The structure of French agriculture is changing: the number of farms is decreasing and farming is happening more on larger farms. In France, this process began a long time ago, in the middle of the XIX Century, as is the case for the majority of European countries. However, the real turning point was at the beginning of the 1960s when a modern agricultural policy was developed, first nationally and then at European level. This marked the beginning of modernising the agricultural sector and led to a decrease in the number of farms.

According to the 2010 agricultural census, there were 515,000 farms in France (mainland and overseas departments), compared to 665,000 in 2000. Today, these long-term demographic changes are continuing and it does not seem that they will end soon. The 2010 agricultural census did in fact reveal that, in certain regions in France, only 40% of farmers over the age of 50 (who were therefore expected to retire within the next 10 years) knew of a young farmer to take on their farm.

France has almost 27 million hectares of arable land, which is just under half the total surface area of the country. Arable land situated on either side of the 45th parallel north latitude line provides ideal conditions for a wide variety in production.
French agriculture has undergone many changes over the past few years, as shown by the extreme fluctuations in average farm income. This is not however merely a short-term problem, rather a medium-term downward trend and agricultural income has been decreasing since 1998. In terms of growth, agricultural income is not increasing at the same rate as the rest of the French economy (cf the graph showing disposable income per inhabitant).

In 2010 the European Union produced 331 billion Euros of raw agricultural produce (non-processed). France contributed 18.5% of this, with production amounting to 61 billion Euros. Overall, France is the largest European agricultural producer, even though this position varies depending on the product. Other large producer countries in the EU are Germany (13% of European production), Spain and Italy (12% of European production each).

Since the end of the 70s, external trade for France has been a surplus industry. Although this surplus fell in 2009 because of the crisis and the severe decrease in global trade, it picked up again in 2010 (+8 billion Euros) and is expected to be even higher in 2011 (around +11 billion Euros). The agri-food sector is key for French exports (10 to 20% of all French exports). The main areas are: wine and drinks, cereals and dairy produce.

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1 The agricultural income shown on the graph indicates the average income earned on one farm for agricultural production. It does not show agricultural household income.