, and stewardship align, vibrant grazing landscapes can flourish in the long term — supported by agriculture, nature conservation, politics, administration, local governments, science, landowners and civil society.



The following institutions support the Kirchberg Declaration



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