

European herders march on Brussels to voice their demands



Already in 2025, herders in several countries in Europe started preparing for a major policy-lobbying event aimed at the European Parliament and the European Commission. On 25 January 2026, German herders had a shepherd's crook blessed at a church service during the *Grüne Woche* (Green Week Agricultural Fair) in Berlin. This crook has been travelling across Brandenburg and several other German States – passed from one herder to another – on its way to Brussels. It serves as a physical link between numerous events in Germany as points in the *Hirtenzug* (Herders' March).

Dutch herders have also taken part in the annual Wool March during the IYRP2026. This started on Texel on 22 August and ended on 28 September in Tilburg. Along the way, more than 25 Dutch shepherds were interviewed and their herding of sheep in heath, urban and dune landscapes was recorded. Members of the public also joined the March and were encouraged to learn about and advocate for herding, wool and heritage sheep breeds.

On 28 September at the border to Belgium, the German shepherd's crook was handed over to the Belgian herders Toon and Johan Schouteden, who are walking a flock of around 300 sheep from there to Brussels, in the final leg of the European Herders' March. They have been joined by Loupa Pius, a pastoralist from Karamoja, Uganda, bringing an East African perspective to the March and highlighting the shared challenges and experiences of pastoralists across different regions of the world. Also in Belgium, members of the public are invited to meet the herders, walk with the flock and learn more about the role of pastoralism in managing rangelands and open landscapes, supporting biodiversity and contributing to resilient food systems.

On 12 October in the evening, the initiative Wool March presents Walter Aigner's film "Wool, Man, Sheep" at the Cinéma Aventure in Brussels.

On 13 October, in the Bois de la Cambre (city park) in Brussels, herders from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands will meet with European policymakers. In the park will also be booths on various topics related to grazing animals, pastoralists, rangelands and the future agricultural policy in the European Union.

Several organisations, including Veterinarians Without Borders Belgium (<https://vsf-belgium.org>), Association for the Support of German Sheep Husbandry (www.wir-lieben-schafe.com/) and Wool March (www.woolmarch.com), are supporting Belgian, German and Dutch herders in organising the Brussels event on 13 October. The German herders will present their declaration of demands regarding EU policy. Wool March will present a declaration on shepherding drawn from the discussions with Dutch shepherds.

In the city park, welcoming remarks will be made by, among others, Khalid Zianwird, Deputy Mayor of the City of Brussels, and Francesca Pasetti, Co-Chair of the European Regional

Support Group for the IYRP2026. Then there will be a panel discussion with representatives from the European Parliament and the European Commission.

In the evening, Veterinarians Without Borders Belgium will hold its annual symposium – open to all – in Chalet Robinson, also in the city park.

But the German herders don't stop there. After the events in Brussels, the shepherd's crook will be taken to the traditional Lukas Market in Mayen in the State of Rhineland-Palatinate, and then the German Herders' March will continue through the State of Hesse. It will end at a major agricultural trade show (*EuroTier*) in mid-November in Hanover, Lower Saxony.

Organised in the context of the IYRP2026, the European Herders' March connects pastoralists across borders and draws attention to the importance of recognising their knowledge, rights and role in the sustainable management of rangelands. The March has also managed to bring together numerous organisations in agriculture and environmental protection under the banner of the IYRP – a feat in itself, as there are often conflicts between these sectors.

The herders are looking beyond 2026, when the IYRP will be over but the herders' concerns and the threats to their pasturelands will continue. Funding for agriculture in Europe has become scarce, and there is strong competition for support under the European agricultural policy now being developed. The herders seek a solid plan for the future of pastoralism in Europe.

See also films about the European Herders' March under "Rangeland Voices" (<https://iyrp.info/europe>).

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