

# The European Grassland Federation at 50: past, present and future

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## Abstract

In 1963 the European Grassland Federation (EGF) was founded in the UK. The origin and membership over fifty years are described. The changes in grassland research and development are reflected in the subjects of the General Meetings and Symposia. The successful development in more recent years of Working Groups, Master Classes and Workshops is described. The links to the European Union and the future direction of the EGF are explored. The EGF continues to play an important role as a non-political forum for exchanging and communicating the results of grassland science in Europe and in bringing grassland scientists together. Future challenges for the EGF are discussed.

Keywords: grassland research, conferences, publications, education, European Union

## Introduction

In the years following World War II, scientists contacted each other bilaterally at occasional European conferences and also at International Grassland Congresses. To improve contacts, in 1963 the European Grassland Federation (EGF) was officially established at a special Symposium at Hurley, UK, organized by the British Grassland Society. At this inaugural meeting, representatives in attendance from grassland societies and countries in Europe agreed to the formation of the EGF, adopted the constitution and appointed the first Executive Committee charged with organization of the first General Meeting in The Netherlands in 1965 (Powell *et al.*, 1995).

Since that time important changes in the European political scene have taken place, and these have affected the EGF. This article reviews important developments in EGF over 50 years, with particular attention to the years since 2003. The history of the first 40 years was described in full by Prins (2004) and is also available from the EGF website ([www.europeangrassland.org](http://www.europeangrassland.org)).

## EGF organization

The objectives of the EGF were and still are: to facilitate and maintain close contact between European grassland organizations, to promote the interchange of scientific and practical experience between grassland experts, and to initiate symposia and other meetings between European grassland organizations.

As was explained before (Prins, 2004), the EGF has a simple structure with membership open to national or representative grassland organizations in Europe. By 2013 thirty-one countries had become Full Members (Table 1). For those countries without a national or representative organization, individual grassland workers may become Corresponding Members to represent their country. In 2013 there were four corresponding members (Table 1). Membership of the EGF is gratis.

Contact between EGF and grassland specialists throughout Europe is maintained through country representatives who act as intermediaries between their national colleagues and the Federation Secretary. Europe has been divided into seven regions and each region is represented in the Executive Committee which manages the affairs of the Federation.

Table 1. Representation of European countries in seven regions: thirty-one full members and four corresponding members\* as of 2013.

EGF region	Members and corresponding members*
Central Europe	Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Switzerland
Western Europe	Belgium, France, Ireland, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Luxembourg*
Northern Europe	Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Sweden
North-eastern Europe	Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia*
Eastern Europe	Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, Ukraine
South-eastern Europe	Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Macedonia*
Southern Europe	Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Albania*

The EGF has Honorary Life Presidents who help to take care of continuity. Dr W. Davies, the great stimulator and founding father of the EGF, was voted the first Honorary Life President at the inaugural meeting in 1963 and he occupied that position until his death in 1968, playing an active role in the EGF (Powell *et al.*, 1995). Three more founding fathers, namely Prof. 't Hart, Dr. Järvi and Dr. Caputa were elected in 1980 and 1982 (Table 2). Not until 2000 were any further Honorary Life Presidents elected. To make the choice more objective, the Executive Committee decided that candidates should be able to show a set of achievements within EGF (Prins, 2004). Since then, seven more have been elected (Table 2). They are expected to attend meetings of the Executive Committee and to support and advise the Federation Secretary and Organizing Committees.

Table 2. Honorary Life Presidents since 1963.

Name	Country	Year elected	Year of death
Dr. W. Davies	UK	1963	1968
Prof. M.L. 't Hart	The Netherlands	1980	2005
Prof. N.G. Andreev	USSR	1980	1996
Dr. V. Järvi	Finland	1982	1987
Dr. J. Caputa	Switzerland	1982	1992
Dr. J. Frame	UK	2000	2006
Prof. G. Blagoveschensky	Russia	2000	
Prof. L. 't Mannetje	The Netherlands	2002	2008
Prof. R.J. Wilkins	UK	2002	
Prof. J. Nösberger	Switzerland	2004	
Dr. W.H. Prins	The Netherlands	2004	
Prof. J. Parente	Italy	2010	

### Scientific Advisory Board

To assist the Executive Committee with strategy and focus on the right themes, subjects, authors and keynote speakers, a Scientific Advisory Board was established in 2012. The Board consists of independent senior researchers who are well known and actively involved with

grassland research. The Board does not meet, but is consulted by the Federation Secretary on an *ad hoc* basis. Presently the Board comprises some 13 experts.

### **The EGF Secretariat and Fund**

In the early years EGF business was handled by the Secretary of the current Organizing Committee of the General Meeting. Thus the EGF secretariat changed hands every two years. This hampered the contact between member countries and within the Executive Committee. As from 1973, a voluntary continuing Federation Secretary was elected. Through the years this post was filled by Dr. R. Tayler (UK, 1973-1978), Dr. J.W. Minderhoud (The Netherlands, 1978-1985), Dr. W.H. Prins (The Netherlands, 1985-2004) and Dr. W. Kessler (Switzerland, since 2004).

With the growth of EGF, the decision to ensure a high and consistent standard in the level of EGF conferences and proceedings, as well as to promote EGF as European forum of grassland science, the task of the Federation Secretary has become more and more important. These days communication is mostly through e-mail, with general information distributed via the EGF website mentioned above. However, the Secretary has to ensure that important messages and documents are printed and kept for the archives of the Federation.

As country membership is free, secretarial costs of EGF administrative affairs had to be covered by conference budgets. In the early years this often meant that the costs were met by the Secretary's employer. However, in 1982 in Reading, a fund was founded so as to facilitate continuing activities of the EGF. Money became available from the financial budgets of EGF conferences via a levy of 10 Swiss Francs (SFr) per paying participant, as part of the registration fee. From the start of the EGF Fund, the Swiss Grassland Society (AGFF) has handled the fund, for which EGF is grateful.

The EGF Fund is supplemented by the net proceeds of sales of EGF Proceedings in the series 'Grassland Science in Europe', presently carried out through the good office of the Federation Secretary in Zürich.

### **General Meetings and Symposia**

From the start it was decided to use only English for general communication at EGF conferences, both orally and in writing. The EGF can be proud to have opted for this unifying solution and is happy that native English-speaking colleagues are always prepared to assist with 'anglicising' the conference papers. These conferences are General Meetings lasting four days, intended for a wide group of grassland people, and Symposia of three days, for specialist topics. The General Meetings include scientific and social programmes and a Business Meeting. Table 3 lists the General Meetings since 1965. The scientific programmes of the first ten meetings generally concerned the production, quality, forage conservation and economics of native and sown grasslands as affected by climate, species, soil and nutrition. From the 11<sup>th</sup> General Meeting in 1986, the topics reflected the wider implications of grassland use, e.g. energy, sustainability, society, ecology, biodiversity and multi-functional grasslands.

At the first General Meeting in Wageningen some 100 participants were present. Through the years the number has increased and nowadays about 300–400 people are expected to attend the General Meetings. The record was 600 in La Rochelle (2002). Naturally, the majority originate from Europe, but participants from outside are welcomed and there are regular attendants from North America and Japan.

For specialist topics EGF invites member nations to organize symposia. In the early years these were occasional symposia, mostly dealing with conventional grassland farming. They featured mainly agronomic subjects (Hurley, 1963; Aberdeen, 1968; Wageningen, 1980 and 1987; Graz, 1991) or were more focused towards economics (Versailles, 1965) or forage conservation (Brighton, 1979; Braunschweig, 1991).

Table 3. EGF General Meetings, 1963–2013.

1 <sup>st</sup>	Nitrogen and Grassland. Wageningen, The Netherlands. June-July 1965
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Evaluation of grassland production. Versailles, France. May 1967
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Conservation of grassland products. Braunschweig, Germany. June 1969
4 <sup>th</sup>	Comparison between natural and artificial grassland. Lausanne, Switzerland. June 1971
5 <sup>th</sup>	Quality of herbage. Uppsala, Sweden. June 1973
6 <sup>th</sup>	Pasture and forage production in seasonally arid climates. Madrid, Spain. April 1975
7 <sup>th</sup>	Constraints to grass growth and grassland output. Gent, Belgium. June 1978
8 <sup>th</sup>	Forage production under marginal conditions. Zagreb, Yugoslavia. June 1980
9 <sup>th</sup>	Efficient grassland farming. Reading, UK. September 1982
10 <sup>th</sup>	Impact of climate on grass production and quality. Ås, Norway. June 1984
11 <sup>th</sup>	Grassland – facing the energy crisis. Setubal, Portugal. May 1986
12 <sup>th</sup>	Grassland and animal production, now and in the future. Dublin, Ireland. July 1988
13 <sup>th</sup>	Soil–grassland–animal relationships. Banská Bystrica, Czechoslovakia. June 1990
14 <sup>th</sup>	Sustainable production from grassland. Lahti, Finland. June 1992
15 <sup>th</sup>	Grassland and society. Wageningen, The Netherlands. June 1994
16 <sup>th</sup>	Grassland and land use systems. Grado, Italy. September 1996. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 1</i>
17 <sup>th</sup>	Ecological aspects of grassland management. Debrecen, Hungary. May 1998. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 3</i>
18 <sup>th</sup>	Grassland farming: balancing environmental and economic demands. Aalborg, Denmark. May 2000. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 5</i>
19 <sup>th</sup>	Multi-function grasslands: quality forages, animal products and landscapes. La Rochelle, France. May 2002. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 7</i>
20 <sup>th</sup>	Land use systems in grassland dominated regions. Luzern, Switzerland. June 2004. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 9</i>
21 <sup>st</sup>	Sustainable grassland productivity. Badajoz, Spain. April 2006. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 11</i>
22 <sup>nd</sup>	Biodiversity and animal feed; future challenges for grassland production. Uppsala, Sweden. June 2008. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 13</i>
23 <sup>rd</sup>	Grassland in a changing world. Kiel, Germany. August-September 2010. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 15</i>
24 <sup>th</sup>	Grassland – a European resource? Lublin, Poland. June 2012. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 17</i>

From 1997 onwards, EGF Symposia have been organized regularly in alternate years between General Meetings. Table 4 shows that, since then, less attention has been paid to conventional grassland production, with precedence given to subjects such as grassland biodiversity (Poland, 1997; Estonia, 2005), grassland and woody plants (Greece, 1999), organic grassland farming (Germany, 2001), effects on environment and economy (Bulgaria, 2003; Belgium, 2007; Austria, 2011; Iceland, 2013) and alternative functions (Czech Republic, 2009).

Generally about 150-200 people are expected to attend the symposia, and the record was 280 at the Brighton, UK symposium (1979). Many symposia are also attended by participants from outside Europe.

Table 4. EGF Symposia, 1963–2013.

Symposia	
1 <sup>st</sup>	The agronomic evaluation of grassland. Hurley, UK. September 1963
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Economic problems relating to the production of forages. Versailles, France. March 1965
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Hill land productivity. Aberdeen, UK. June–July 1968
4 <sup>th</sup>	Forage conservation in the '80s. Brighton, UK. November 1979
5 <sup>th</sup>	The role of nitrogen in intensive grassland production. Wageningen, The Netherlands. August 1980
6 <sup>th</sup>	Animal manures on grassland and fodder crops: fertilizer or waste? Wageningen, The Netherlands. August–September 1987
7 <sup>th</sup>	Forage conservation towards 2000. Braunschweig, Germany. January 1991
8 <sup>th</sup>	Grassland renovation and weed control in Europe. Graz, Austria. September 1991
9 <sup>th</sup>	Management for grassland biodiversity. Lomza, Poland. May 1997. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 2</i>
10 <sup>th</sup>	Grasslands and woody plants in Europe. Thessaloniki, Greece. May 1999. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 4</i>
11 <sup>th</sup>	Organic grassland farming. Witzenhausen, Germany. July 2001. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 6</i>
12 <sup>th</sup>	Optimal forage systems for animal production and the environment. Pleven, Bulgaria. May 2003. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 8</i>
13 <sup>th</sup>	Integrating biodiversity and efficient grassland farming, Tartu, Estonia. August 2005. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 10</i>
14 <sup>th</sup>	Permanent and temporary grassland: plant, environment, economy. Gent, Belgium. September 2007. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 12</i>
15 <sup>th</sup>	Alternative functions of grassland. Brno, Czech Republic. September 2009. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 14</i>
16 <sup>th</sup>	Grassland farming and land management systems in mountainous regions. Gumpenstein, Austria. August 2011. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 16</i>
17 <sup>th</sup>	The role of grasslands in a green future – threats and perspectives in less favoured areas, Iceland. June 2013. <i>Grassland Science in Europe, Volume 18</i>

### Events for young scientists, special workshops and project meetings

Since 2002, EGF General Meetings regularly include special offers, such as seminars or master classes, for scientists younger than 35 years, active in research, resident of an EGF country, with an accepted contribution for the conference and thus eligible for a reduced registration fee.

Moreover special workshops organized outside the scientific programmes of EGF conferences provide the opportunity to discuss subjects between researchers. Sometimes policy makers from the EU have participated in these workshops. Examples are the recent workshops held in Poland (2012) on: i) Grassland Production in Europe, about the information needs of Eurostat as well as the MultiSward Book Project, and on ii) EGF Resolutions on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Reform of 12 October 2011.

The annual EGF conferences are also on offer, and have been used intensively for years, for project management and project team meetings of European research projects of various programmes (Interreg, COST, EU Seventh Framework Programme for Research FP7, EU Marie Curie Actions *etc.*).



These additional events connected to EGF conferences have proved to be very useful for the attendants, not only for technical reasons, but also for social reasons by extending and strengthening their networks.

### **From Conference Proceedings to the series Grassland Science in Europe**

The Proceedings of General Meetings and Symposia have all appeared in print. At first each Organizing Committee took care of its own proceedings and was thus influenced by local editing and printing procedures. In the 1990s it was decided to opt for more standardization. All papers were read and checked by at least two referees and native English-speaking colleagues started to help with 'anglicising' the manuscripts. The final standardization took place with the proceedings appearing as consecutive volumes in the series 'Grassland Science in Europe' for both General Meetings (Table 3) and Symposia (Table 4). For 2014 it is already Volume 19 in this series. Discussions are taking place as to whether or not EGF should continue to produce paper copies of the Proceedings. These have been available on compact disc and on the EGF website since 2004.

As mentioned above, EGF welcomes participants from outside Europe to attend the conferences. However, papers from outside are only accepted if at least one author is from Europe and the work is relevant to Europe.

### **Grass and Forage Science, the official journal of EGF**

In 1996 the British Grassland Society (BGS) and EGF joined hands in the publication of *Grass and Forage Science*. This cooperation, with the financial responsibility held by BGS, has contributed to the journal becoming much more international in its scope and focus. In the 1990s, papers submitted to *Grass and Forage Science* were predominantly from English-speaking countries, with very few from elsewhere in Europe. By 2013, around one-third of papers published in *Grass and Forage Science* were from authors based in mainland Europe. Many European countries are also now represented in the journal's Advisory Editors and Associate Editors. The journal has also increased its presence and attractiveness to authors and readers in other grassland areas of the world, notably China and Latin America.

Publication of the review paper on international grazing terminology in March 2011 was an important milestone in the journal's increasingly international appeal. Other important review papers, including some that have been adapted from plenary papers presented at recent EGF General Meetings and Symposia, have also contributed to the journal receiving increased citation metrics and downloads from the journal website. The EGF is grateful to BGS for taking care of the management of *Grass and Forage Science*.

### **Working Groups**

In the early years EGF had already set up selected committees on specialist topics like 'Methods of Forage Production Experiments' or 'Nomenclature'.

Since 2002 EGF has acted as an umbrella for Working Groups of scientists from different European countries. These groups are welcome to organize their own meetings at EGF conferences and report at each EGF General Meeting. Recently they have started to report also on the EGF website. There are four active groups and one group has finished its work. The groups are listed below:

- Grassland re-sowing and grass-arable rotations (2002-)
- Dairy farming systems (2004-)
- Analytical methods for measuring fatty acids in forage (2006-2010)
- Grazing (2008-)

- Semi-natural grasslands (2011-).

More details can be found at the EGF website. The modern EGF conference provides a good forum for the encouragement of these and other multi-national and multi-disciplinary projects and for reporting their progress. This contrasts with the early days of EGF, when most papers reported the results of work carried out in one institute in one country and there were no working groups.

### **European Union (EU)**

The EGF is the only European-wide non-political body that organizes regular meetings to discuss scientific and socioeconomic issues related to European grassland science, management and farming in the broadest sense. The Federation realized that it was in a position to provide expert information required for the evolution of EU policies, whilst the decisions of the EU would affect the adoption of technologies being developed by EGF scientists.

Efforts have been made over 20 years to increase contact between EGF and the EU. All General Meetings since 2002 have had plenary papers concerning the effects of EU policies on grassland. EU-officials came to EGF conferences and notably in 2008 the session on 'Grasslands – Challenge for the Future' included an address by the EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Exchanges between officials of EGF and the EU have occurred since 1997, but it was not until 2011 that any continuing relationships developed. It was agreed with EU officials that workshop sessions would be held at the General Meeting in Poland in 2012 with EU participation and that the Federation would supply input to the debate on evolving EU policies for grassland. A Working Group met in Lublin and produced a series of resolutions that were adopted at the Business Meeting and submitted to the EU in July 2012.

Following this, the EGF was asked to provide advice to Eurostat on grassland. Prof. A. Peeters led a Working Group that submitted to Eurostat late in 2013 a paper entitled 'Grassland Term Definitions and Classifications Adapted to the Diversity of European Grassland-Based Systems'. In another significant development in October 2012, the EU invited EGF to nominate a representative on the Steering Board for the European Innovation Partnership on Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI). After that, the Federation Secretary and Prof. A. Peeters were decisively involved in the EU's development of the Strategic Implementation Plan for EIP-AGRI.

It is too early to identify policy decisions that have arisen directly from inputs from EGF, but contacts are now well established and should enable more rapid and effective use of findings from our scientists in the evolution of EU policies.

In addition to these contacts at the policy level, EGF plays an important part in the execution and reporting of multi-national research programmes funded by the EU. The personal relationships between scientists at EGF meetings have been important in developing consortia to bid for and undertake these programmes. Increasingly, not only are early results reported at EGF meetings, but also working meetings of consortia are often attached to EGF meetings.

### **The future: challenges and perspectives**

The paper on EGF History written ten years ago (Prins, 2004) included a number of statements on 'The Future'. We now comment on the extent to which our aspirations in these areas have been realized. Some new challenges are added.

1. 'Grasslands are now used increasingly for multi-functional purposes rather than solely for animal production. Increasing involvement of scientists from basic, social and environmental sciences is therefore to be expected'.

In the past ten years, indeed more participation from non-agronomic scientists took place in the conferences, which was, of course, related to the conference themes. Certainly more

speakers from outside the agronomy scene were invited to present a plenary paper. There is an increasing interest in how to meet the challenges of the various services which grassland provides for the human well-being and for its contribution to natural capital and environmental services. Furthermore, the evident atmospheric changes require new science-based information on how to support the preparedness of agriculture for climate change.

For the future, the effort by EGF to reach scientists outside the regular agronomy world should be increased, the more so because some renowned grassland research institutes have been substantially reduced or even closed and some university chairs of grassland science have been discontinued. New grassland-relevant scientific input has originated in institutes of ecology and other scientific societies offer platforms for the discussion of grassland issues, but a professional link to the agricultural relevance is often missing. The actual scientific environment for grassland science has substantially expanded; it requires strong collaborations among many disciplines, including agronomists, animal scientists, soil scientists, ecologists, economists, sociologists and modellers. Closer cooperation, both between scientists in different disciplines and between different Scientific Societies, would produce 'win-win' situations.

2. 'In order to provide emphasis on new and important areas, and to facilitate in-depth studies, the EGF encourages the formation of Special Interest Groups. There are many advantages of such Groups convening during or around EGF conferences.' The section above on Working Groups shows that good progress has been made in this initiative.

For the future, this effort should be maintained but EGF should try to involve more scientists from outside the disciplines that represented the previous core of EGF, as mentioned under 1.

3. 'The EGF is the only European-wide non-political body that organizes regular meetings to discuss scientific and socioeconomic issues related to European grassland science, management and farming in the broadest sense. In order to spread the social and political impact of the knowledge and understanding of grassland matter, the Secretariat of the EGF plans to issue press statements to the general and farming media in countries in Europe, before and after meetings.'

The planned press statements have not appeared regularly; the EGF, run by volunteers, should find a way to get this organized properly. A success is that, since 2009, at the end of every conference a senior scientist summarizes the results and this Synthesis then appears on the EGF website.

The following are new statements regarding challenges and perspectives:

4. There is a growing tendency to base important long-term policy decisions in Europe on results of short-term research. The EGF should send a wake-up call that these decisions can be dangerous and often misleading. The EGF stresses the need for long-term experiments in strategic agro-ecological systems. In the past those experiments repeatedly demonstrated that long-term responses differed markedly from short-term responses.

5. With the increasing world population and use of agricultural products for other purposes than food or feed, European politics may require that farmers should become more autonomous in the supply of feed, particularly protein, for the livestock sector. As a consequence grassland farming may be confronted with complex challenges which have to be solved by agricultural and environmental scientists together with the social science communities.

6. There is concern that the education of future grassland experts should be improved in most European countries. In this, EGF may be able to contribute by facilitating networking and exchange of information, not only via the usual conferences, working groups, master classes and workshops, but also by facilitating internships, mentors and career resources for the mutual benefit of early-career scientists, experts and interested institutions. Such actions will certainly support the efforts of the EGF to be perceived as the voice of grassland issues in Europe.

For decades EGF has played an integral role in advancing grassland research and management. It continues to anticipate new challenges and is prepared to address emerging issues in a manner



that is science-based, comprehensive and socially acceptable. The update of the core values of the Federation will be expressed in a new mission statement of EGF that is being drafted in consultation with the Scientific Advisory Board.

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