

# 1 General information

**Seaport:** Port of Antwerp-Bruges

**Country:** Belgium

**Project title:** Agriculture Innovation Fund ('Landbouwinnovatiefonds')

**WPSP theme:** Environmental care

# 2 Introduction

The Agriculture Innovation Fund of Port of Antwerp-Bruges supports farmer-led innovation in Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe, a cross-border landscape where port activity, agriculture, nature and local communities meet. The Fund was created to help farmers in the polders around the port develop practical, sustainable and economically viable solutions to challenges such as biodiversity loss, drought, salinisation, soil degradation and changing climate conditions.

By enabling farmers to test and implement nature-inclusive and climate-resilient practices, the Fund strengthens both environmental protection and the long-term viability of agricultural sector in the port's surrounding region, an important stakeholder group of the Port of Antwerp-Bruges, operating in close proximity to the port area and its industrial activities. It builds on earlier Grenspark initiatives around the Western Marsh Harrier and nature-inclusive farming, and has since generated a portfolio of approved projects focused on biodiversity corridors, circular biomass use, soil health, water management and climate adaptation.

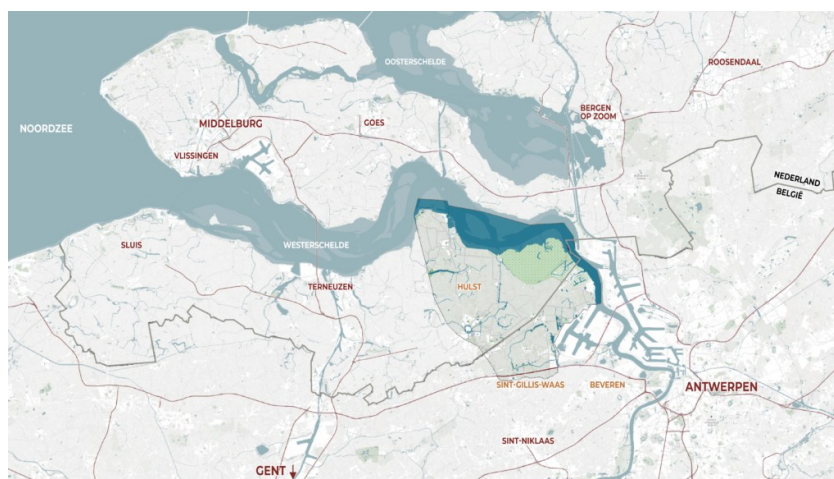


## 3 Description of the project

### 3.1 Broader context: Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe

Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe is a cross-border park on the western bank of the river Scheldt, the gateway to the Port of Antwerp-Bruges, where land and water, nature, agriculture, local communities, tourism, economic development, industry and port activity come together. It encompasses both Belgian and Dutch territory, including parts of Beveren and Sint-Gillis-Waas (BE) and Hulst (NL), with the Verdrongen Land van Saeftinghe (a brackish tidal marsh) and the Hedwige-Prosper nature restoration area forming its ecological core. Around this nature core lie the Scheldt polders, productive farmlands and the transition zone towards the Antwerp port area, creating a distinctive landscape where one of Europe's largest ports coexists with valuable natural habitats and agricultural businesses.

The park is a joint development initiative between eleven key partners, including the Port of Antwerp-Bruges, the local municipalities of Hulst (NL) and Beveren (BE), provincial authorities of East Flanders (BE) and Zeeland (NL), nature organisations such as the Flemish Agency of Nature and Forest and Natuurpunt and others. It was created as a collaborative response to a complex regional context in which nature development, port expansion, agriculture, liveability and recreation had been shaped by different interests. Since 2016, public authorities, nature organisations, farmers, residents, entrepreneurs and the port have worked together to move from fragmentation and opposition towards a shared area agenda, which was formalised as a partnership in het Grenspark in 2021.



The shared ambition is to develop an integrated landscape that delivers ecological, social and economic value by strengthening biodiversity and nature experience; improving liveability; developing local tourism and sustainable recreation such as walking and cycling routes, birdwatching, local food and drink experiences and bed-and-breakfast facilities; and supporting a resilient, sustainable and inclusive agricultural sector. Within this context, the Port of Antwerp-Bruges has established the Agriculture Innovation Fund ('Landbouwinnovatiefonds').

## 3.2 Agriculture Innovation Fund

Within the development of Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe, the Agriculture Innovation Fund in its current form was established in 2024 by the Port of Antwerp and other partners of Grenspark (province Zeeland, the municipality of Hulst and EGTS ('Europese Groepering voor Territoriale Samenwerking' / European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC))). The fund was created to support local farmers to develop innovative and sustainable agricultural practices that respond to the specific challenges of the polder landscape, reduce environmental pressure and strengthen the long-term productivity of the land, while operating in close proximity to the port and industrial areas. This includes measures that contribute to better groundwater and freshwater management, such as improving the water-retention capacity of soils, preventing runoff and pollution, and making farms more resilient to drought, salinisation and extreme rainfall. It also includes agricultural techniques that require fewer pesticides, reduce intensive tillage and soil disturbance, and improve soil structure and soil life.

The ambition is not only to improve ecological and environmental aspects, but to also strengthen the economic resilience of agricultural sector near the port area. It does this by enabling farmers to transition their business models and practices to the local challenges of the area and a changing climate, safeguard the long-term viability of farming in the area, and enhance innovativeness and competitiveness of local farmers. By supporting this type of innovation, the fund helps farmers move towards agro-ecological practices that benefit both biodiversity and the economic viability of their farms. Additionally, through the Fund, the Port of Antwerp-Bruges strives to create a strong support system for the agriculture sector around the port area and to foster good relations with its agricultural stakeholders as well as improve the biodiversity in the region (such as creating foraging area for the Western Marsh Harrier).

A defining feature of the fund is that it is farmer-led. Rather than imposing a fixed set of measures, the fund invites agricultural entrepreneurs to propose solutions that respond to the specific conditions of their land, business model and local landscape. It enables farmers to research and experiment, share knowledge and develop nature-inclusive, sustainable and innovative projects.

This bottom-up innovation approach has so far resulted in several supported projects and concrete outcomes that contribute to the biodiversity and environmental protection of farmlands near the port area (*see next section 'Results'*).

There have been four funding rounds so far — the first in 2019 and 2021. Then in 2024 and the most recent in 2025 — inviting farmers in Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe to submit innovation projects. Project applications for a smaller budget are handled by EGTS Linieland, while larger requests are first scored by

an independent jury drawn from six stakeholder organisations (Zeeland, East-Flanders, ILVO, Waterschap Scheldestromen, VLAKWA and the Streekholders platform). The jury's advice is non-binding, as the Port of Antwerp-Bruges board and the municipal executive

of Hulst take the final decision on each grant application, approving or rejecting the subsidies.



## 4 Results

Before the formal establishment of the Agriculture Innovation Fund, Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe had already served as a practical testing ground for nature-inclusive agriculture. A central focus in these earlier efforts was the Western Marsh harrier (NL: 'bruine kiekendief') a protected bird of prey that depends not only on suitable breeding areas, but also on a food-rich agricultural landscape around those nature areas. They showed that farmers could play an active role in biodiversity recovery when ecological measures were made compatible with agricultural practice. In the first calls farmers could experiment further with this techniques while agricultural expert advice was funded by the fund and therefore risks were reduced.

One important line of experimentation focused on harrier-friendly crops and mixed cropping systems. Farmers tested crops such as grass-clover, alfalfa/luzerne, spelt and other protein-rich or structurally diverse crops that attract prey species for the harrier, while also offering value for the farm. One of the projects in the first call consisted of a practical innovation developed by the family Onghena. a seeding machine capable of sowing at two different depths in one pass, making mixed cropping easier to apply in practice. These crops can also provide local protein for cattle, helping reduce dependence on imported protein sources such as soy and creating environmental benefits through more local protein feed cycles.

The specific harrier-friendly crops and mixed cropping systems were split off the Agricultural fund in 2024, because of the scale and specific expertise: 'Dubbel Doel' coordinated by the Agency of Nature and Forest (ANB) supporter farmers from there on. This approach further developed this logic by explicitly combining two objectives:

ecological value and agricultural usefulness. In this project, farmers manage land with crops and strips that support biodiversity, including food availability for the brown harrier, while also improving soil quality and offering longer-term perspectives for agricultural use. According to the Grenspark, fifteen farmers have cultivated more than one hundred hectares in Beveren and Sint-Gillis-Waas with this “double purpose”. Recent ecological monitoring indicates encouraging early results, including increased numbers of butterflies and mice, high numbers of pigeons and finches, and evidence that the parcels have potential as hunting areas for brown harriers.

**Following the formal establishment of the Agriculture Innovation Fund** and the launch of its project calls, the Fund has generated a portfolio of approved farmer-led innovation projects, building on these earlier initiatives within Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe. These are the projects that can be presented as the direct results of the Fund itself. While several are still in implementation, the approved measures already show how the Fund translates the Grenspark’s ambitions into concrete action on farms.

The calls in 2019 and 2021 included and realised varied projects:

- 1) Feasibility study on converting a conventional pig farm into an (organic) dairy goat farm, focusing on feed self-sufficiency and wildlife-friendly forage crops.
- 2) Development of herb-rich grassland and an autonomous protein strategy using crops such as clover-grass, spelt, alfalfa, and triticale–field bean mixtures, including silage trials.
- 3) Cultivation of over 7 hectares of clover-grass on owned land to improve feed quality, combined with ecological nature management and commercial sheep farming.
- 4) Implementation of controlled drainage systems to mitigate drought impacts and improve water management.
- 5) Development of an innovative seeding machine capable of sowing at two different depths in a single pass (as explained more detailed above)

The more recent calls included following subjects:

One supported project, **Randen(w)ijs**, focuses on the ecological and circular management of flower and herb strips in the agricultural landscape. These strips function as ecological corridors between nature areas and other landscape elements, helping pollinators, plants and other species move through and recolonise the agricultural landscape. By mowing the strips without shredding and removing the cuttings, the project strengthens their ecological value while turning the biomass into a useful resource, such as animal feed or input for local composting. The project therefore combines biodiversity gains with practical benefits for farmers and the wider farming community.

Other supported projects focus on improving the soil as the basis for climate-resilient farming. **Boerderijcompostering Vlaanderen** aims to convert local nature-management residues, such as grass cuttings and woody material, into high-quality agricultural local compost. This contributes to higher organic matter and carbon storage in the soil, better

soil structure, improved water retention and infiltration, and a more climate-resilient agricultural system. It also creates a circular link between nature management and farming by turning biomass from landscape management into a productive resource for agriculture.

The **Klimaat-Bodem-Strategie** project helps farmers better understand and improve their soils under climate pressure. Through broad soil analyses and practical field checks, participating farmers examine challenges such as drought, compaction, poor infiltration and salinisation. The aim is to identify targeted soil and water measures that make farmland more resilient to extreme weather, while also sharing knowledge with other farmers in the Grenspark through training and demonstration moments.

The project **Tot onder de bodem** further develops this focus on soil resilience by testing measures that help farmland function more like a sponge: retaining water during wet periods and making it available during dry periods. The measures include reducing soil compaction, increasing organic matter through compost and green manures, and testing techniques and crops that strengthen soil structure and stimulate soil life. The documented expected benefits are both ecological and agricultural: healthier soils, more resilient crops, support for local food production and more sustainable farm management.

Taken together, the supported projects show that the Agriculture Innovation Fund is producing practical environmental results at farm and landscape level: stronger biodiversity corridors, better reuse of biomass, improved soil organic matter, enhanced water retention and infiltration, and more knowledge among farmers about climate-resilient land management. The available documentation mainly describes approved projects and expected or early implementation results; final measured outcomes will depend on project reporting, monitoring and the requirement that supported investments remain demonstrable over time.



## 5 Vision and leadership deployed by the port's management

Port of Antwerp-Bruges has deployed leadership in this project by positioning itself not only as an economic operator, but as a long-term steward of the port's surrounding landscape. Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe lies in a sensitive border region where port activity, agriculture, nature, heritage and local communities are closely intertwined. This has historically been a challenging context: port expansion, nature-compensation projects and land-use changes on the left bank of the Scheldt and in the wider Scheldt area have created pressure on farmers and local communities, including concerns around loss of agricultural land, expropriations and uncertainty about the future of farming. The broader Ommelandverbond was explicitly created after years of social and legal tensions around port development on the left bank of the Scheldt, with a focus on cooperation around liveability, nature, mobility, heritage and agriculture.

In this context, the Agriculture Innovation Fund reflects a deliberate leadership choice by Port of Antwerp-Bruges: to help turn potential conflict into cooperation. Rather than treating agriculture, nature and port development as competing claims on the same space, the Fund creates a practical mechanism through which farmers can become active partners in the transition of the area. This is fully aligned with the Grenspark's original purpose: bringing together stakeholders from agriculture, industry and nature, each with their own goals and interests, and working towards a shared area agenda.

The port's leadership is also visible in its long-term continuity. The current Innovation Fund builds on earlier Grenspark work that started in 2016 with nature-inclusive agriculture and demonstration projects around bird biodiversity. This evolved into earlier farmer-led innovation calls, and later into the current Fund with a stronger focus on water, climate resilience, soil health and agro-ecological farming. This shows that POAB did not launch a one-off initiative, but helped develop a sequence of instruments that gradually deepened the region's transition towards more sustainable agriculture.

A particularly important leadership choice is the decision to empower farmers rather than prescribe solutions from above. The Fund deliberately places the initiative with agricultural entrepreneurs themselves: farmers identify the challenges on their land and propose innovations that fit their own business model, soil conditions and landscape context. The documents describe the Fund as a way to strengthen the innovation capacity and private investment power of farmers, while keeping the scheme practical, clear and low-threshold. This farmer-led model is essential in a region where trust, feasibility and local ownership are crucial.

Finally, POAB's leadership is embedded in governance and resources. The port worked with Province Zeeland, municipality Hulst and EGTS Linieland to establish the Fund, contributed to its financing, and participates in the final decision-making process for project approvals. At the same time, project assessment involves a wider jury and

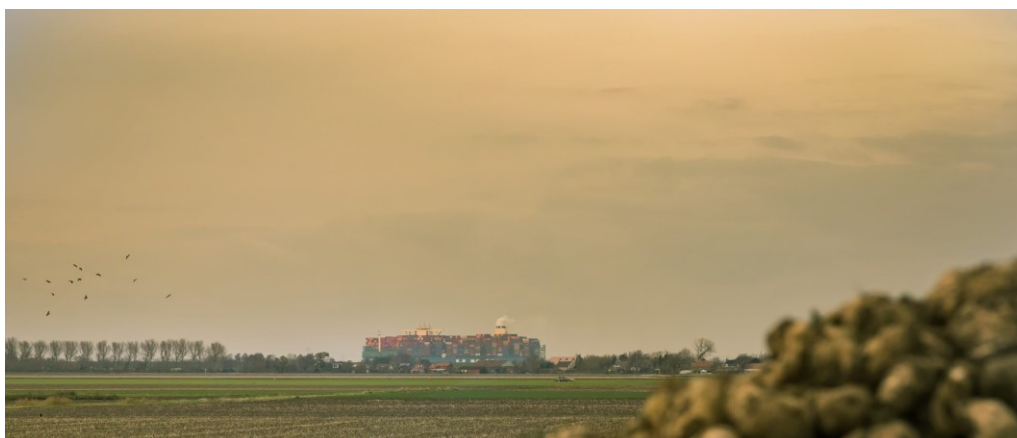
sounding board with expertise from agriculture, water management, regional development and research. This combination of strategic direction, shared governance and farmer empowerment demonstrates how a port authority can take responsibility beyond the quay walls: building trust with local stakeholders, supporting climate adaptation and biodiversity, and contributing to a more resilient relationship between port development and the rural landscape around it.

## 6 Engagement of societal and commercial stakeholders

Stakeholder engagement is embedded in the design, governance and implementation of the Agriculture Innovation Fund. The Fund builds on the Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe approach, which was created to bring together agriculture, port activity, nature and local communities in a shared area agenda. Farmers are not just consulted, they initiate the projects and are supported by the Fund. Rather than imposing top-down measures, the Fund invites farmers to initiate their own innovation projects, ensuring that ecological ambitions are translated into practices that are workable within real farm operations.

The Fund is also governed through a cross-border and multi-stakeholder structure. Port of Antwerp-Bruges works with Province Zeeland, municipality Hulst and EGTS Linieland, while project assessment involves expertise from public authorities, agricultural research, water management, innovation networks and regional stakeholder platforms. This ensures that supported projects are evaluated not only for their environmental value, but also for their feasibility, innovation potential and relevance for the agricultural community.

Engagement continues after project approval. Several supported projects are collaborative by nature, promoting agricultural cooperative management, nature managers and knowledge partners, and include monitoring, demonstration or knowledge-sharing components. In this way, the Fund strengthens trust and cooperation in the port's surrounding landscape, while turning farmers into active partners in biodiversity restoration, climate adaptation and sustainable regional development.



## 7 Contribution to the UN SDGs

The initiative of the Agriculture Innovation Fund undertaken by the Port of Antwerp-Bruges exemplify a strong commitment to sustainability and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Agriculture Innovation Fund contributes meaningfully to several SDGs.

### SDG 15 – Life on Land

*“Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.”*

The Agriculture Innovation Fund supports farming practices that protect biodiversity, strengthen ecological corridors and improve the environmental quality of agricultural land. Projects such as flower and herb strips, nature-inclusive mowing, farm composting and soil improvement measures help support pollinators, birds, soil life and wider ecosystem health, while also addressing land degradation.



### SDG 13 – Climate Action

*“Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.”*

The Fund supports climate adaptation by helping farmers make their land and business operations more resilient to drought, salinisation, extreme rainfall and changing weather patterns. Its focus on soil structure, organic matter, water retention, infiltration and groundwater management directly contributes to climate-resilient farming in the polder landscape.

### SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals

*“Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.”*

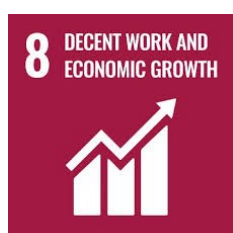
Partnership is central to the Fund’s design and implementation. The Fund contributes to SDG 17 by mobilising financial resources, expertise and institutional capacity to support farmer-led innovation. Under the leadership of Port of Antwerp-Bruges, it lowers the threshold for farmers to access support, exchange knowledge and build capacity around climate-resilient and nature-inclusive agriculture. The project shows how the port and its stakeholders can mobilise cross-border cooperation for sustainable area development.



## SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

*“Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and **foster innovation.**”*

The Fund fosters practical innovation within the agricultural sector in the port’s surrounding region. It supports experimentation, applied research, new techniques and knowledge development, allowing farmers to test innovative solutions for soil, water, biodiversity and climate challenges in real operating conditions.



## SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth

*“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.”*

The Fund supports the long-term viability of farming in a region where agriculture faces pressure from climate change, land-use change and environmental requirements. By helping farmers adapt their practices while maintaining productive and economically workable business models, the project contributes to resilient local livelihoods and sustainable regional economic development.

## SDG 2 – Zero Hunger

*“End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and **promote sustainable agriculture.**”*

The Agriculture Innovation Fund contributes to SDG 2 advancing sustainable and resilient agriculture. By supporting agro-ecological practices, local feed cycles, soil health and climate adaptation, the Fund helps safeguard the long-term productivity and sustainability of the agricultural landscape.



## 8 Relevant information

- [Innovatiefonds voor water en klimaat | Port of Antwerp-Bruges](#)
- [Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe lanceert innovatiesubsidie voor landbouwers | VILT vzw](#)
- [Haven van Antwerpen doet oproep landbouwinnovatiefonds bij polderboeren | VILT vzw](#)
- [PubliekeGronden sessie-6 Van-geslaagd-pilootproject-naar-strategisch-beleid.pdf](#)
- [Landbouwer en roofvogel, onverwachte bondgenoten](#)
- [Met enige trots vertellen we het verhaal van het grenspark](#)
- [Grenspark Groot Saeftinghe | Stichting Het Zeeuwse Landschap](#)

## 9 Contact information



**Yannick Vanhaegenborgh**

*Port Environment Expert*

Port of Antwerp-Bruges

yannick.vanhaegenborgh@portofantwerpbruges.com

+32 494 59 02 76