
THE EVOLUTION OF THE LIVESTOCK SECTOR IN ALBA COUNTY BETWEEN 2019 AND 2023 AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT PROSPECTS UNDER THE CAP STRATEGIC PLAN 2023–2027

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

This research analyzed the evolution of the livestock sector in Alba County, Romania, from 2019 to 2023, while also examining relevant support measures outlined in the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan (CAP SP) for 2023–2027. Romania, recognized for its agricultural potential, faces challenges in livestock development, yet farming remains a sustainable activity. The sector has benefited from significant CAP support, particularly through Pillar I subsidies and Pillar II investments in high-performance farms and improved manure management. Our analysis of statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics reveals that Alba County plays a crucial regional role. We observed an increase in cattle numbers and substantial growth in sheep and goat populations within Alba County, suggesting a focus on species adapted to local conditions and a potential for high-value products. Conversely, the pig sector saw a regression. The overwhelming demand for funding under CAP SP 2023–2027, specifically for intervention DR 20, indicates a structural financing deficit, with investment needs far exceeding available support. This highlights the ongoing necessity for targeted financial allocations to foster a competitive and sustainable livestock sector.

Keywords: (max. 5) livestock sector, Alba County, CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027

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INTRODUCTION

Animal sector is dealing with livestock growing for agricultural goals as defined by FAO (2017) Romania is recognized as a country with a high potential for agricultural development both in the vegetable and animal sectors. (Popescu, A., et al, 2023). Romania has a great natural potential as regards the development of livestock industry that would allow both the internal market development as well as an active export based industry. (Maerescu et al., 2018)

The livestock sector in Romania has faced significant challenges in recent years, influenced by factors such as the fragmentation of agricultural land, a steady decline in animal herds, limited national financial assistance, and the low proportion of livestock producers who meet the eligibility criteria for coupled support schemes. (GRODEA, M., 2018) Livestock farming is a traditional skill for the rural population (especially in the mountain areas). It is a sustainable activity, with excellent prospects, because it uses fodder from the respective area, consuming little energy. (Buliga Ștefănescu, A., 2019)

There are authors who highlight that the performance in animal sector of the EU differs from a country to another depending on farm

structure, technical endowment, genetic potential of the biological material, rearing systems and natural conditions where animal farming is practiced. (Popescu, A. et al, 2019)

The livestock sector has benefited from support under Pillar II of the CAP, namely the National Rural Development Programs 2007-2013, respectively 2014-2020, and also benefits from support under the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027. The support that this sector has benefited from and benefits from has been based on investments in high-performance livestock farms that comply with European standards regarding animal welfare. The livestock sector has also benefited from subsidies under Pillar I of the CAP, which represents a breath of fresh air for this sector that is constantly changing due to the constant challenges that farmers face.

Romania in its capacity as an EU Member State has accepted the *acquis communautaire* and therefore it is subject to the Community rules regarding the animal welfare. (Maerescu, C., 2019)

Considering the importance of the livestock sector in Romania and in the world. The aim of this research was to analyze the evolution of the livestock sector in Alba County between 2019 and 2023 and to highlight the support measures for animal husbandry provided for in

the Strategic Plan of the Common Agricultural Policy for the period 2023–2027 (SP PAC 2023–2027).

The analysis of the implementation of similar measures within the National Rural Development Program (NRDP) 2014–2020 highlighted the fact that approximately 60% of the projects financed in the livestock sector aimed at making new investments or modernizing existing farms. A significant component of these projects aimed at improving manure management, by adopting technical and infrastructural solutions aimed at ensuring proper management of organic waste, in accordance with environmental requirements and European standards.

According to the approved Version 7.1 of the CAP SP 2023–2027, support in the zootechnical sector is found in an intervention strictly on this branch, namely DR 20 Investments in the zootechnical sector with an allocated value for this financial year of 224.61 million Euros (CAP SP 2023–2027 version 7.1)

Alba County is one of the component counties of the Central Region (Mureș, Covasna, Harghita, Alba, Brașov, Sibiu) of Romania. It borders Cluj and Bihor counties to the north, Bihor, Arad and Hunedoara counties to the west, Vâlcea county to the south, and Sibiu and Mureș counties to the east.



Figure 1. Map of Romania, highlighting the Central Region, Alba County

Source: Original/centru-development-region-map-region-of-romania-illustration-vector.jpg

The livestock sector in Alba County plays an essential role in ensuring food security, maintaining ecological balance and supporting

income for numerous households and family farms. In addition, this sector favours the development of related industries, such as animal product processing, trade and veterinary services, thus contributing to the dynamization of the rural economy of the county.



Figure 2. Map of the Central Region

Source: Alba-County-Rural-Development-Strategy-2021-2027.

In terms of livestock development, Alba County stands out for its intense activity in the poultry sector, with some of the largest farms in the country being located here. Pastures and hayfields dominate the agricultural landscape of the county, followed by arable land, which indicates a favourable potential for mixed agriculture, in which the livestock sector also plays an important role. Alba County is home to the largest honey processor in Romania, as well as one of the largest producers of poultry meat, milk and dairy products. In a regional context, the county ranks first in the production of wool, honey, sheep meat, cattle and pigs. (Socio-economic-and-demographic-analysis-of-the-county-Alba)

The purpose of this research was to analyze the evolution of the livestock sector in Alba County between 2019–2023 and to highlight the support measures for animal husbandry provided for in the Strategic Plan of the Common Agricultural Policy for the period 2023–2027 (SP PAC 2023–2027)

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This research was based on the analysis of specialized literature, with the aim of highlighting the relevance of the topic addressed in the context of sustainable development of the livestock sector. In addition to theoretical

sources, we analyzed the Alba County Development Strategy for the period 2021–2027, a programmatic public policy document available in electronic format.

Also, statistical data available on the National Institute of Statistics (INS) platform regarding livestock numbers in Alba County, within the Central Region of Romania, were collected and processed. The processing of these data was carried out using Microsoft Excel, to facilitate interpretation and identify relevant trends.

A second stage of the research consisted of analyzing the interventions that support the

livestock sector within the CAP SP 2023–2027. It was found that this sector requires constant support to maintain its viability and competitiveness, support that is materialized both through direct payments and through funding dedicated to investments within PILLAR II of Rural Development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Alba County plays an important role at the regional level in terms of the livestock sector, this is highlighted by the livestock numbers during the analyzed period at the level of Alba County in conjunction with the Central Region.

Table 1

Livestock, by animal category, Centru region and Alba County
in the period 2019-2023

Animal categories	Central Region and Alba County	PERIOD					2023-2019	2023 /2019
		Year 2019	Year 2020	Year 2021	Year 2022	Year 2023		
		UM: Number						%
Cattle	CENTER Region	341,006	353,405	374,049	380,479	386,216	45,210	113
Cattle	white	60,789	63,920	70,989	72,272	73,390	12,601	121
Swine	CENTER Region	372,419	382,534	357,377	327,550	324,778	-47,641	87
Swine	white	74,585	59,097	65,499	63,499	64,656	-9,929	87
Sheep	CENTER Region	2,285,787	2,215,476	2,160,265	2,201,403	2,303,941	18,154	104
Sheep	white	423,695	426,083	399,709	445,647	480,964	57,269	114
Goats	CENTER Region	128,258	126,925	124,146	127,135	143,520	15,262	112
Goats	white	22,417	22,432	24,201	29,473	41,270	18,853	184
Birds	CENTER Region	8,778,306	9,554,517	9,476,299	9,335,580	9,207,186	428,880	105
Birds	white	2643053	2841708	2871831	2761386	2773473	130,420	105

Source: Own processing after Tempo Online, INS

The analysis of the evolution of livestock in Alba County compared to the Central Region, for the period 2019–2023, highlights divergent trends that can constitute starting points in defining strategic directions for sustainable development of the livestock sector at the county level.

Regarding the cattle species, both at regional and county level, an increase is observed, but the expansion rate is more pronounced in Alba County compared to the regional average. This fact indicates a positive dynamic of local investments in

cattle farms, possibly stimulated by the subsidies granted for milk and meat, but also by the opportunities offered by the modernization of farm infrastructure. At the same time, the workforce is very important in livestock farms, especially in cattle farms.

There are authors who highlight the fact that the lack of labour on farms also represents a limiting factor, which can lead to a reduction in cattle herds. (Popescu, A., et al, 2023)

For the pig species, the data reflect an obvious regression, both in the Central Region and in Alba County, an evolution explainable in the context of the sanitary

pressure generated by African swine fever and the economic constraints in the sector. This decrease emphasizes the need for public interventions aimed at restoring production capacities and strengthening biosecurity measures.

In contrast, for the sheep and goat sector, Alba County recorded growth rates considerably higher than the regional average. Thus, sheep herds increased by 13.5% in Alba, compared to only 0.8% at regional level, and goat herds increased by 84.1% in the county, compared to 11.9% in the Central Region. These data reflect a pronounced local orientation towards species adapted to hilly and mountainous areas, with potential for niche agri-food production with high added value (traditional cheeses, premium meat, organic products).

Regarding the poultry sector, both Alba County and the Centru Region register a relatively constant growth of around 4.9%, which indicates a stability of this segment, without significant variations in the structure of the livestock. However, the capping of the growth rate may suggest reaching a saturation threshold in the absence of new major investments in technologies and infrastructure.

In conclusion, Alba County stands out for its superior development capacity in certain livestock segments (cattle, sheep, goats), which justifies the orientation of funds from the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 towards supporting them. It is recommended to prioritize investments in farm modernization, the implementation of sustainable technologies, as well as the development of local value chains that allow for better valorization of animal production

in the context of sustainable rural development.

Table 2
The weight of animals by category in Alba County out of the total Central Region in 2019

Animal categories	Central Region 2019	Alba County 2019	%Alba County in the Central Region
Cattle	341,006	60,789	18
Swine	372,419	74,585	20
Sheep	2,285,787	423,695	19
Goats	128,258	22,417	17
Birds	8,778,306	264,305	30
Total	11,905,776	3,224,539	27

Source: Own processing based on tempo Online, INS

The comparative analysis of the share of livestock in Alba County in the total Central Region, for the years 2019 and 2023, reveals a clear trend of consolidating the role of Alba County within the regional livestock sector. The evolution by animal category highlights both significant increases in the county's share and its maintenance as a leading actor in certain sectors, such as poultry.

Table 3
Share of animals by category in Alba County out of the total Central Region in 2023

Animal categories	Central Region 2023	Alba County 2023	% White from the Central Region
Cattle	386,216	73,390	19
Swine	324,778	64,656	20
Sheep	2,303,941	480,964	21
Goats	143,520	41,270	29
Birds	9,207,186	2,773,473	30
Total	12,365,641	3,433,753	28

Source: Own processing based on tempo Online, INS

Alba County has slightly consolidated its position in the regional livestock landscape, indicating a positive trend of increasing production capacity and/or greater efficiency of public interventions and private investments. Thus, it can be observed from tables 2 and 3 a slight increase in 2023 compared to 2019 on total animals from 27% to 28%.

As can be seen from Tables 2 and 3, a significant increase is recorded in the goat sector. This change represents the most significant increase in the share per species and indicates a clear reorientation of production in Alba County towards the goat sector, possibly due to: the adaptability of goats to difficult areas, the increased demand for goat milk, the superior valorization through artisanal products (local cheeses), the access to funds from the PNDR and the CAP SP.

The evolution of the share of livestock in Alba County in the total Central Region between 2019 and 2023 highlights a consolidation of the county's role in the regional livestock sector, especially through a significant increase in the contribution to sheep and goat species. This trend reflects both the county's capacity to capitalize on financing opportunities and the strategic orientation of farmers towards adaptable, sustainable sectors with higher potential for capitalization. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that at the level of Alba County in the previous financing period, within the PNDR 2014-2020, both investments in the modernization of livestock farms and investments in the installation of young farmers with livestock projects or with livestock components were made, which favoured the development of the sector.

There are studies that highlight that in Romania, at the level of 2021, the livestock grew in 13 counties, the most significant increases being recorded in Bihor – 37.6%, Alba – 29.25% and Bacau – 23.1%. The authors also emphasize that the implementation of the new projects involved the introduction of advanced livestock farming technologies, which imposed compliance with hygiene standards and ecological measures in accordance with the requirements of the European Union. (Chiurciu, IA, et al, 2023).

The implementation of the CAP and the support related to Pillar I, direct payments, and Pillar II, Rural Development, had a positive impact also at the level of Alba County during the analyzed period. The

financial support contributed significantly to the improvement of production conditions in the livestock sector. These measures allowed farmers to access the necessary resources to modernize their activities, increase productivity and comply with European standards regarding animal welfare and environmental protection.

For the 2023-2027 programming period, support for investments in the livestock sector aims at both the development of new production capacities and the modernization of existing farms. These interventions include the purchase of modern equipment, the adaptation of infrastructure to current legislative and technological requirements, connection to utility networks, as well as the provision of facilities to ensure efficient and sustainable management of animal manure. In this regard, investments are supported for the proper storage and application of manure and sewage sludge, as well as the purchase of equipment that contributes to the reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) and ammonia emissions. At the same time, innovative technologies that support the transition to a low-carbon economy, in line with the climate objectives of the European Union, are encouraged. (SP CAP 2023-2027, v.7.1)

Under Pillar II of the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, interventions dedicated to the livestock sector aim to support both primary production and processing activities of animal products. Through interventions DR-22, DR-23 and DR-24, investments are financed for the establishment and modernization of livestock farms, as well as related operations for conditioning, storage, processing and marketing of livestock products. These measures aim to increase the competitiveness of agricultural holdings, obtain products with higher added value, strengthen the position of farmers on the market and integrate them into agri-food value chains.

Also, the DR-14 intervention, intended for small farms, aims to prioritize farms that maintain or develop livestock of

indigenous breeds, contributing to the conservation of the zootechnical genetic heritage and the sustainability of agro-ecological systems. In parallel, the DR-30 intervention, which supports the installation of young farmers, encourages the development of viable projects in the zootechnical sector, supporting generational renewal, innovation and knowledge transfer in the rural environment.

The intervention DR 20 Investments in the livestock sector was an intervention requested within the project submission session with reference no. DR 20 – 01/ 23–30.04.2024, so that the entire value allocated for this sector within the PS PAC 2023-2027 was requested. The objectives pursued within DR 20 were: Improving the performance of livestock farms by increasing livestock numbers and diversifying species, respectively increasing the added value of agricultural products by processing products at the farm level. (DR 20 AFIR, 2025)

According to the provisions of the 2023-2027 CAP SP, the allocation was distinct, with the projects classified as follows:

1. Cattle sector (including buffalo);
2. Swine sector;
3. Sheep and goat sector;
4. Poultry and other farm animals, including bees (except for poultry farms applying under component 5 for investments necessary to switch from improved batteries to alternative systems);
5. Laying hens – modernization for the transition from improved batteries to alternative rearing systems (DR 20 Applicant Guide).

This method of allocating funds proved to be favorable for potential applicants, offering them equal opportunities to access financial support, regardless of the livestock sub-sector in which they intended to invest.

Regarding the financing of investments within the framework of the 2023-2027 CAP SP - intervention DR 20, the non-reimbursable public support provided provides for a maximum value of 2 million

euros per project, if the investment aims at the development or complex modernization of farms. For projects that involve exclusively the acquisition of agricultural machinery and equipment, the maximum value of support is limited to 300,000 euros per project. The intensity of the non-reimbursable support, related to the value of eligible costs, can reach a maximum ceiling of 65%, depending on the type of investment, the size of the holding and the priorities established by the 2023-2027 CAP SP. This financing formula aims to stimulate investments in the modernization of the agricultural sector, with a focus on efficiency, sustainability and economic competitiveness. (AFIR)

Table 4
DR - 20 Investments in the livestock sector -
numerical stage of implementation

Funding applications submitted	Selected funding applications	Contracts (ongoing and completed)	Selected funding applications/Cf submitted %	Ongoing and completed contracts out of total selected Cf.
No.	No.	No.	%	%
499	209	154	42	74

Source: Own processing based on the Situation of submitted projects PS PAC 2023-2027 available at <https://www.madr.ro/planul-national-strategic-pac-post-2020/implementare-ps-pac-2023-2027/situatia-proiectelor-depuse-ps-pac-2023-2027.html>

Table 5
**DR - 20 INVESTMENTS IN THE
LIVESTOCK SECTOR - VALUE STAGE OF
IMPLEMENTATION**

Public allocation	Funding applications submitted	Selected funding applications	Value Cf submitted - Public value allocated	Value Cf deposited from allocated value
	Public value	Public value	euro	%
224,610,728	511,942,595	224,907,532	287,331,867	228

Source: Own processing based on the Situation of submitted projects PS PAC 2023-2027 available at <https://www.madr.ro/planul-national-strategic-pac-post-2020/implementare-ps-pac-2023-2027/situatia-proiectelor-depuse-ps-pac-2023-2027.html>

The analysis of the implementation status of the intervention DR-20 – Investments

in the livestock sector and the degree of use of the available public allocation reveals a significant interest and a demand far exceeding the financing capacity from the beneficiaries (tables 4 and 5). Thus, out of a total of 499 financing applications submitted, only 209 were selected for financing, which corresponds to a selection rate of 42%, indicating a high degree of competition between projects and rigorous evaluation criteria. Of the approved applications, 154 projects (74%) have already been contracted, which reflects a relatively advanced and efficient implementation compared to the moment of launching the measure.

Correlating these data with the information on the size of the allocated budget and the total value of the submitted applications, an oversubscription of 228% is observed: the total value of the applications for funding (511.94 million euros) far exceeded the available public allocation (224.61 million euros). This phenomenon signals the existence of a structural financing deficit in the livestock sector, where investment needs exceed more than twice the support capacity available through the CAP SP. At the same time, the final selection of approved projects led to the commitment of the entire available budget (224.91 million euros), which reflects an efficient absorption of the funds and an adequate administrative capacity on the part of the managing authorities.

The analyzed data confirm the high development potential of the livestock sector in the Centru region, respectively Alba county. At the same time, it is important to emphasize the need to adjust financial allocations to adequately respond to the real demand for investments and to support the transition towards a competitive and sustainable agriculture at the national and regional levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Romania's agricultural sector faces challenges like land fragmentation and declining animal herds, yet livestock farming remains a vital, sustainable activity, especially in mountain regions. Support from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) under Pillars I and II has been crucial, particularly for

investments in modernized, welfare-compliant farms and improved manure management.

Alba County is a key regional player, contributing significantly to food security and the rural economy. Between 2019 and 2023, cattle numbers increased, while the pig sector declined, likely due to African swine fever. Conversely, sheep and goat populations saw substantial growth in Alba County, indicating a strategic shift towards adaptable, high-value production. The poultry sector remained stable.

Alba County's growing share in the regional livestock sector highlights its capacity to leverage funding and farmers' strategic choices. CAP support has improved production conditions, fostering modernization and compliance with European standards. The 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan, particularly intervention DR 20, aims to further develop and modernize farms, including sustainable manure management and green technologies. The overwhelming demand for DR 20 funding, exceeding available allocations by 228%, reveals a significant investment deficit in the livestock sector, despite efficient fund absorption.

Addressing the existing financing gap is crucial for fostering a competitive and sustainable agricultural sector regionally and nationally.

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