

Sector Cross Visit Report

Sustainable Goat Farming in the Mediterranean: Organic Pastoral Systems

Málaga, Spain

11–13 November 2025

Málaga is widely known as a vibrant tourist destination, but beyond its coastal skyline lies a very different story: one of centuries-old pastoral systems shaped by rugged mountains, harsh dry seasons, and the resilience of the people who farm there. This lesser-seen Málaga, with its mix of olive groves, aromatic scrublands and steep grazing areas, became the setting for our Cross Visit in November 2025.

For two and a half days, 19 participants from Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania and Spain came together to explore what it means to raise livestock under dry, challenging conditions. The visit was not only an opportunity to observe farming realities in Southern Spain; it was, above all, a chance to slow down, listen, and learn from each other.

Understanding the context: farming where water is scarce

The first day was spent indoors at the University of Málaga, providing a foundation for understanding the **complex, fragile context of Mediterranean organic livestock farming**.

Prof. Paloma Hueso González (Geography Department) presented the climatic, geographical, and social realities of the region, highlighting challenges posed by climate change, including shorter, more intense rainfall events and prolonged dry periods. Participants learned how landscape heterogeneity (from steep grazing areas to olive groves and cereal production) affects farm management. Prof. Hueso also shared strategies to restore soil degraded by overgrazing, including the use of organic amendments, rotational grazing, and careful stocking control, showing how these measures improve resilience under dry conditions.

Francisco de Asís Ruiz Morales, researcher and director of the [Andalusian Shepherd School](#), introduced participants to **organic livestock systems in Andalusia, which are strongly linked to local breeds**. He emphasised two major challenges facing the sector:

- **Generational renewal:** the Andalusian Shepherd School, founded in 2010, trains 18–20 students per year, with 80% staying in the sector. The school also coordinates a network of approximately 150 shepherd trainees.



- **Marketing and product identity:** storytelling, highlighting local breeds and flavours, and organic certification were identified as key strategies to improve market access for meat and dairy products.

The day also included the **People's Bingo** icebreaker, which encouraged participants to connect both personally and professionally. This activity helped building trust, fostered a friendly and open atmosphere, and set the tone for collaborative learning throughout the visit.



Participants playing "People's Bingo". Credit: Paloma Hueso.

Sheep grazing at UNESCO World heritage

A sunny morning welcomed the group to [El Torcal de Antequera](#), a natural area famous for its karst formations and designated UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016. The site is valued for its geology, biodiversity, hiking trails, and breathtaking landscapes.

Here, participants met **Francisco León**, the only farmer authorised to graze his 1,000 organic sheep across the site's 1,200 hectares; a concession renewed through competitive tendering every five years. Alongside two other shepherds, he monitors the flock daily, a task now eased by GPS trackers fitted to 30 animals.

Participants observed the sheep's remarkable adaptation to dry conditions:

- No external water is provided outside summer, yet the flock experiences no heat-stress-related losses.
- Short pastures, Mediterranean shrubs, and scattered holm oaks provide sufficient forage and natural protection against disease.

Francisco shared challenges including limited access to organic abattoirs (forcing lambs into conventional finishing houses and exports), marketing wool, and passing knowledge to the next generation.



Organic sheep herd and participants at *El Torcal de Antequera*. Credits: Anca Moga (left), Álvaro Quintana (right).

Key takeaways:

- Livestock in extreme environments require attentive observation and adaptive management.
- Sustainable grazing is achievable without supplemental inputs in challenging landscapes.
- Market and infrastructure constraints require integrated ecological, technical, and marketing solutions.

Much more than artisan cheese

The visit continued at [Quesería Santa María del Cerro](#) in Villanueva de la Concepción, where **Maribel Romero**, the current owner and fifth generation of farmers, welcomed participants into her family business. Trained as a cheese master, Maribel produces both traditional and innovative Malagueña goat cheeses, winning several prizes. After consolidating the business, she invested in a cheese tasting area, which has evolved into an on-demand restaurant highlighting local cuisine and Malagueña goat products.





Group ready to access the cheese factory and the best group picture ever. Credit: Álvaro Quintana

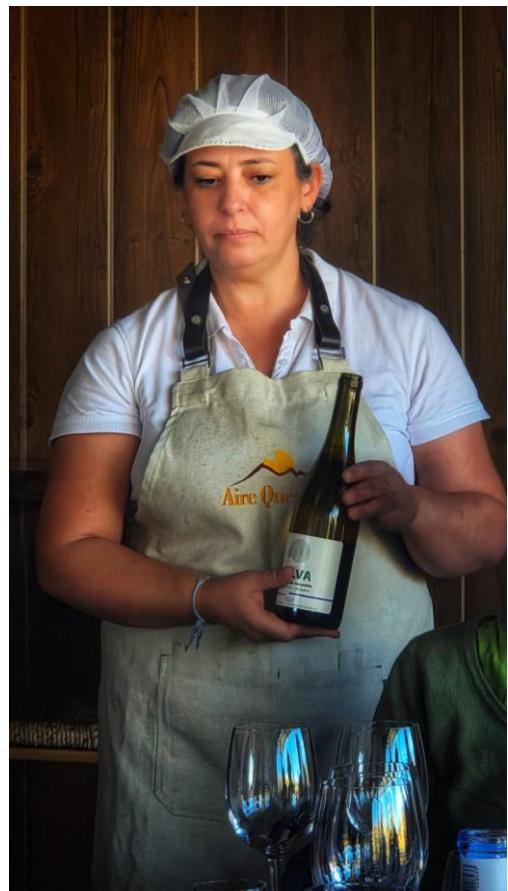
In addition to using milk from her own herd, Maribel produces organic cheeses for **Jorge Antúnez**, a process that required certifying her dairy facilities. Participants were granted an inside look at the factory during the production of truffled goat cheese, filling the air with its enchanting aroma. They observed the full production process for both hard and soft cheeses: the hard cheeses naturally aged thanks to the mould present in the environment, while the soft cheeses are inoculated with *Penicillium albidus* to achieve their characteristic texture and flavour.

Participants also learned about the business model: the enterprise now employs about eight family members in the factory and another eight on the farm. Staff are involved in all aspects of the business, from livestock management to cheese distribution through short supply chains, demonstrating the value of integrated operations.





Cheese tasting platter and Maribel Romero introducing the tasting. Credit: Anca Moga



The group sampled Maribel's cheeses, the organic cheese from Jorge's herd, and three cheeses brought by participants from [Baier Cheesemakers](#) in Transylvania, Romania. A rich lunch featured roasted suckling kid and other local dishes, rounding out the sensory experience.

A meaningful drop in the sea: Jorge Antúnez's organic milking goats

The final day of the visit was dedicated to [Finca-Dehesa El Campillo](#), Jorge Antúnez's organic Malagueña goat farm. Andalusia produces over 40% of Spain's goat milk, yet only 1% of Malagueña goats in Málaga are organic.

Jorge converted to organic 25 years ago, citing dissatisfaction with chemical inputs. He reports similar economic returns, healthier animals, and greater sustainability. His 1,200-hectare farm combines cereal crops, olive groves, and Dehesa grazing. The 1200-animal herd is divided into pregnant and milking does, which sleep in shelters, graze until sunset, and are milked once daily. GPS tracking helps manage the large herd, and feed is supplied only in the milking parlour. Most cereals are produced on-farm under the [Secanos Vivos](#) project, including wheat, buckwheat, vetch, beans, and other legumes.

Collaboration with **Álvaro Fernandez-Blanco**, a veterinary and organic advisor, exemplifies effective advisory relationships. Álvaro's first-year observations led to a 70-page technical report, and improvements since include phytotherapy, herd rotation, and cereal rotation.



Participants received hands-on exposure to herbal treatments and the principles of phytotherapy.



Organic Malagueña goats from Jorge Antúnez's farm. Credit: Juanma Micheo

A light dinner on the farm gave participants the opportunity to reflect on the day and contribute ideas to the visit panels hanging on the walls (pearls, puzzlings, proposals). These inputs fed into next day's World Café activity, reinforcing peer-to-peer learning and collective reflection.

Reflection and soft hands

On the final morning, participants visited [La Casa de la Cabra Malagueña](#) in Casabermeja, a museum and training facility for the Malagueña breed. Here, the group reflected on the three visits and engaged in a hands-on cheese-making activity.

During the World Café, participants synthesised lessons learnt across all sites:

- Adaptability and observation are central to success in Mediterranean organic systems.
- Low-input, context-specific management allows resilience under water scarcity.
- Soft skills and collaboration are essential for effective advisory work.

Proposals for action included:

- Marketing and consumer education initiatives
- Cooperation among producers and advisors



- Small-scale processing and slaughtering solutions
- Using technology and AI for herd management
- Encouraging the next generation of shepherds

The hands-on cheese-making activity brought lessons to life, giving participants a tangible memory of the region's organic livestock, practical skills, and very soft hands.



Participants during the cheese making activity. Credit:

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