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Call for Empowering Women in Agrifood (EWA) Advance Programme 2026 Participants Guidelines

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EIT FOOD

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Call Fact Sheet

Title of Call	Call for Empowering Women in Agrifood (EWA) Advance Programme 2026 Participants
Objective and Scope	Selection of up to 10 female startup founders or representatives of women-founded startups with innovative product or solution that achieved considerable results in sales and have traction in the European market. At least 7 from the 10 participants selected will be from RIS Countries.
Call Open Date	18 February 2026
Call Deadline	11 May 2026, 23:59 CEST
Available Funding	Up to 21,200 EUR gross per participant Total call budget: 47,000 EUR gross
Project Duration	September – December 2026
How to apply	Application form at MyEITFood Portal
Contact Information	Carolina Silva Marques carolina.silvamarques@eitfood.eu

1. Introduction

EIT Food

EIT Food is the world's largest food innovation community, creating connections right across the food system. Supported by the European Union (EU), we invest in projects, organisations and individuals which share our goals for a healthy and sustainable food system.

We have built a unique not-for-profit business to carry out transformative programmes in skills, education, entrepreneurship, start-up investment and communications. We deliver these programmes in partnership with our members to create a culture and build a community which sees the long-term value in the food innovation we fund.

Our Missions

EIT Food's Missions respond to major societal challenges within the food system. The alignment of our chosen challenges towards United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and EU policy is detailed in our main funding [strategy document](#) agreed with EIT (European Institute of Innovation & Technology). For more about our Missions-led approach please visit [our website](#).

Our Thematic Priorities

At EIT Food we believe that good ideas and solutions don't stop at a single project or pilot stage but grow into coordinated, large-scale solutions capable of driving systemic change across the food system. In order to deliver systemic change, three priority areas have been identified where we can make the greatest difference to Europe's food future through innovation: **resilient agriculture, protein diversification, and biotechnology.**

[EIT Food Regional Innovation Scheme \(RIS\)](#)

The EIT RIS is the EIT Community's outreach introduced in 2014 to share good practices and experience emerging from EIT Community activities. The EIT RIS opens the activities of EIT's Innovation Communities to innovators that are not partners, by providing targeted support to individuals and organisations to take part in and benefit from EIT Innovation Communities' activities, services and programmes. EIT Food RIS aims at strengthening those regions in Europe which are modest and moderate in terms of innovation in the agrifood sector. This outreach scheme is open to innovators that are not partners of EIT Food and provides targeted support to EIT RIS stakeholders through a portfolio of projects.

General information about the EWA programme

The Empowering Women in Agrifood (EWA) Programme, is an initiative by EIT Food that supports women entrepreneurs in the food and agriculture sector. The programme provides training, personalized mentorship, networking opportunities, and access to funding to help them start or scale their businesses. The EWA Programme addresses a gender gap in the agrifood sector and unlocks potential and opportunities for female entrepreneurs.

Read more on the [EWA Programme website](#).

The EWA Programme has evolved from one single-track programme to a flexible, three-module structure (EWA Explore, EWA Grow, EWA Advance). This call refers only to the EWA Advance module. The EWA Programme support women at every stage of entrepreneurial journey, providing tailored support.

The EWA Programme will be managed by EIT Food in cooperation with local organisations ("Organisations") specializing in boosting female entrepreneurship.

Module 3: EWA Advance

We built a programme specifically for advanced female-founded startups to accelerate commercial traction, fundraising success, corporate partnerships, and scalable growth. It applies a gender lens by addressing the real-world barriers women founders disproportionately face - including unequal access to networks and capital, credibility bias in sales and corporate environments, and the need to scale efficiently with fewer resources. Through practical tools, expert mentoring, and targeted ecosystem access, the programme strengthens commercial readiness, investment readiness, corporate readiness, and scaling-up capability — helping founders move faster, negotiate stronger, and grow sustainably.

A pan-European cohort of up to 10 women entrepreneurs ("Mentees") is selected and mentored by experts to strengthen investor and corporate readiness, and scale their operations, expand to new markets. Delivered in English, the programme's core value proposition is corporate and investor readiness for female entrepreneurs with the strongest growth potential, scalable business models, or clear investor-readiness needs. Cohort themes must align with the EIT Food Missions and cover priority areas such as resilient agriculture, biotechnology, and diversified proteins. All thematic areas will be addressed through a strong women empowerment lens, ensuring that programme content, mentoring, and investor engagement actively support female leadership and equitable access to growth and funding opportunities.

EWA Advance Programme offer

The EWA Advance Programme offers approximate of 8 hours of trainings, approximate of 16 hours of 1:1 mentoring and approximate of 8 hours of networking opportunities:

- **1 online Matchmaking** (min. 90 min)
- **8 online trainings / expert sessions / firesides** (min. 60 min each)
- **weekly mentoring touchpoints** (min. 60 min each)
- **8 networking sessions** (min. 60 mins each)
- **1 online Masterclass** (min. 90 min)
- **1 online Demo Day prep session** (min. 60 min)
- **1 offline Demo Day** (1 day)

The EWA Advance trainings will tackle the following areas:

- **Commercial readiness.** Women founders often have strong products but face slower trust-building cycles, smaller initial networks in key buying circles, and higher pressure to “prove” credibility early (e.g. Credibility-by-design go-to-market; Customer profiling; Pricing confidence & validation; Sales planning with resilience; Distribution strategies that unlock access).
- **Investment readiness.** Women founders often face higher scrutiny when seeking funding and must communicate authority quickly to overcome bias and build trust with investors. They need to confidently present their financial story, demonstrate funding strategy fit, and prepare for due diligence while leveraging warm introductions and networks (e.g. Bias-aware pitching; Warm intro strategy; Financial storytelling that builds authority; Funding strategy fit; Due diligence readiness with confidence).
- **Corporate readiness.** Corporate environments can amplify credibility bias, especially in procurement-heavy or technical domains. Women founders are also more likely to be asked for “proof” before partnership commitment (e.g. Power mapping inside corporates; Procurement readiness as a growth lever; Negotiation readiness; Risk & compliance support; Governance that signals maturity).
- **Scaling-up.** Women founders often scale with less capital, less operational slack, and greater pressure to “do everything perfectly.” That can lead to slower hiring, delayed internationalisation, or burnout risk (e.g. Capital-efficient scaling strategy; Internationalisation pathways via partnerships; Leadership & organisational design; Operational expansion with guardrails; Talent strategy & support ecosystem).

Individuals from outside of RIS countries can join the EWA Advance 2026 and benefit from the matchmaking and expert support provided by EIT Food. However, minimum 7 out of 10 selected participants (Mentees) must be from RIS countries.

The EWA Advance Programme is organized around the following steps:

- a) Application for EWA Advance programme’s participants – **mid February – May 2026**;
- b) Evaluation and selection of applicants – **May 2026**;
- c) Onboarding and preparation – **end of May – mid June 2026**;
- d) Kick-off and Matchmaking activity – **beginning of September 2026**;
- e) Mentoring and training including Masterclasses – **September – December 2026**;
- f) Pitching event (“**Demo Day**”) – **December 2026**;

2. Purpose of this Call

This EIT Food call has the objective of recruiting **up to 10 European-based female startup founders or representatives of women-founded startups** with innovative agrifood product or solution that achieved considerable results in sales and have traction in the European market.

3. Description of Profile

The EWA Advance programme aims to target representatives (individuals) of women-founded startups with an innovative agrifood product or solution that achieved considerable results in sales or/and have traction in the market with a minimum TRL 4. A fast-track* pathway will be available for alumni of selected EIT Food initiatives, enabling high-performing founders from other programmes to access EWA Advance (Module 3).

***Fast-track for EIT Food alumnae:** additional point (0,5 point) will be added during evaluation phase for alumnae of other EIT Food initiatives (Seedbed, Team-Up, FAN, EWA) that meet the eligibility criteria and have been evaluated positively, following the evaluation criteria.

Applicants must be living and running their startups in one of the Horizon Europe Eligible countries, with registered startups also required to be legally established in one of these countries. Participants can be either the founder or an official representative of the business.

All applicants must demonstrate a strong commitment to participating in the programme's activities.

To participate in the pitching competition and to receive Proof of Successful Completion, Mentee must:

- a. attend a minimum of 80% of the training activities planned within the EWA Advance Programme (specific dates will be defined and communicated in advance by organisers),
- b. attend the Matchmaking (online), Masterclass (online) and Demo Day (in-person) (specific dates will be defined and communicated in advance by organisers),
- c. complete a minimum of 80% of the time allocated for Mentor & Mentee sessions,
- d. complete Mentee's Startup Readiness (Growth) Plan,
- e. timely complete all the obligatory documents provided during training and mentorship ensuring capturing relevant progress and business information from the participant,
- f. support EIT Food and provide information before and after the activities within the EWA Advance Programme that allow participant's business progress monitoring (satisfaction surveys, mentoring feedback, business development progress report for Prizes winners),
- g. support EIT Food in EWA Programme dissemination and complied with the branding requirements.

Only if these minimum participant obligations are met the Proof of Successful Completion will be issued acknowledging the competences gained during the EWA Advance Programme.

4. Deliverables

Deliverable: Proof of Attendance at Masterclass (signature on the attendance list in case of the in-person event or screenshot in case of the online event).

5. Funding

1st Round – Subgrant (Financial Support)

The Subgrant ("Financial Support") is available for all the selected applicants (Mentees). A total of up to **1.200 euros gross is granted per Mentee** to support their costs of participation in the EWA Advance Programme activities.

The Financial Support is intended to support costs directly linked to the Mentee's participation in the programme and is aligned with Horizon Europe and EIT Food priorities. It may cover the following cost categories:

- **Travel and subsistence (up to 1.200 euros):** Transportation and accommodation costs (e.g. train, flight, local transport) for in-person attendance at programme activities, Demo Day event, meetings with mentor or investors. The Financial Support was estimated by looking at average costs within different countries in Europe.

The Financial Support is based on a lump sum and value for money. All costs, including co-funding, need to comply with Horizon Europe regulations regarding the eligibility of expenses. Please refer to Article 6 of the [Model Grant Agreement](#) and the [Annotated Model Grant Agreement](#).

The total lump sum contribution will be disbursed in instalments. It is conditional upon the delivery of the project deliverable mentioned above. Each deliverable is associated with proportional cost allocation and deduction rate. In cases where deliverables are not completed or only partially fulfilled, a deduction will be applied up to the amount associated with the incomplete deliverable.

First instalment will be paid as the pre-financing in the amount of €600 (50% of the lump sum) after the Subgrant Agreement signature.

Deliverable: Proof of Attendance at Masterclass (signature on the attendance list in case of the in-person event or screenshot in case of the online event)

- Allocated Value: €600 (50% of the lump sum value – second instalment)
- Delivery date: by the 20th November 2026

2nd Round - Prizes

The third event within the EWA Advance Programme, organised face to face (Demo Day) will be organised with the aim of exposing Mentees to public speaking and business competition, selecting **1st (20.000 EUR gross)** and **2nd (15.000 EUR gross)** ("Prizes") winners and networking all participants with the European startup and innovation ecosystem (investors, Business Angels, innovators, corporates and industry representatives). Prizes are meant to be used toward the development of the startup.

The Winner who receives a Prize is committed and ensures through a Prize Agreement that:

- The Prize should be used to accelerate business growth (including e.g. operations and production-related costs, marketing and communication).
- The Mentee will inform EIT Food after 6 months on Prize expenditure through a progress report that will be validated by EIT Food contact point.
- EIT Food is liable to only grant an individual that is committed to launch a new or improve product or service to the market and/or raise investment during the following 1 year.
- Evidence on these requirements could be requested and subject to an audit by EIT Food.

6. Call Timeline and Application

Timeline

Call Open Date	18 February 2026
Call Deadline	11 May 2026, 23:59 CEST

Evaluation and additional interviews	12 May – 1 June 2026
Communication to selected participants	2 – 5 June 2026
Standstill period, Onboarding and Signing the Agreement	10 June – 30 August 2026
Programme Kick-off & Matchmaking Event	1 – 4 September 2026

The standstill period is a set time after funding selection for appeals, final administrative checks, and compliance in the award process. The project cannot start before this period.

Application Submission

Interested candidates complete and submit the application form online at [MyEITFood Portal](#) platform at the appointed time.

7. Evaluation, Eligibility and Selection Process

Evaluation Process

The evaluation panel is formed by at least one external evaluator and at least one representative from EIT Food or Organization, who will remotely review and score the applications based on the scoring approach described below via [MyEITFood Portal](#). The selection of Mentees will be based on eligibility and quality criteria.

Applicants who scored between 2,5 - 4,0 after assessment of the proposal may be invited to an online interview to determine the final selection.

The Mentee who wants to compete for a Prize, will prepare and deliver a business pitch during Demo Day. Each Mentee will present a 4-minute pitch following 5-minute Q&A from the jury panel. The jury panel will be formed with at least 3 independent experts. Please read Prizes Evaluation Criteria section of this document for specific criteria description.

All external evaluators have been selected in an open and transparent process. All evaluators, both internal and external, are trained extensively on the European Union's Code of Conduct for Evaluators, namely on the importance of transparency, fair treatment of all applicants, confidentiality and how to avoid conflict of interest. Evaluators must contractually agree to recuse themselves in the event of a conflict of interest. EIT Food aims for representation of either women or men not falling below 40% as a parity threshold within evaluation committees.

Eligibility Criteria

This call is open to individuals. Please read [Annex 1. Eligibility](#), in addition to the following eligibility criteria:

Applicant Eligibility	Each applicant must:
	• Identify as a woman, • Have interest and preliminary commitment to attend Programme activities, trainings and events, • Be a representative of a legally incorporated entity registered in or after 2016 in a Horizon Europe eligible country, • Have developed an innovative agrifood product or solution. • Have a minimum TRL-4.

	Gathered investment (private or public) and/or have sales.
Application Eligibility	Each application must:
	- Be complete, with all mandatory application documents uploaded. Please, note that the pitch deck is required to be uploaded. - Be fully written in English. - Be submitted on time via MyEITFood Portal.

Evaluation Criteria

The following quality criteria and weighting will be used in the assessment:

Quality Criteria	Description	Scoring	Weight
1 - Relevance	The extent to which the product or service addresses a clearly defined and relevant problem in agrifood sector.	1 to 5	20%
2 - Commercial and Market Impact	The extent to which the product or service demonstrates a clear route to market, customer need, and potential for scalability across Europe and the innovation has measurable potential to contribute to sustainability goals, decarbonisation, circularity, or digital transformation.	1 to 5	20%
3 - Innovation Potential	The extent to which the product or service is innovative and clearly differentiated from existing technologies or practices on the market, with demonstration of strong potential to meet underserved needs or improve sustainability, efficiency, resilience, or profitability.	1 to 5	20%
4 - Strategic Alignment	The extent to which the product or service aligns with EIT Food's and EWA strategic focus areas (Protein Diversification, Resilient Agriculture, Biotechnology).	1 to 5	20%
5 – Programme Impact	The extent to which EWA Advance Programme's activities and funding will make a difference and allow further development of applicant's business.	1 to 5	20%
Additional point	Fast-track for EIT Food alumnae	0 to 0,5	100%

The total score can amount **up to 5,5 points**.

Each quality criteria will be scored from 1 to 5 using the following scoring system. The quality threshold for selection is a total weighted score of 2.5. The highest-scoring applications will be selected.

Note: if there is a tie, the Mentees will be selected based on the combined score received for selection criteria number 2 and 3.

Score	Description
1	Poor: The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.

2	Fair: Application broadly addresses the criterion but there are significant weaknesses.
3	Good: Application addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
4	Very Good: Application addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
5	Excellent: Application successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

***Fast-track for EIT Food alumnae:** additional point (0,5 point) will be added during evaluation phase for alumnae of other EIT Food initiatives (Seedbed, Team-Up, FAN, EWA) that meet the eligibility criteria and have been evaluated positively, following the evaluation criteria.

Prizes Evaluation Criteria

The detailed evaluation process for the selection of the Prizes winners is described below:

1. Progress score over the EWA Advanced programme (50%) - Quantitative score based on a progress evaluation of Mentees prepared by Mentors, as well as Mentee's Startup Readiness (Growth) Plan evaluation by Organization's representative.

	Criteria	Points	Weight
1	Mentee's Startup Readiness Plan evaluation	10	50%
2	Mentors' evaluation	10	50%

1. **Mentee's Startup Readiness (Growth) Plan evaluation** will be assessed by Organization's representative, assessing the following aspects. Each criterion must be scored from 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest score and 10 the highest):
 - **Problem and market need definition** – Clarity and depth in defining customer problems and unmet needs in existing and new markets, supported by validated customer insights, commercial evidence, and a clear rationale for expansion, including market-specific risks and credibility barriers.
 - **Solution and value proposition** – Maturity and adaptation of the solution and value proposition for new markets or customer segments, demonstrating differentiation, customer relevance, and alignment with commercial, corporate, or partner requirements, supported by traction and customer feedback.
 - **Business model and feasibility** – Refinement and scalability of the business model for growth, including pricing confidence, revenue logic, cost structure, operational capacity, and financial feasibility, with clear assumptions aligned to funding strategy and capital-efficient scaling.
 - **Market potential and traction** – Demonstrated strength and quality of traction in current markets and a well-supported assessment of market potential, positioning, and go-to-market strategy for expansion, including distribution access, partnerships, sales readiness, and early market-entry signals.
 - **Growth plan quality and clarity** – Clarity, structure, and strategic depth of the Startup Readiness (Growth) Plan, including data-driven arguments, coherent commercial, corporate, investment, and scaling logic, and professional communication appropriate for advanced-stage and investment-oriented evaluation.

2. **Mentors' evaluation** will be assessed by Mentor based on the progress and improvements made by Mentee from the initial meeting after Matchmaking Event to the final meeting before the Demo Day, according to the following criteria. Each criterion must be scored from 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest score and 10 the highest)
- **Strategic Leadership and Scale Readiness** - Mentee demonstrates strengthened leadership capacity, strategic clarity, and confidence to scale her agrifood startup, including capital-efficient growth, resilience under pressure, and readiness to enter new markets through partnerships or internationalisation pathways.
 - **Agrifood System Understanding and Corporate Readiness** - Mentee shows an advanced and applied understanding of agrifood value chains and corporate environments, including procurement structures, compliance requirements, governance expectations, and risk management, and can position her startup as a credible corporate partner.
 - **Market Traction, Commercial Readiness and Go-to-Market Strength** - Mentee demonstrates improved commercial readiness, including sharper customer profiling, confident pricing logic, resilient sales planning, and effective distribution strategies, supported by existing traction and evidence-based market expansion plans.
 - **Business Model Maturity and Investment Readiness** - Mentee has refined a scalable and investable business model, demonstrating stronger financial storytelling, bias-aware pitching, appropriate funding strategy fit, and readiness for investor engagement and due diligence.

The overall progress score can amount to 10 points.

- b. Pitch score on the day of the Demo Day (50%) - The Mentee who wants to compete for a Prize, will prepare and deliver a business pitch during Demo Day. Each Mentee will present a **4-minute pitch** following **5-minute Q&A** from the jury panel. The jury panel will be formed with at least 3 independent evaluators and experts. The jury will evaluate each pitch according to criteria listed below. Each criterion must be scored from 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest score and 10 the highest).

	Criteria	Points	Weight
1	Mentee clearly articulates the validated problem and market need, including how it manifests in current and target expansion markets, supported by customer evidence and traction.	10	10%
2	The proposed solution demonstrates maturity and differentiation, clearly showing why it works, how it has been validated, and how it adapts to new markets, customers, or corporate requirements.	10	20%
3	The value proposition and market positioning are clear and competitive, demonstrating strong customer targeting, pricing logic, and differentiation from existing alternatives.	10	10%
4	The business model and go-to-market strategy demonstrate scalability and feasibility, including commercial readiness, distribution strategy, partnerships, and capital-efficient growth logic.	10	10%

5	Mentee demonstrates leadership capability and execution readiness, including strategic decision-making, credibility with customers, partners, corporates, or investors, and the ability to scale responsibly.	10	10%
6	Mentee clearly explains how the Prize will accelerate growth, including its role in commercial expansion, investment readiness, corporate partnerships, or scaling milestones.	10	20%
7	Mentee demonstrates her startup's potential to generate systemic impact, including economic viability, environmental sustainability, and social impact within the food system at national or regional scale.	10	20%

The overall pitch score can amount to **10 points**.

Note: if there is a tie, the winners will be selected based on the combined score received for selection criteria number 4 and 5.

The total score (50% overall progress score and 50% overall pitch score) can amount up to 10 points.

The highest scoring applicants will win the prize.

All applicants will be alerted in writing to the outcome of their application.

Appeal on Evaluation Results

Applicants can submit an appeal within 5 days of receiving their result, if:

- The evaluation of their proposal has not been carried out in accordance with the procedures set out in this document.

For more details, please refer to [EIT Food Redress guidance](#).

8. Administrative Items

EIT Food Legal Framework & Legal Documents to be signed

Selected applicants will receive a second communication with instructions regarding the completion of the Lumpsum Subgrant Agreement to be signed between the Mentee and EIT Food.

After the Demo Day, selected winners will receive a communication with instructions regarding completion of the Prize Agreement to be signed between the Mentee and EIT Food.

Payment Schedule

EIT Food will transfer the Financial Support in two instalments. This Financial Support will be released after verifying that the [participant's obligations](#) were met.

EIT Food will transfer the Prizes in one instalment. These Prizes will be released after selecting the pitching competition winners at the Demo Day.

All payments will be made to Mentee's personal bank account.

Monitoring

The activity will be monitored and may be audited. All Activities selected for funding undergo continuous monitoring by EIT Food to ensure effective progress and implementation in accordance with the Participant Consent Form and to trigger payments according to the achievement of deliverables.

EIT Food may request regular reporting of actual costs incurred with the subgrant, as well as regular reporting of deliverables, together with the supporting documentation. The monitoring process may result in an amendment to the Activity workplan and/or budget.

Support

If you have any questions about this Call for EWA Advance Mentees, please contact Carolina Silva Marques (carolina.silvamarques@eitfood.eu).

Annex

1. Eligibility

Please Note:

1. Failing any of the above call specific criteria will make your application ineligible. If an applicant is ineligible, the participant will be informed.

2. [According to EU policies and measures](#), Russian entities will not be authorised to participate in any new grant under the EU Research and Innovation programmes. This ban applies not only to their potential participation as beneficiaries, but to their potential participation in any kind of role: beneficiaries, linked third parties/affiliated entities, subcontractors, in-kind contributors, international partners/associated partners, and third parties receiving financial support. Find the full statement from the European Commission [here](#).

3. Pursuant to Article 2 (2) of the [Decision 2022/2506](#) of 15 December 2022 on measures for the protection of the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary *where the Commission implements the Union budget in direct or indirect management pursuant to of Article 62(1) points (a) and (c), of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046*, **no legal commitments shall be entered into with any public interest trust established on the basis of the Hungarian Act IX of 2021 or any entity maintained by such a public interest trust**. This prohibition applies to financial support to third parties (sub-grants and prizes), hence the proposal of any entity or group of entities where a Participant is included in the list of public interest trusts shall be considered as not eligible.

4. Applicants will be deemed ineligible if:

- a. bankrupt, subject to insolvency or winding-up procedures, where its assets are being administered by a liquidator or by a court, where it is in an arrangement with creditors, where its business Activities are suspended, or where it is in any analogous situation arising from a similar procedure provided for under national laws or regulations;
- b. it has been established by a final judgment or a final administrative decision that the organisation is in breach of its obligations relating to the payment of taxes or social security contributions in accordance with the applicable law;
- c. it has been established by a final judgment or a final administrative decision that the organisation is guilty of grave professional misconduct by having violated applicable laws or regulations or ethical standards of the profession to which the organisation belongs, or by having engaged in any wrongful conduct which has an impact on its professional credibility where such conduct denotes a wrongful intent or gross negligence;
- d. is found to be attempting to influence the decision-making process of the call during the process;
- e. attempting to obtain confidential information that may confer upon its undue advantages in the call process;
- f. it has been established by a final judgment that the organisation is guilty of fraud, corruption or money laundering.