

Partner Search for Expanding Investment Ecosystems call (CONNECT): European Food Innovation and Sustainability Network

Summary

Profile type	Company's country	POD reference
Research & Development Request	Spain	RDRES20251013003
Profile status	Type of partnership	Targeted countries
PUBLISHED	Research and development cooperation agreement	• World
Contact Person	Term of validity	Last update
Marcin MERCHEL	13 Oct 2025 13 Oct 2026	13 Oct 2025

General Information

Short summary

A Catalan Food Innovation Cluster supporting food sector SMEs and ecosystem growth, will coordinate a project aiming to build a resilient, investor-oriented ecosystem that helps EU food SMEs access finance, markets, and sustainable growth opportunities. They are seeking: clusters, accelerators, investors, fintechs, and research institutions to support mentoring, policy co-creation, and ecosystem development. The proposal will be submitted under Horizon Europe HORIZON-EIE-2026-01-CONNECT-02.

Full description

The European food sector faces multiple, interconnected challenges, including climate change, sustainability pressures, evolving consumer preferences, complex regulations, geopolitical tensions, logistics inefficiencies, food waste, and slow adoption of new technologies. These factors weaken competitiveness and threaten food security, particularly in emerging innovation regions where collaboration between local stakeholders and international networks is limited, restricting access to finance, markets, and scaling opportunities. Even in mature innovation ecosystems, gaps in talent, skills, and commercialization capacity continue to slow innovation.

The project aims to strengthen Europe's food innovation landscape through a multi-faceted approach. It will develop an EU-wide mentor pool connecting organizations with expertise in regulatory compliance, digital adoption,

sustainable food innovation, and commercialization of research. Cross-regional exchange programs will facilitate placements and study visits between mature and emerging innovation regions, promoting mutual learning. A virtual mentorship platform will provide structured guidance, thematic workshops, group problem-solving, and peer-to-peer learning circles for SMEs and spin-offs facing operational or regulatory challenges. Best practice showcases will highlight successful strategies in overcoming funding, regulatory, and operational obstacles, creating replicable models. Regional innovation ambassadors will act as local liaisons, linking EU networks with regional ecosystems to ensure sustained impact. Through these activities, the project will enhance collaboration, accelerate scaling of innovative solutions, and reinforce Europe's competitiveness, food security, and sustainability.

The programme:

The project will be submitted under Horizon Europe – HORIZON-EIE-2026-01-CONNECT-02, which supports projects that connect ecosystems, enhance innovation capacities, and foster cross-regional collaboration. The programme provides EU co-funding for initiatives that strengthen SME competitiveness, promote knowledge transfer, and scale innovative solutions across Europe.

The partnership:

The consortium currently includes:

- Cluster Foodservice Catalunya (Spain) – innovation cluster and SME network (Lead partner).
- Department of Trade and Finance, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague – academic expertise in finance and innovation.
- Smart Agrifood Hub (Poland) – emerging region cluster for agri-food innovation.
- Cross-Border Cooperation Agency "Euroregion Lower Danube" – regional development and cross-border collaboration.

The project seeks additional partners such as innovation clusters, accelerators, investors, fintechs, and research institutions with expertise in food innovation, sustainability, digital solutions, and market scaling. Partners should contribute mentoring, policy co-creation, SME support, or ecosystem development and can be based anywhere in the EU.

Timescales:

- Official call deadline: 20 January 2026, 17:00 (CET)
- Deadline for Expression of Interest (EoI): 12 November 2025
- Anticipated project duration: 24 months

Advantages and innovations

The project offers significant advantages and innovation by addressing systemic challenges in the European food sector, including climate change, sustainability pressures, regulatory complexity, shifting consumer demands, logistics inefficiencies, and limited adoption of new technologies. By connecting organizations across the EU, the project fosters collaborative innovation, knowledge exchange, and capacity building, ensuring that promising solutions in sustainable food production, digital adoption, and commercialization are scaled efficiently. Its innovative approach integrates mentorship, peer learning, cross-regional exchanges, and digital platforms, providing structured support that is rarely available at a European scale.

Technical specification or expertise sought

The project seeks organizations with expertise in regulatory compliance, commercialization of research, digital transformation, and sustainable food innovation. Partners capable of providing practical guidance on scaling, market access, and operational efficiency will be central to achieving project goals. Experience in mentorship, ecosystem facilitation, and technology adoption is essential to support SMEs and spin-offs across diverse regions.

Stage of development

Sustainable Development goals

- **Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production**
- **Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure**
- **Goal 2: Zero Hunger**
- **Goal 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal**

IPR Status

IPR Notes

Partner Sought

Expected role of the partner

1. Food Sector Organizations (SMEs, Spin-offs, Cooperatives within Associations no individual partners)
 - Bring hands-on operational experience across production, distribution, and commercialization.
 - Provide deep knowledge of scaling businesses, market entry strategies, and adoption of innovative practices.
 - Contribute sector-specific expertise in regulatory compliance, sustainability initiatives, digital transformation, and commercialization of research-driven innovations.
 - Actively participate in mentorship, peer-to-peer learning, and cross-regional exchange programs to share best practices and lessons learned.

2. Research Institutions and Universities with Established Innovation Pipelines

- Offer technical expertise and access to applied research that can be translated into market-ready solutions.
- Maintain a portfolio of spin-offs and start-ups capable of contributing to and benefiting from EU-wide collaboration.
- Support structured mentorship, thematic workshops, and cross-regional knowledge exchange.
- Facilitate connections between emerging talent, research outputs, and SMEs seeking to adopt innovative solutions.

3. Industry Clusters and Associations within the FOOD sector

- Serve as ecosystem facilitators, linking SMEs, spin-offs, research institutions, and investors.
- Coordinate mentorship programs, cross-regional exchange activities, and peer learning circles.
- Identify high-potential organizations in less mature innovation regions and connect them to EU-level networks.
- Help disseminate best practices, success stories, and replicable models to wider audiences.

4. Innovation and Investment Networks

- Provide guidance on access to finance, venture capital, grants, and scaling strategies.
- Support SMEs and spin-offs in navigating funding landscapes, market entry, and growth planning.
- Participate in mentorship initiatives, connecting capital and expertise to innovative ideas.
- Facilitate collaborations that link investors, innovators, and ecosystem enablers to accelerate scaling.

5. Technology and Digital Solution Providers

- Deliver tools and platforms for virtual mentorship, structured learning, and peer-to-peer collaboration.
- Support SMEs in adopting technologies for logistics optimization, traceability, sustainability monitoring, and operational efficiency.
- Enable integration of innovative solutions across the food value chain to enhance competitiveness and sustainability.
- Contribute to digitalization strategies that underpin mentorship programs, cross-regional exchanges, and knowledge sharing.

Type of partnership

Research and development cooperation agreement

Type and size of the partner

- **SME 50 - 249**
- **R&D Institution**
- **Other**
- **SME 11-49**

Call Details

Framework program

Horizon Europe

Call title and identifier

**Expanding Investment Ecosystems
HORIZON-EIE-2026-01-CONNECT-02**

Submission and evaluation scheme

HORIZON Lump Sum Grant [HORIZON-AG-LS]

Anticipated project budget

Coordinator required

No

Deadline for EoI

30 Nov 2025

Deadline of the call

20 Jan 2026

Project duration in weeks

Web link to the call

<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/HORIZON-EIE-2026-01-CONNECT-02>

Project title and acronym

EFIS-NET

Dissemination

Technology keywords

Market keywords

- **07003002 - Health food**
- **05008002 - Food and feed ingredients**
- **05009001 - Food & feed ingredients**

Targeted countries

Sector groups involved

- **World**