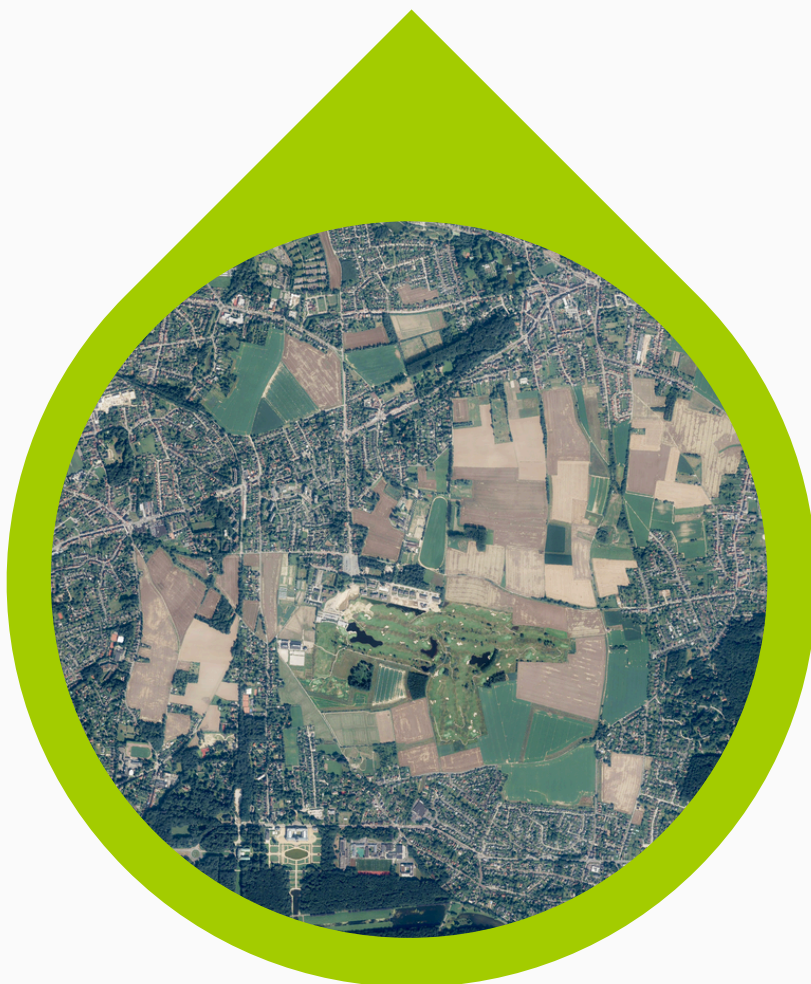




Flanders research institute for
agriculture, fisheries and food



POLICY BRIEF

PROACTIVE LAND AND PROPERTY POLICIES FOR LAND-BASED AGRICULTURE

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PROACTIVE LAND AND PROPERTY POLICIES FOR LAND-BASED AGRICULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

THE GROUND IS SLIPPING AWAY: FLEMISH FARMERS ARE RAPIDLY LOSING ACCESS TO LAND AND FARMSTEADS

Land is the heart of this issue. Land remains one of the most essential production factors for agricultural enterprises in Flanders. More important than ownership itself is farmers' access to land—particularly long-term, secure access. This security is the cornerstone of land-based farming. It underpins income generation, enables greater autonomy, serves as a prerequisite for permits, determines livestock capacity and manure management, and provides the confidence needed to make long-term investments. In short, long-term security of access to land is an absolute prerequisite for building a sustainable future for land-based agriculture in Flanders.

The current situation in Flanders reveals a serious and escalating challenge regarding access to land for professional farmers. While this issue is often framed narrowly as a matter of rising land prices, the problem runs much deeper. The gap between the agricultural economic value of land and its market price has widened significantly – meaning farmers must now pay several times more for land than they can reasonably earn from farming it [\[1\]](#). Rising prices are merely a symptom of **broader underlying dynamics, most of which are unrelated to professional farming**. These include permissive land-use policies that allow the conversion of farmland into large private gardens, the repurposing of farmhouses for non-agricultural businesses, the use of agricultural land for keeping hobby animals, and – to a lesser extent – land claims from other policy areas such as infrastructure, water management, and nature conservation. Nearly all of these pressures are backed by financial means that far exceed the earning potential of agriculture. The consequences are grave: in some Flemish municipalities, more than 66% of all farmland is no longer used for agricultural purposes [\[2\]](#).

In addition to local land claims, **macroeconomic investment dynamics** are also placing increasing pressure on agricultural real estate. Farmland is widely regarded as a safe and stable investment, attracting capital that often prioritizes financial return over long-term land stewardship. While this does not always result in the immediate loss of agricultural use, it frequently leads to short-term lease agreements that offer farmers less security and come at a higher cost. Moreover, agricultural land is subject to **speculative interest** from non-agricultural actors, while simultaneously being sought after by farmers themselves – often in pursuit of economies of scale or to support extensification strategies.

Discussions about the high cost of agricultural land often obscure a key point: farmers do not necessarily need to own the land they cultivate. What matters most is a long-term guarantee of access. However, even this fundamental need is not adequately supported by current policies, which offer insufficient guarantees for long-term tenure. This is particularly concerning given the significant amount of farmland owned by public authorities, which have no clear or consistent policy framework on this matter.

The stark contrast between the current reality and the critical importance of land access for farming highlights the urgent **need to develop proactive land and property policies**. Compared to other European countries and regions, Flanders has relatively limited regulation of the agricultural real estate market – both farmland and farmsteads [\[3\]](#). Consequently, the issue of land access for farmers has largely been reduced to discussions around zoning and land use designation. However, in practice, while the legal designation of land is a necessary condition, it is by no means sufficient to ensure that actual land use aligns with that designation. As a result, current and future generations of farmers are increasingly losing access to land and agricultural infrastructure. **This development stands in direct contradiction to broader societal and policy objectives for the Flemish agricultural sector** – including producing food amid a climate crisis, moving toward strategic food autonomy, contributing to high-quality and biodiverse landscapes, and enhancing carbon sequestration in agricultural soils.

Without a proactive land and property policy, the Flemish agricultural sector will be unable to meet these growing demands and expectations. Notably, Flanders already implements proactive land policies in other domains – such as mobility, housing, economic development, nature conservation, water management, and recreation. These examples clearly demonstrate both the importance and the effectiveness of such an approach in achieving policy goals. The same level of commitment is now urgently needed for agriculture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

13 ESSENTIAL ACTIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO FARMLAND AND FARMSTEADS FOR PROFESSIONAL FARMERS

A TO MEASURE IS TO KNOW

RECOMMENDATION 1

CREATE A FLEMISH OBSERVATORY FOR THE AGRICULTURAL REAL ESTATE MARKET

Accurate data is the foundation of effective policy. In Flanders, the agricultural real estate market remains poorly understood due to a lack of high-quality data. As a result, there is limited scientific insight into critical developments – including the growing presence of non-agricultural actors, ownership concentration, foreign ownership, and the relationship between land ownership and land use. Similarly, agricultural land prices remain largely unstudied due to insufficient data infrastructure. This lack of reliable information severely hampers the public debate on access to farmland and makes it extremely difficult to develop well-informed policies related to land and property in agriculture. To close this gap, the creation of a Flemish Observatory for the Agricultural Real Estate Market is urgently needed. This observatory should be tasked with regularly monitoring and reporting on the evolution of land ownership patterns as well as land transactions. It would provide the necessary evidence base to support land-related policymaking, especially as it relates to land access for professional farmers. Establishing such an observatory will likely require new legislative action, similar to the approach taken in Wallonia with the creation of the Observatoire du foncier agricole [\[4\]](#). A comparable initiative in Flanders would enable meaningful, data-driven dialogue on the future of agricultural land use and ownership.

RECOMMENDATION 2

ANALYZE AND MONITOR THE EVOLUTION OF AGRICULTURAL LEASEHOLDS IN FLANDERS

On October 13, 2023, the new Flemish Lease Decree was published. A key motivation for this reform was the growing reluctance among landowners to enter into long-term lease agreements. By revising various aspects of the legal framework, the new decree aims to reinvigorate landowners' willingness to lease their land and to improve access to farmland for young and starting farmers through lease agreements.

As part of the reform, a Flemish Lease Observatory is being established. Its mandate includes conducting preparatory research for the Lease Price Committee, analyzing trends in land prices, and examining the practical application of the leasehold legislation (Article 69). In light of these goals, it is essential that the evolution of agricultural leases in Flanders be studied both quantitatively and spatially.

The Lease Observatory should be tasked with systematically monitoring changes in the number and surface area of agricultural leases across the region. Spatial analysis is also crucial to identify where and why lease registrations are declining or emerging. Such insight would help guide evidence-based policy decisions aimed at securing long-term access to land for active and future farmers.

B

PROVIDE STRONG POLICY INSTRUMENTS

WIDELY APPLICABLE ACTIONS

RECOMMENDATION 3

CREATE AND FUND A FLEMISH LAND BANK TO SUPPORT AGRICULTURAL POLICY GOALS

The Flemish Land Agency already manages several land banks and corresponding funding mechanisms to effectively implement policy objectives, such as the Blue Deal, reforestation goals, and infrastructure development. Through these land banks, complementary agricultural policies are carried out to compensate farmers who lose access to land due to these broader policy measures. However, there is currently no land bank or dedicated funding line focused on a more comprehensive agricultural policy program. Both are essential for advancing **the future of agricultural enterprises**. A dedicated land bank would support critical objectives, such as ensuring farmland diversity to address climate extremes, countering **undesirable trends in the agricultural land market** (e.g., keeping farmland in the hands of professional farmers) [\[5\]](#), facilitating **land mobility between retiring and incoming farmers** (e.g., preventing farmland fragmentation when a farmer retires), and assisting the **transition of agricultural businesses and areas** (e.g., in proximity to land bank operations for water management and nature conservation).

RECOMMENDATION 4

REDUCE NON-AGRICULTURAL USE OF FARMLAND AND FARMSTEADS

The current policy context continues to promote the ongoing fragmentation of agricultural land by allowing developments that are not in accordance with the designated use. It is crucial to **limit the use of agricultural land for purposes such as gardens and hobby farming** to prevent the gradual encroachment on farmland. Non-agricultural land use is often linked to the **non-agricultural (re)use of buildings in rural areas**, although this is not always the case. Therefore, initiatives must reduce the non-agricultural use of both farmland and farmsteads. Eliminating the discrepancy between regulations and vision is essential to achieving the objectives related to protecting agricultural land. The legal framework governing basic property rights of non-zoned land uses (VCRO) and non-zoned changes of use (BVR 28/11/2003) should be aligned with the open space vision outlined in the Spatial Policy Plan for Flanders. Solely implementing this vision through negative assessments in a permit application and appeals to reverse building permits provides limited impact and leads to confusion and frustration among landowners and local permitting authorities.

Concrete suggestions [\[6\]](#) for revising the regulatory decision on non-zoned changes of use include: removing the use of farmsteads for storage (Article 8), restricting the use of farmsteads for offices and housing (Article 3 and Article 11). To curb non-agricultural land use, additional (financial) burdens and conditions could be imposed on permits, and the effectiveness of fiscal measures should be further explored.

MAKE USE OF PUBLIC LAND OWNERSHIP

Public institutions in Flanders collectively own a substantial portion of land. By 2024, this is expected to account for approximately **17% of the total land area** [\[7\]](#). Of this, more than 64,000 hectares are used for agricultural purposes [\[8\]](#). Over 53,000 hectares of this land have an agricultural designation, making up 7.1% of the region's total agricultural land. **More than 5,500 agricultural businesses** operate on publicly owned land [\[9\]](#), meaning they are heavily dependent on the public institutions from which they lease these plots. As such, the land policies of these institutions will play a critical role in shaping the future of these agricultural enterprises.

Public Welfare Centers (OCMWs) and church councils are two key public institutions with significant farmland holdings that have accumulated over the centuries. Recently they have been selling off land, resulting in a sharp decline in their agricultural real estate portfolios. In East Flanders, for instance, they sold nearly 18% and almost 10% of their historic land holdings in just a decade, using the proceeds to finance other investments.

RECOMMENDATION 5

IMPLEMENT A TEMPORARY MORATORIUM ON THE PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC FARMLAND

There is an urgent need for an in-depth discussion on the future of public farmland, particularly with regard to the long-established land holdings of Public Welfare Centers (OCMWs) and church institutions. However, the rapid sale of these properties threatens to render this discussion moot in the near future. The Flemish government can provide the necessary space for this important debate by legally declaring the public agricultural land assets of local institutions as "of general interest" rather than restricting them to local interest, as is currently the case. This would lay the legal foundation for a temporary moratorium on the further privatization of public farmland, allowing time to build knowledge among and between public landowners, raise awareness about the strategic value of these agricultural land assets and public stakes in farming businesses, foster discussions, and explore opportunities for collaboration and policy development across the public sector. A temporary moratorium would also alleviate the crippling uncertainty faced by thousands of farming businesses that currently rely on public land, offering them temporary relief in the face of ongoing land sales. Finally, such a moratorium is crucial to protect land that is not subject to leases, which is often the first to be sold for financial reasons yet offers the greatest potential for new policies (see Recommendations 6 and 7).

RECOMMENDATION 6

EMPOWER PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS WITH THE RIGHT TOOLS TO ACHIEVE SOCIETAL OBJECTIVES ON PUBLIC LAND

The sale of public agricultural land has a well-known cause: the search for funding for other investments and the relatively low income from lease agreements. The rent that can be charged is relatively low, as it is set and fixed by the Lease Price Commission. When public institutions seek to finance investments for other policy objectives, these lease revenues quickly pale in comparison to the potential proceeds from selling the land, and they sometimes do not outweigh the cost of loans with interest. As a result, many conclude that selling the land is financially more attractive.

For public authorities, it is a challenge to achieve social, agricultural, and financial objectives on their land. This involves a search for suitable types of use agreements (such as leasehold, long-term lease, or temporary access). Over the past years, various public institutions have experimented with different arrangements in which prospective users were given the opportunity to propose ways to contribute to, for example, specific sustainability goals. These proposals are then formalized in cooperation agreements that may include pricing and cultivation conditions. The Flemish government could take the lead in clarifying the advantages and disadvantages of the available types of agreements and in providing guidance to help other public institutions put them into practice.

RECOMMENDATION 7

INTEGRATE PUBLIC FARMLAND INTO REGIONAL DEALS AND AREA-BASED POLICY PROGRAMS

Public land assets, particularly those owned by Public Welfare Centers (OCMWs) and, to a lesser extent, church institutions, are often located outside their administrative boundaries. In the current context of budgetary constraints, OCMWs and local governments are increasingly reporting that maintaining, and especially managing, these land holdings is no longer considered part of their core responsibilities, particularly when these properties fall outside their jurisdiction. As a result, governments are selling land within each other's territories, often prioritizing the highest bidder. This practice can lead to undesirable outcomes, such as the conversion of farmland for non-agricultural purposes or the repurposing of farmsteads.

Additionally, this fragmented and uncoordinated sell-off results in the public sector losing strategic land holdings that are essential for the effective implementation of agricultural and environmental policies. Such practices directly undermine the principles of regional deals (regiodeals) and the integrated, area-based approach to open space management, including programs like Landscape Parks, National Parks, and WaterLandSchappen.

The Flemish government plays a critical role in supporting the preservation and strategic management of public farmland. By doing so, it can help balance competing interests across sectors and administrations at various levels of government.

RECOMMENDATION 8

OFFER STABILITY AND STRATEGIC LEEWAY TO AGRICULTURAL ENTERPRISE OPERATING ON PUBLIC LAND

Thousands of agricultural businesses currently operate on publicly owned farmland. Historically, this public land offered these farms security and thus allowed them to invest, plan for the long term, and care for the soil. In the current context of public land being sold at a high rate, that sense of security has turned into a paralyzing uncertainty. Many farmers working on public land live in fear of being told that 'their' public land is being sold. Losing a plot of land can quickly jeopardize a farm's profitability, livestock numbers and manure management, access to support measures, loan repayments, feed autonomy, and more. This climate of uncertainty also encourages unsustainable use of public farmland. Public institutions hold a powerful asset with their land – one that can offer renewed long-term security. By doing so, they can actively support thousands of farmers in meeting both societal and policy ambitions. By making non-leased public farmland available, public institutions can provide additional space to existing farms. Several pilot projects have shown that farmers could use this "breathing space" or strategic leeway experiment with new, sustainable practices – which, if successful, can be applied to their entire operations and on all of their farmland (e.g. the call for projects in Mendonk (Ghent) and the Dubbel Doel project by the Agency for Nature and Forest). For public institutions, such collaborations may have a strategic multiplier effect with impacts far beyond the boundaries of their own land.

RECOMMENDATION 9

OFFER OPPORTUNITIES TO NEW FARMERS ON PUBLIC LAND

In the years ahead, many publicly owned farmlands will become available as current users retire or cease their activities. This shift presents a valuable opportunity not only for existing farms (see Recommendation 7), but also for newcomers to the agricultural sector. Public institutions are uniquely positioned to **strategically allocate these lands to support new entrants**, particularly those without family ties in farming – a group that often struggles to access adequate, high-quality land through the private market. Through open calls, public bodies can create pathways into farming for new generations, actively contribute to the **renewal of the sector**, and foster innovation that often accompanies new business models and practices. It is essential, however, to ensure that newcomers are granted enough land and long-term security. Without adequate land and long-term security, newcomers risk being funneled into intensive horticulture – whereas broader access encourages experimentation and innovation in field crops and animal husbandry. The Flemish government can set a strong example – for instance, by establishing a public land bank (see Recommendation 3) – and encourage other public institutions to develop similar forward-looking policies.

ACTIONS FOR FARMSTEADS AND AGRICULTURAL BUILDINGS

In addition to land use policies (for fields, pastures, orchards, etc.), policies that focus on agricultural infrastructure, such as farmsteads, barns, sheds, greenhouses, etc. are increasingly needed. Agricultural buildings in Flanders face growing pressure from non-agricultural uses, including housing, businesses, hotels, restaurants, and other developments. A policy that prioritizes the availability of both land and infrastructure for food production can help alleviate the pressures on agriculture.

RECOMMENDATION 10

MAKE AGRICULTURAL REDEVELOPMENT A VIABLE OPTION [\[10\]](#).

There is no shortage of interest in reactivating vacant farm sites for agricultural use – quite the opposite. However, access to buildings remains a major hurdle, particularly for beginning farmers. Real estate prices are simply too high for agricultural redevelopment to be considered a realistic option. Most farming businesses cannot financially compete with affluent non-agricultural buyers. This is why **proactive policy support for agricultural redevelopment is essential**.

Encouraging agricultural reuse is a complex challenge that cannot be addressed with a single instrument. The Province of Antwerp has already taken promising steps, including the creation of the Landbouwkompas (Agricultural Compass) and the Landmobiliteit (Land Mobility) project, which connects retiring farmers with aspiring young ones, in collaboration with the farmers' organization Groene Kring. In several policy forums – such as those involving municipal spatial planning officials and the Agricultural Redevelopment Action Platform – the idea has emerged to establish a preemptive purchase mechanism. Such an entity would acquire and resell farmsteads with the explicit aim of keeping them in agricultural use. Building on the model of existing brownfield covenants used to remediate industrial sites, a dedicated “yellowfield covenant” could be developed for agricultural areas. The term yellowfield refers to the yellow zoning color typically used to designate farmland in spatial plans. To secure the future of farming, it is vital that agricultural redevelopment is not just encouraged in principle but also made feasible in practice – ensuring that as many sites as possible remain productive and rooted in agriculture.

RECOMMENDATION 11

SUPPORT THE DESEALING AND DEMOLITION OF VACANT AGRICULTURAL SITES TO HALT THE ONGOING FRAGMENTATION OF AGRICULTURAL AREAS. [\[11\]](#).

When non-agricultural reuse is deemed undesirable from a policy standpoint, property owners – including local permitting authorities – inevitably ask, “What then?”. When an assessment indicates that the proposed use is not appropriate, alternatives must be identified to ensure the site has a viable future. **Agricultural reuse** or **complete demolition** of existing buildings offer solutions that genuinely commit to preserving agricultural land. The full de-paving of vacant agricultural sites can help counter the fragmentation of agricultural areas and strengthen the agricultural function within the region. Similarly, demolition can support Flanders' broader ambition of de-paving in open spaces. However, the current real estate market often does not align with this policy goal.

To provide “a future perspective for each site”, more is required than just stricter zoning regulations. A comprehensive **enabling policy** is needed – one that supports and complements the decision-making framework. To make demolition a feasible alternative and meet the ambitions for de-paving in open spaces, a **demolition fund** must be established. This fund could be supported by financial contributions generated from developments that are not conform to the zonation plan. To make this approach viable, a clear framework for these financial contributions must be developed.

WORK FROM A CLEAR VISION, ROOTED IN A CONSISTENT AND LONG-TERM AREA-BASED APPROACH

RECOMMENDATION 12

DEFINE A REGIONAL AND FORWARD-LOOKING AGRICULTURAL VISION – AND COMMIT TO CLEAR CHOICES

Flanders' agricultural sector is calling for greater legal clarity and long-term strategic direction. Meeting this demand requires decisive choices about the future development of the region – both in terms of agricultural economics and landscape ecology.

While many area-based programs in Flanders articulate clear objectives for water management, nature conservation, and forestry, they often lack a coherent long-term vision for agriculture. This gap, combined with vague or broadly distributed subsidies, creates an unstable foundation for a future-oriented agricultural strategy. Given the geographic and functional diversity of the Flemish landscape, the potential for agricultural development varies widely from region to region. It is therefore essential that the Flemish government develops area-specific agricultural visions, with clear development goals and explicit policy choices. Achieving this will require sustained and structured collaboration between the Agency for Agriculture and Fisheries and the Department of Environment. Both policy domains must also commit the necessary resources – including time, personnel, and budget – to ensure the development, implementation, and long-term monitoring of this area-based approach. Current initiatives, such as the Landscape Parks, National Parks, and WaterLandSchap, provide ideal platforms to anchor and advance these tailored agricultural strategies. By integrating agriculture more meaningfully into these programs, Flanders can ensure that farming remains both viable and aligned with broader environmental and spatial goals.

RECOMMENDATION 13

APPOINT REGIONAL LIAISONS TO FACILITATE ONGOING DIALOGUE BETWEEN FARMERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Many farmers lack a clear and consistent point of contact for voicing their concerns or sharing ideas for the future. Instead, they are approached by a fragmented array of public authorities across various policy domains. At the same time, numerous area-based policy programs – such as WaterLandSchap – often struggle to gain traction due to limited understanding of, or engagement with, the local farming community. Building trust and navigating local dynamics can take years. Across the EU, efforts are underway to develop lasting models of collaboration. In Milan, for instance, peri-urban farmers organize into distretti agricoli (agricultural districts) to co-develop regional action plans [\[12\]](#). In Wallonia's Parcs Naturels [\[13\]](#), agricultural engineers serve as facilitators, bridging the gap between farmers and policy.

To support the effective rollout of area-based initiatives, Flanders should establish a permanent network of **regional liaisons** (also referred to as area facilitators) [14]. Their role should extend beyond the limitations of short-term, project-based work – with a long-term vision and a broad thematic scope. These liaisons not only mediate between stakeholders but also actively build partnerships on the ground, conduct essential fieldwork, and maintain close, one-on-one contact with farmers. As such, they form a vital link between agricultural practice and public policy – enabling meaningful, place-based cooperation.

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This Farmer Clears Field publication frames within the first generation of living labs for demolition, commissioned by Department of Environment Flanders with process supervision by Architecture Workroom Brussels (AWB). The living lab is part of the 'Flanders breaks out' campaign. The 'Farmer Clears Field' project team is a collaboration between Voorland, Boerenbond, KU Leuven and ILVO (Institute for Agricultural, Fisheries and Food Research).

Smart demolition of vacant agricultural sites - ILVO Flanders

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