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European Organisation of Agricultural, Rural and Forestry Contractors

Confédération Européenne des Entrepreneurs de Travaux Techniques Agricoles, Ruraux et Forestiers

Europäischer Zentralverband der land- und forstwirtschaftlichen Lohnunternehmer und ländlichen Dienstleistungsunternehmen

## **Addressing the European Fuel Crisis: The Role of Agricultural Contractors in Delivering Energy-Efficient Farming**

### **1. Context: An Energy Crisis with Direct Implications for Agriculture**

The recent European Commission communication on the energy crisis highlights the EU's continued vulnerability to fossil fuel imports and the urgent need to accelerate the transition towards a more resilient and efficient energy system. With over half of Europe's energy consumption still dependent on imported fossil fuels, rising prices are already impacting key sectors, including agriculture.

The Commission rightly identifies agriculture as one of the sectors under pressure from rising fuel costs, particularly through increased diesel prices affecting transport, logistics, and farming operations. The accompanying annexes outline useful measures, including support for biogas, energy efficiency, and cleaner technologies in farming.

CEETAR welcomes these measures. CEETAR also welcomes the recognition that heavy-duty agricultural machinery requires workable short-term fuel solutions, including improved access to sustainable biofuels for existing combustion engines. While electrification will play a role in the longer-term transition, it is not yet a practical short-term solution for many high-power agricultural and forestry operations. At the same time, there is an opportunity to complement this framework with more practical, field-level solutions that can be deployed immediately, particularly those delivered by agricultural contractors.

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### **2. The Missing Link: Practical Efficiency Measures in Farming**

While the Commission focuses on energy systems, electrification, and clean technologies, there is scope to further strengthen the focus on immediate, low-cost efficiency gains in agricultural inputs, particularly fertilisers.

Fertiliser production is highly energy-intensive, relying heavily on natural gas. As such, improving fertiliser efficiency is not only an agricultural issue—it is a direct energy policy lever.

CEETAR has previously demonstrated that a 10% improvement in fertiliser efficiency across the EU is both realistic and achievable, using existing technologies and best practices. This alone would significantly reduce Europe's dependency on imported gas.

As highlighted in CEETAR's earlier position, precision application technologies already available through contractors can reduce fertiliser use by 5–10%, with further gains of 10–15% in treated area efficiency through GPS-enabled systems.

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### **3. Concrete Measures to Improve Energy Efficiency in Agriculture**

Building on both the Commission's framework and industry expertise, CEETTAR proposes the following practical measures:

#### **Fertiliser and Input Efficiency**

- Deployment of precision fertiliser application technologies (variable rate spreading, GPS guidance)
- Use of contractor-provided machinery to optimise fertiliser and slurry application
- Wider adoption of Recovered Nitrogen from Manure (RENURE) solutions
- Optimisation of application timing and dosage based on soil and crop needs

#### **Fuel Efficiency in Field Operations**

- Use of high-efficiency machinery operated by trained contractors
- Reduction of overlapping passes through precision guidance systems
- Improved logistics and field planning to reduce fuel consumption
- Adoption of best practices in machinery operation and maintenance

#### **System Efficiency and Resource Optimisation**

- Increased use of shared machinery via contractors to maximise utilisation rates
- Improved data-driven farm management practices
- Integration of energy-efficient technologies already available on the market

These measures are immediately deployable, require no major technological breakthroughs, and deliver both economic and environmental benefits.

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### **4. The Strategic Role of Agricultural Contractors**

These measures demonstrate a broader point: agricultural contractors play a central role in delivering energy efficiency in European farming. By providing access to advanced machinery and precision technologies, contractors enable farmers to benefit from the latest innovations without requiring significant individual investment. This is particularly important for small and medium-sized farms, which may otherwise face barriers to adopting such technologies. Contractors also contribute to the efficient use of inputs such as fuel, fertilisers, and seeds by ensuring that operations are carried out with a high level of technical expertise and optimisation. Their ability to operate across multiple farms allows best practices to be implemented at scale, accelerating the uptake of efficient methods throughout the sector. In this way, contractors are not only service providers but also key enablers of both economic and environmental efficiency in agriculture.

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### **5. Policy Recommendations, Urgency and Inclusion of Contractors**

To unlock the full potential of efficiency gains in agriculture, policy frameworks should actively support the role of contractors as key delivery partners. Targeted incentives under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) can accelerate the uptake of precision farming

techniques and contractor-based services, including through their integration into Eco-Schemes and CAP Strategic Plans, as well as support for investment in efficient machinery and digital tools.

This approach is particularly important in the current context, where rising fuel and fertiliser costs are placing increasing pressure on farm profitability and, over time, may impact production levels. Strengthening energy and input efficiency in agriculture is therefore not only an economic necessity but also a matter of food security and resilience.

Recognising contractors as central actors within the agricultural system would ensure that policy measures reflect how modern farming operates in practice. Their technical expertise and ability to deliver solutions at scale make them essential partners in designing and implementing measures that can achieve immediate and lasting impact. Rather than focusing primarily on compensating higher input costs, policy should prioritise measures that structurally reduce energy demand and improve resource efficiency across the sector.

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## **6. Best Practice: The Irish Example**

Ireland provides a strong example of how contractors can be more effectively integrated into policy frameworks.

The government has established a dedicated Farm Contractors Working Group, formally recognising contractors as skilled professionals within the agricultural sector and creating a structured platform for dialogue, policy development, and targeted support. This includes consideration of financial and structural measures, skills development, and the inclusion of contractors in modernisation schemes.

In parallel, Ireland is introducing targeted fuel support for contractors, including a lump-sum payment linked to fuel usage (estimated at up to €0.20 per litre), aligned with support already available to farmers. This ensures that contractors—who play a critical role in agricultural operations—are appropriately supported in responding to rising energy costs.

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## **9. Conclusion**

The European Commission has taken an important step in responding to the energy crisis. However, to fully realise the potential for reducing energy demand, more concrete, agriculture-specific measures can complement this approach.

Agricultural contractors are uniquely positioned to deliver these solutions—quickly, efficiently, and at scale.

By supporting contractor-led efficiency measures, particularly in fertiliser use and fuel consumption, the EU can strengthen food security and improve the sustainability and competitiveness of European agriculture.

CEETAR stands ready to contribute to this effort and calls for a stronger recognition of contractors' role in delivering Europe's energy and agricultural transition.

### **About CEETAR:**

The European Confederation of Agricultural, Rural and Forestry Contractors, established in 1961, represents about 150,000 companies and nearly 600,000 workers. It aims to represent the interests of land-based contractors in Europe. In 2014, the European Network of Forestry Entrepreneurs decided to merge with CEETAR, resulting in a stronger and more representative single organisation representing land-based contractors at EU level.

CEETAR aims to be a proactive force to benefit the contractors and the rural economy at European level. Its objective is to:

- Represent the national federations and defend their professional interests in relation to the institutions of the EU. This way, CEETAR is recognised as representative organisation for contractors towards the European Institutions,
- Represent the national federations and defend their professional interests towards other private organisations, which are active at European level and beyond. CEETAR maintains constructive relations with COPA-COGECA (farmers), CEMA (agricultural machinery industry), EFFAT (workers)...
- Help organisations in the new Member States to fulfil their national objectives as rapidly as possible and under the best conditions through the expertise transfer developed by the CAP 50 years ago.