

SUCCESS STORIES

Respite Aid Scheme: giving the farmers a break to keep the farms running.

The respite aid scheme was launched in 2017 on a French scale by the French agricultural social security fund MSA in collaboration with the Agricultural Replacement Service. The scheme enables farmers in a situation of professional exhaustion to be relieved by the intervention of a replacement agent on their farm to ensure the continuation of the farm.



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| Name of the interviewed | Respite Aid scheme coordinated by MSA (French Agriculture Social Security) and Service de Remplacement (Farmers replacement service), name of the Interviewee: Karim CHEURFA-MOLINIER from Service de Remplacement France. |
| Type of farming activity | The respite aid scheme to replace farmers when they need a break. |
| Mental health issue and affecting factors | Professional exhaustion, mental health issues. |

What is your story?

The Respite Aid Scheme for Farmers is an initiative that was established as a replacement service to support the continuation of farm activities and provide relief for farmers facing professional exhaustion and burnout. The scheme was initially tested by the French Ministry of Agriculture in 2017, with an initial budget of 4 million euros for the first year. The funds were allocated to the MSA (French Agriculture sector Social Security), which played a key role in administering the aid.

The primary objective of the Respite Aid Scheme was to alleviate the pressure on farmers, particularly animal breeders who needed to work on their farms on a daily basis. Under the scheme, a social assistant will visit the farm and provide a week of respite aid to the farmer in need. In 2018 and 2019, the aid was reduced, and the responsibility for financing the scheme was transferred to the MSA and their local social funds. The local MSA funds were given autonomy in determining the eligibility criteria, duration of aid, and the remaining cost to be paid by the farmer.

The Respite Aid Scheme represents 1% of the replacement motives of the Service de Remplacement, which amounts to 50,000 hours of work or 6,250 days. In 2022, approximately 1,800 farmers participated in the scheme. However, the initiative faces certain limitations, mainly due to the budget constraints of local MSA funds and their social programs. This can lead to restrictive conditions or a high amount of money remaining to be paid by the farmers, discouraging them from applying for this aid.

Moreover, there are additional barriers such as strained relationships between farmers and the MSA, for example, due to unpaid cotisations, as well as the tendency for farmers to keep their mental health struggles private.

The MSA and Service de Remplacement aim to utilize the Respite Aid Scheme as a last resort and instead invest in structural vacations and breaks for farmers to achieve a better work-life balance and a more sustainable profession. Indeed work-life balance is well-applied across the agri-food sector, except for the farmers themselves. The Respite Aid Scheme is considered a complementary measure that should be accompanied by additional support from social assistants and psychologists. It is noteworthy that 90% of the demands received, even from non-members of the replacement service, are met. The Service the Remplacement gives priority to these demands alongside other emergencies such as illnesses or accidents, with the aim of maintaining the farms while their owners are in distress.

The agents who are sent on Respite Schemes are experienced individuals who are prepared to handle difficult situations on the farms they are assigned to. The objective is to engage voluntary agents for these farm visits. However, the Replacement Service faces challenges in finding suitable candidates due to the lack of interest in agricultural vocations, which impact on hiring opportunities.

The financing of the Respite Aid Scheme is dependent on the MSA, and is primarily financed by farmers themselves. Although some actors in the agri-food chain have financially supported local initiatives for annual leave for farmers, they have not yet extended their support to the Respite Aid Scheme. As of now, there has not been any discussions regarding the establishment of tools like an endowment fund by actors in the agriculture sector, other than farmers, to support the scheme.

Handling the situation

The Respite Aid Scheme for Farmers aims to address the struggles faced by farmers in several ways. Firstly, it recognizes the professional exhaustion and the burnout experienced by farmers and provides them with a much-needed break by giving access to a number of days of respite aid. This temporary relief allows farmers to recharge and alleviate the immense pressure they face on a daily basis, particularly animal breeders who require constant attention to their farm activities.

Moreover, the scheme acknowledges the importance of mental health for farmers, who often face unique challenges in this regard. The Respite Aid Scheme addresses the practical aspect of farm management. By sending experienced replacement agents to intervene on farms during the respite period, the initiative ensures that the productivity and functionality of the farm are maintained. This not only allows the farmer to take a much-needed break but also ensures the smooth continuation of farm activities in their absence.

Furthermore, the scheme endeavors to create a more balanced work-life balance for farmers. While the Respite Aid Scheme is intended to be used as a last resort, the overarching goal of its leading organizations is to invest in structural vacations and breaks for farmers. By promoting a better work-life balance, these organizations acknowledge the importance of overall well-being for the social sustainability of the agricultural profession.

However, it is worth noting that the initiative does face certain limitations and challenges. The financial constraints of local MSA funds and the potential burden of costs on farmers can create obstacles for those seeking respite aid. Additionally, strained relationships between farmers and the MSA, along with the reluctance of some farmers to openly discuss their mental health struggles, can further impede the effectiveness of the initiative.

In conclusion, while the Respite Aid Scheme for Farmers may have its limitations, it represents a recognition of the struggles faced by farmers and aims to provide tangible support. By offering respite aid, access to professionals, and advocating for a better work-life balance, the initiative strives to address the multifaceted challenges encountered by farmers in their profession.

Conclusion and tips

Tips to other farmers

“When you’re feeling weary, with your head in the sand,
Pressing on the brake is no sin, it’s time to take a stand!
Don’t hesitate to reach out for helping hands,
In the face of exhaustion, let support expand!
Your well-being matters, embrace assistance, together we’ll withstand it!”

In conclusion, the Respite Aid Scheme for Farmers is a commendable initiative that takes a comprehensive approach to addressing the realities of farming activity and the struggles faced by farmers. It recognizes the immense pressure and professional exhaustion experienced by farmers, offering them a much-needed respite through temporary aid. Additionally, the scheme’s leaders focus on promoting a better work-life balance aside of the respite demonstrates a commitment to the overall well-being and sustainability of the profession.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the funding scheme associated with the initiative. The reliance on local MSA funds and their social programs poses challenges in terms of restrictive conditions and potential financial burdens for farmers. This can prevent some individuals from accessing the aid they require. Strained relationships between farmers and the MSA, along with the hesitance to openly address mental health struggles, further complicate the implementation of the scheme.

To ensure the long-term success and accessibility of the Respite Aid Scheme, it is vital to address the funding issue as a major priority. Exploring alternative funding mechanisms, such as involvement from actors in the agri-food chain or the establishment of an endowment fund, could alleviate the financial constraints and provide more sustainable support. By overcoming these limitations, the initiative can reach a broader range of farmers and effectively alleviate the burdens they face.

Overall, the Respite Aid Scheme for Farmers deserves recognition for its comprehensive approach and understanding of the challenges inherent in farming. It serves as an important step toward supporting farmers’ well-being and acknowledging the demanding nature of their profession. By addressing the funding limitations and ensuring accessibility, the initiative can truly make a lasting impact on the lives of farmers and contribute to a healthier and more sustainable agricultural sector as a first aid tool.

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