

Antoine BOTTY, May 2026

THE SPECIFICITIES OF GENERATIONAL RENEWAL IN FRENCH ALPINE AGRICULTURE

CIPRA, for a good life in the Alps

CIPRA, the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps, is a non-profit, non-governmental umbrella organisation with representatives in seven Alpine countries and a member network of over 100 associations. CIPRA works on a scientific basis with diverse communication, political, education and practical projects for sustainable development. It is committed to the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage, the strengthening of regional diversity and joint solutions to cross-border challenges in the Alpine region.

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I. BACKGROUND

Given that 2026 has been declared the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists by the United Nations, and that pastoralism is a key component of Alpine identity, CIPRA France commissioned me to conduct an exploratory study on the following topic: the specific characteristics of generational renewal in French Alpine agriculture.

The Alpine Convention is the international treaty dedicated to the protection of the Alps, addressing various issues through its protocols, such as climate change, the green economy, population, culture, quality of life, and mountain agriculture. In total, the Alpine Convention focuses on 17 interconnected themes. The topic explored in this document lies at the intersection of several of these themes. Moreover, the Alpine Convention's working group on mountain agriculture and forestry has identified generational renewal as a priority for 2026.

CIPRA has always paid particular attention to the views and perspectives of young people on a wide range of topics. This approach helps to better highlight the real needs on the ground. The present study is an example of this, in that the role of young people and future farmers takes on its full significance here: they are the ones directly confronted with the issue of generational succession.

This study focuses exclusively on the French Alps. It is a multifaceted topic that encompasses economic, social, climatic, and structural dimensions.

II. METHODOLOGY

To properly address this topic, the first approach was a quantitative approach. The goal was to collect as much data as possible in order to develop a structured and precise analysis of the mountain farming sector. This research helped identify trends, challenges, and positive aspects specific to this high-altitude context.

In a second step, it was important to identify the organizations and individuals involved in the subject in order to collect qualitative data. The organizations were identified through a mapping of stakeholders involved in generational renewal, which led to ten interviews. This data is essential for understanding the internal dynamics and key players in the sector. It also helps contextualize the collected data and adds a human, on-the-ground perspective.

In a third phase, an online survey was conducted. It yielded 36 responses from students in professional farming training structures. Its aim was to understand the trends, perspectives, and perceptions surrounding the profession of farming in mountainous regions. Reaching out to students was essential, as they represent the future farm suc-



cessors and tomorrow's farmers. The challenges they face in establishing themselves on farms serve as a concrete example of the barriers to generational renewal.

By combining these three components, it was possible to produce a well-considered study, informed by quantitative data, field interviews, and a more human perspective on the realities of the profession.

PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED

ADABEL / Chamber of Agriculture – Elodie Argoud

Belledonne Regional Advisor at the Isère Chamber of Agriculture

Conservatoire d'espaces naturels – ISERE (CEN)

Audrey Pagano – Project Manager, Coordinator of Regional Initiatives, Regional Outreach, Dry Grasslands Program

Nicolas Biron – Project Officer, Isère Wetland Inventories, Scientific Site Monitoring, Development of Management Plans

La Crécia Farm – Théo Ravix

Ferme des Rappilles – Josselin Francoz

Honorine Jully

Leader of an agricultural project in mountain livestock farming

INRAE – Claire Deléglise

Agricultural researcher specializing in mountain livestock farming and climate change

MSA – Ophélie Mereau

Head of the Occupational Risk Prevention Department

SAFER – Aurélien Lequette

Head of the Hautes-Alpes Departmental Office

THE ISSUE

Based on a combination of results from a literature review, interviews, and survey answers, it is clear that generational renewal in French Alpine agriculture cannot be reduced to a simple issue of a shortage of young people or a lack of interest in the profession. On the contrary, the issue appears to be a complex one, at the intersection of sev-



eral dimensions: economic, social, land-related, territorial, human, and climatic. The study shows that the difficulty stems not only from the succession process itself, but from the fact that the farms to be passed on are not always economically viable, physically accessible, or livable in human terms.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

STRUCTURAL ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

The first major finding that emerges is the **structural economic vulnerability of the agricultural sector**. Farm incomes remain low, profit margins are narrow, operating costs are high, and profitability remains uncertain. The data show that 18% of farming households live below the poverty line, compared to 13% for all households, reflecting greater precariousness in the agricultural sector (Daniel Salmon, Senator for Ille-et-Vilaine, & Marie Pochon, Member of Parliament for Drôme, 2023). Added to this is a long-term decline in farm income: between 1990 and 2020, net farm income fell by 40% (Elisabeth MERCIER et al., 2022). In 2022, for every 100 euros of agricultural production, farmers retain only 16 euros, compared to 23 euros in 1990 (INSEE, 2025). This clearly shows that agriculture is not merely suffering from a cyclical problem, but from a deeper erosion of its ability to generate sufficient income.

This economic vulnerability becomes even more problematic when considered in relation to the issue of starting or taking over a farm. To enter the profession, young people must accumulate a very large amount of start-up capital, even though income prospects are low or uncertain. The interviews clearly point in this direction. Josselin Francoz / Ferme des Rapilles explains that the main problem for young people who want to set up their own farms is the cost of taking over existing operations, and notes that if his father's farm had been sold to him at its true market value, he would never have been able to take it over. Claire Deléglise confirms this difficulty by highlighting the growing burden of the costs of buildings, livestock, and equipment (see section 3.2). Generational renewal depends less on an abstract desire than on a concrete possibility: that of taking over a production unit at a manageable capital level.

This economic vulnerability is not uniform across the agricultural sector. Gender-based economic inequalities exist and represent another significant barrier. On average, women farmers earn 29% less than men (Quentin Ghesquiere (Oxfam France), 2023). This issue will be explored in greater detail in section 3.3.

Intermediary conclusion: Mountain regions constitute a unique environment, with



their own distinct realities, both in terms of how they are discussed and how stakeholders interact with them. However, these specific characteristics are harder to discern in statistics or general studies on agriculture. Research on the subject is often conducted on a large scale, which can sometimes obscure the realities of mountain life and limit access to data relevant to the field.

The available data reveal trends, but do not always clearly highlight certain specific features of mountain areas, such as the fragmentation of plots, the prevalence of leased land, limited opportunities for mechanization, the effects of the microclimate, the conditions under which products are sold, or on-site processing.

It should be noted that this difficulty in obtaining precise data is not solely due to a lack of data, but also to the complexity of collecting it. Such data is often produced according to administrative boundaries. This does not call into question the quality of existing research, but it does not always provide a view that is fully adapted to the realities of mountain agriculture. This is why it was important to cross-reference multiple types of data. Cross-referencing data and interviews thus allows for a better understanding of part of the reality on the ground.

THE INCREASING CAPITALISATION OF FARMS

Next, another fundamental mechanism: the increasing capitalization of farms and the challenges this poses for succession. Farms are becoming increasingly difficult to take over, not only because of the buildings, equipment, livestock, and accumulated investments. This trend is reinforced by expansion strategies that sometimes help maintain income but simultaneously increase the scale of the operation to be taken over. This phenomenon is particularly important to understand in mountainous areas, where capitalization is driven not only by production but also by land and real estate considerations. Tourism pressure, land scarcity, the value of buildings, and urbanization all drive up the overall cost of taking over a farm. Interviews with Aurélien Lequette of SAFER and Élodie Argoud of ADABEL show that farm succession is thus competing with other land uses, particularly residential development.

Higher costs can be attributed to various factors:

- Buildings and their facilities are aging; as a result, it is often necessary to build or renovate the facilities on the farm.
- In the past, mountain farming often relied on mixed cropping, whereas today it is more specialized and produces higher yields, requiring significant investments in equipment and mechanization.
- In addition, there has been a general increase in land and property values.



This logic also applies to the issue of sellers leaving the business. Low pension benefits influence their decisions at the time of transfer. Sellers have limited options when leaving the business and may therefore opt for a more profitable exit, particularly by selling buildings or land outside the agricultural sector. The problem is not presented as a moral or selfish choice, but as a rational decision made under constraints. The transfer therefore faces two constraints: the buyer cannot always raise the necessary capital, and the seller cannot always afford to transfer the business under more favorable terms.

Note: The purchase of agricultural land or buildings is a regulated process. Buying land does not automatically mean that its use or construction is authorized. To build, the Local Urban Planning Plan (PLU) or zoning regulations must permit it. Land or buildings that fall outside the agricultural framework are either reclassified under urban planning regulations or, in the case of an existing building, may legally change their designated use (Ministry of Housing, Territorial Cohesion, and Rural Affairs, 2014).

Land ownership is thus a major obstacle. Access to land, buildings, and equipment that can be passed on to the next generation is a central challenge. Just because a farm is available doesn't automatically mean it's "ready to be taken over." Prospective farmers often have to invest not only to take over the existing operation but also to adapt the farm to their own vision. The example of the Crécia farm (Lans-en-Vercors, Isère) illustrates this point very well: even in the context of a family transfer, the takeover required a shift in the farm's model, with a more strategic focus and a greater emphasis on processing and direct sales. This shows that succession is not simply the continuity of a tool, but also the sometimes difficult encounter between an existing legacy and a new agricultural project.

Intermediary conclusion: in mountain regions, taking over a farm is therefore characterized by multiple territorial constraints and dynamics specific to this environment. Certain characteristics, however, remain similar to those observed in other agricultural areas, but they are amplified and complicated by tourism pressure or the scarcity of land.



FAMILY, HERITAGE AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Added to this are human and relational barriers to transfer, such as the family, heritage, emotional, and social dimensions of the process. Land is often part of a family history, sometimes passed down for several generations, which makes transferring it outside the family difficult. The estate is sometimes divided among several heirs, which can heighten tensions. The transferor may also find it hard to envision a life elsewhere after having built their entire life around the farm. Finally, in mountain villages, succession is also a social matter: neighbors, elected officials, residents, and other farmers often keep a close eye on what is happening. These factors clearly demonstrate that agricultural succession is not merely an economic transaction: it also touches on identity, the local area, and each person's place within it.

From a social perspective, it is important to note that generational renewal also depends on living and working conditions. Alpine agriculture appears to have a relatively younger workforce than the average; while the national average of farmers under 40 is 19%, it stands at 22% in mountain agriculture (GIRAUD, 2023); however, this relative youthfulness is not sufficient to guarantee that generational renewal is assured.

The profession remains heavily marked by physical hardship, heavy workloads, on-call duties, difficulty finding free time, administrative burdens, and isolation. Health is a major issue here. The risk of suicide is more than 40% higher than that observed in the general population, and the interview with Ophelie Mereau / MSA shows that agricultural distress is always multifactorial: it combines economic difficulties, physical fatigue, mental pressure, isolation, and, in mountainous areas, stress related to the terrain or predation. The profession thus appears not only difficult, but also potentially exhausting and psychologically taxing.

Added to these issues is gender inequality. This affects working conditions, status, recognition, and social protection. Women face equipment that is sometimes unsuitable, difficulties in taking maternity leave, careers that are more often precarious or incomplete, and consequently lower pensions. The interviews also show that gendered roles remain deeply entrenched in the organization of agricultural work: administrative and accounting tasks are still often handled by women. In this context, Honorine July stands out as an interesting figure, as she transforms this inequality into a driving force for commitment. Her story demonstrates that some young women today want to fully claim their place in a profession still shaped by outdated stereotypes.

Furthermore, there has been no significant decline in the profession's appeal. The survey shows that 58.3% of students can see themselves becoming farmers, and 22.2% are considering it as a potential career path. The issue is not a lack of candidates, but rather that the profession appears less desirable than it once did. Several factors have been identified: the physical demands of the work, long hours, heavy workload, difficulty for spouses to find employment in the area, low social recognition, and a tarnished image.



At the same time, discussions with those on the ground show that commitment to the profession remains very strong among those who choose it. Josselin Francoz / Ferme des Rapiilles explains that he settled down because he was deeply attached to his farm and his region. Théo Ravix / Ferme à la Crécia goes even further, saying that if you do this job, it is above all out of passion. The profession is becoming less attractive in terms of living conditions, which are less in line with today's work culture, but it remains driven by a powerful sense of identity, connection to the land, and philosophy.

Intermediary conclusion: in this case, data specific to mountain areas remain, once again, partially obscured within the broader agricultural data. However, knowledge of the local area and social integration at the local level appear to be crucial factors in gaining both physical and social access to these areas. We can also highlight the additional stress specific to certain mountain areas due to predation. The presence of wolves adds an extra workload and constant stress. Added to this is the management of guard dogs and their interactions with the public in the mountains.



IV. CONCLUSION : LEVERAGE POINTS

The first of these leverage points is **collective work**. Cooperative structures are gaining ground in the Alps, and GAECs are playing an increasingly significant role. They now account for 40% of the utilised agricultural area (UAA), up from 25% in 2010 (Groupe Agricole Alpin et al., 2024). This trend is significant because it can address several issues simultaneously, such as sharing the workload, reducing on-call duties, better distribution of time off, pooling investments, and reducing isolation. Collective action can make the profession more sustainable, both economically and in human terms. Collective structures are not merely legal entities, but concrete solutions to working conditions that have become too burdensome to bear alone.

The second lever is **the processing and direct marketing of products**. Some farms are finding that short supply chains, on-farm processing, and direct sales offer a way to better capture added value, regain economic flexibility, and restore a sense of purpose to their work. This is particularly evident at Théo Ravix's farm in La Crécia, where processing has helped further stabilize the business model and reduce dependence on subsidies or market prices. Here, the mountains can become an asset, thanks to high-quality products, PDO/PGI schemes, the optional "Mountain Product" quality label " (Euromontana, 2020) (see Appendix, point 1), and a strong link between production, the local area, and the consumer. This direct value-added approach not only generates additional income; it also strengthens the farm's viability and thus its transferability.

Adding a processing and farm-direct sales channel constitutes a significant economic advantage. This ensures that no added value is lost in the off-farm processing and marketing chain. This added value is further enhanced by tourism, which plays a significant role in the sale of local products. The marketing of these products also adds value to the region's tourism offerings. This can thus create a virtuous cycle.

Finally, climate change is evident in **a temperature increase of +2.5 °C** in the Alps since 1900, compared to **+1.7 °C** in the rest of France (La montagne, en première ligne face au réchauffement climatique, n.d.). This change plays a central role, not only as an additional constraint, but as a factor transforming the industry. Climate data already show significant changes in the Alps, including rising temperatures, reduced snow cover, a worsening water balance, and increased pressure on water resources. These changes have direct effects on forage systems, grass growth, livestock stocks, watering, and the self-sufficiency of mountain farms. Claire Deléglise/INRAE explains that climate change is already undermining the forage self-sufficiency of mountain farms. Stock management is becoming tighter, and the purchase of forage may become necessary. Climate does not always appear to be the main obstacle in young people's projections. Climate is a source of concern for some respondents, but it is not the primary fear: only 11 out of 36 students, or 30.6%, say they fear it. Climate is clearly making the profession



more technical, more demanding, more uncertain, and more dependent on the ability to anticipate and adapt.

At the same time, this transformation can also open up new possibilities. Some young people are already considering models that are more self-sufficient, more extensive, or better suited to future constraints. Honorine Jully, for example, explains that an extensive model can help reduce costs and increase the animals' food self-sufficiency. This shows that climate change does not only lead to discouragement: it also pushes some project leaders to rethink how they set up their operations.

Ultimately, generational renewal in French Alpine agriculture is hindered by a combination of factors: low profitability, high capital costs, difficulty accessing land and buildings, insufficient pensions, demanding working conditions, complex succession processes, and climate uncertainties. But it also highlights several levers for change: collective work, direct processing and marketing, earlier discussions about succession, adaptation of agricultural models, and the search for more livable and self-sufficient systems.

The central idea running through the entire study is therefore as follows: the problem is not finding motivated young people, but making mountain farms truly transferable, economically viable, and livable for people.



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ANNEXES

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE OPTIONAL QUALITY LABEL “MOUNTAIN PRODUCT”

Link to the document:

<https://www.euromontana.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2020-implementation-of-the-oqt-report-FR.pdf>

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SUMMARY OF THE SURVEY OF YOUNG PEOPLE

1. **Number of participants** = 36
2. **Of the following words, which ones do you spontaneously associate with the profession of mountain farmer?**
 - Passion 86.1%
 - Contact with nature and living things 80.6%
 - Heavy workload 63.9%
3. **Do you think current public policies do enough to encourage young people to settle down?** Those who answered “no” mentioned:
 - expanding housing options for vulnerable groups such as young people, since living in the Alps is expensive.
 - access to land
 - subsidies and financial assistance from the state and regions to help young people settle, as well as psychological support
 - avoiding cronyism in local public decision-making (particularly regarding land acquisition)
 - support for the establishment of small and medium-sized agricultural operations and avoiding the systematic expansion of farms, which, once put up for sale, become unaffordable
 - instilling hope in this profession + recognition of the profession

Criticism regarding access to land and local “clientelism” + a greater need for financial assistance for setting up operations and psychological (human) support + clearer support for small and medium-sized operations and a reevaluation of farm expansion



4. Do you think the current education system does enough to encourage young people to pursue careers in agriculture? Those who answered “no” mentioned:

- improving the status of vocational programs and offering more internships
- not enough courses on agriculture, particularly in middle and high school. For example, a few hours on this topic should be included in geography classes.
- the perception of the profession as a low-status job because it is manual (a general issue in the education system regarding manual trades)
- changing the narrative around starting a farm, equipping young people, and gradually engaging them with their projects rather than scaring them off from the start and discouraging them as early as open house events
- raising awareness about land access issues and actively supporting young farmers to gain access to land. Training centers should be active players in their local areas and become more involved.
- The profession's image in society: agriculture is still viewed as a “second-class” profession—dirty but “easy” because it doesn't necessarily require a high-level degree
- I believe vocational programs (including agricultural ones) aren't sufficiently promoted to young people during career guidance.
- Teachers who don't try to turn us off the agricultural world, but instead encourage us to get started
- Encouragement

Lack of recognition for the sector + a tarnished public image + questioning of the role of agriculture in middle and high schools (lack of awareness) + lack of support for young people starting out in the industry + need for stronger links between training and local realities

5. What conditions would need to be in place for you to seriously consider setting up a farm or working long-term in mountain agriculture?

- Affordable land 75%
- Income security 72.2%
- Greater recognition of the profession 69.4%
- 13.8% are in discussions with the transferor, and 100% of them are their parents.

6. What are the main questions or concerns regarding this transfer?



- Access to land (lease/ownership) 75%
- 50% modernization of the farm