

# Sheep farming in northern Spain is in a critical phase

**Sheep farming in the northern Spanish province of Huesca is slowly dying out. Wim Paas, a PhD candidate in Plant Production Systems, is looking for solutions to that.**

The number of sheep in the region was approximately halved between 2005 and 2019. About 15 per cent of the pastures have been abandoned and are now gradually becoming forested, causing the ‘sheep landscape’ with its typical vegetation and insects to disappear. Schools, shops, and other facilities in the remote villages are also disappearing.

This gradual development could accelerate in the coming years, says Paas in an article in *Ecological Indicators*. Sheep farming is currently not very profitable and not many people are prepared to start farming sheep in the region. The existing farmers keep between 200 and 1000 sheep and sell them for meat, but meat prices are low and expansion is not an option.

Farmers are also struggling with increasingly frequent droughts. The only thing that keeps the sheep farms going is the EU subsidy of about 24 euros per sheep per year.

## GPS

Are there alternatives? One of the options is more intensive farming methods: more sheep per hectare, purchasing animal feed and ensuring

more meat per lamb through a breeding programme. That seems technically feasible, but this scenario is less sustainable and leads to more competition with other meat sectors. Also, it does not fit well with the EU’s Farm to Fork strategy, so it could put the EU subsidies at risk.

The second option is to continue with extensive sheep farming with technological support. This includes GPS trackers and electronic fences to compensate for the lack of shepherds.

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## The EU subsidy of 24 euros per sheep per year is keeping the sheep farms going

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These are extra costs, so the sheep farmers would have to negotiate a better price for their lamb through local supply chains. This technologically extensive system fits better with the Farm to Fork strategy, but also requires a high level of investment. There are no easy solutions, Paas notes. Doing nothing is not an option, so the sheep farmers will have to make choices in the near future. AS

