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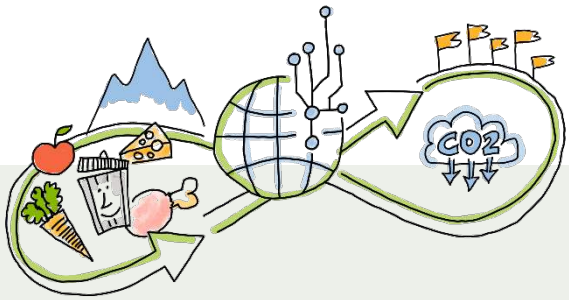

Strengthening Circular Food Hubs in the Alpine Space
Policy Briefs & Recommendations

An Open Letter from the CEFoodCycle Partners to Policymakers Across the Alpine Space

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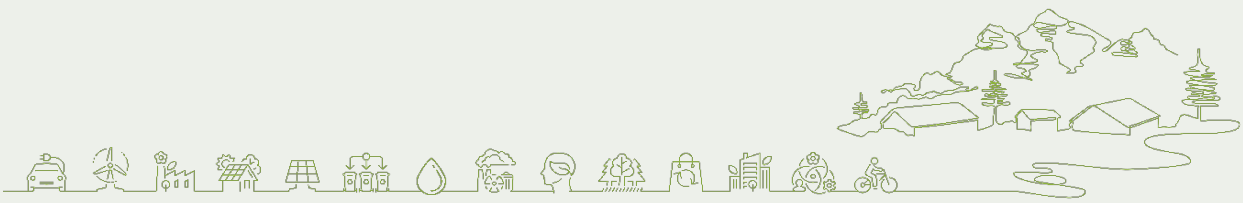

This project is co-funded by the European Union through the Interreg Alpine Space programme.

1. Why Circular Food Hubs Matter

Across Europe, and particularly in the Alpine Space, food systems face rising pressure from climate change, resource scarcity, food waste, and volatile global markets. The transition to circular, resilient, and locally rooted food systems is no longer optional. It is essential for food security, regional competitiveness, and sustainability.

The CEFoodCycle project (2023–2025), co-funded by the Interreg Alpine Space programme, supports this transition by piloting five regional Circular Food Hubs in Salzburg–Bavaria (AT/DE), South Tyrol (IT), Piemonte (IT), Alpes-Maritimes (FR), and Gorenjska (SI). Acting as living laboratories for cooperation, innovation, and policy testing, these hubs bring together farmers, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), food producers, municipalities, hotels, restaurants and catering (HoReCa) actors, researchers, educators, and citizens to co-create circular food solutions tailored to regional contexts.

These five Circular Food Hubs demonstrated that circular transformation is achievable when supported by political recognition, adequate resources, and collaboration across sectors.

This brief complements the Business Model Catalogue of Circular Food Hubs and the partners' regional Exploitation Plans, providing consolidated policy insights and recommendations for replication.

2. Lessons from the Alpine Circular Food Hubs

Despite different contexts the hubs shared several key lessons:

1. **Circular Food Hubs act as bridges between businesses, research, policy, and communities.**
2. **Education and awareness are decisive**.
   Integrating circularity into vocational and higher education strengthens long-term change.
3. **Pilot actions matter**.
   Hands-on initiatives like zero-waste events, design-driven by-product valorisation, and bio-waste management testing proved most effective for behavioural and policy change.
4. **Policy alignment builds legitimacy**.
   Hubs embedded in regional Smart Specialisation or Sustainable Development Strategies achieved stronger institutional support.
5. **Trust takes time**.
   Collaboration flourished where neutral facilitators (chambers, development agencies, universities) coordinated dialogue among diverse stakeholders.

3. What Needs to Change: Policy Priorities

To make Circular Food Hubs effective, replicable, and sustainable, policymakers at regional, national, and EU levels should act in four priority areas:

1. Regulatory Environment for Circular Economy

- **Recognise Circular Food Hubs** as enablers of regional circular economy transitions.
- **Simplify and harmonise regulations** for food donation, by-product reuse, and waste management across borders.
- **Align Circular Food Hubs with Smart Specialisation Strategies**, Circular Economy Roadmaps, and Sustainable Food System policies.
- **Publish sector-specific guidance** (e.g. for hotels, restaurants and catering) to facilitate compliance with food waste and bio-waste obligations.
- **Enable pilot testing under adaptive "sandbox" frameworks** to trial innovative practices without legal risk.

2. Long-Term Funding for Circular Transition

- **Establish multi-annual operational funding** for hub coordination, facilitation, and stakeholder engagement to deliver circular economy outcomes (waste prevention, by-products valorisation, local loops).
- **Mobilise blended finance** combining EU, national, and regional sources (ERDF, LIFE, CAP Strategic Plans, Horizon Europe).
- **Link funding to measurable outcomes,** (e.g., food waste prevention, innovation uptake, awareness, and job creation.
- **Fund pilot projects as "policy labs"** to test regulatory and market solutions before large-scale rollout.

3. Stakeholder and Community Engagement

- **Support structured cross-sector networks** connecting agriculture, tourism, education, and waste management.
- **Integrate circular food topics into vocational education and training, and higher education curricula** and develop train-the-trainer programmes for professionals.
- **Encourage co-creation and peer learning** through workshops, hackathons, and innovation challenges.
- **Launch regional recognition schemes** such as Circular Food Awards such as the CEFoodCycle Award 2024 to reward excellence and raise public awareness.

4. Infrastructure and Digital Support for Circularity

- **Provide dedicated spaces** (innovation labs, co-working hubs) for Circular Food Hub coordination and experimentation.
- **Maintain shared digital platforms** (e.g. FoodCycle.ai) for data-driven decision-making, matchmaking, and visibility.
- **Develop regional data dashboards** tracking circular economy KPIs (e.g., tonnes of food waste prevented, percentages of local sourcing, greenhouse gas emission savings, number of valorised by-products streams).
- **Encourage cross-border data exchange** for transparency and learning within the Alpine Space.

4. A Call to Action

Circular Food Hubs are engines of transformation, turning policy ambition into local action and connecting people, food, and place. To unlock their full potential, policymakers should:

1. **Embed Circular Food Hubs within regional and national strategies** for circular economy, agri-food innovation, and sustainable food systems.
2. **Provide stable funding and governance frameworks** to sustain the development of a circular economy at regional levels.
3. **Support the creation of a transnational network of Circular Food Hubs** to exchange circular economy knowledge, methods, tools and policy models.
4. **Use Circular Food Hubs as delivery mechanisms** for the EU Green Deal and national strategies on sustainable food systems and circular economy.

By doing so, regions can foster food systems that are more resilient, inclusive, and resource-efficient, benefiting communities, businesses, and the environment across the Alpine Space and beyond.

This statement is jointly endorsed by the CEFoodCycle partnership, representing the Circular Food Hubs of Salzburg–Bavaria, South Tyrol, Piemonte, Alpes-Maritimes, and Gorenjska.

Circular Food Hubs across the Alpine Space

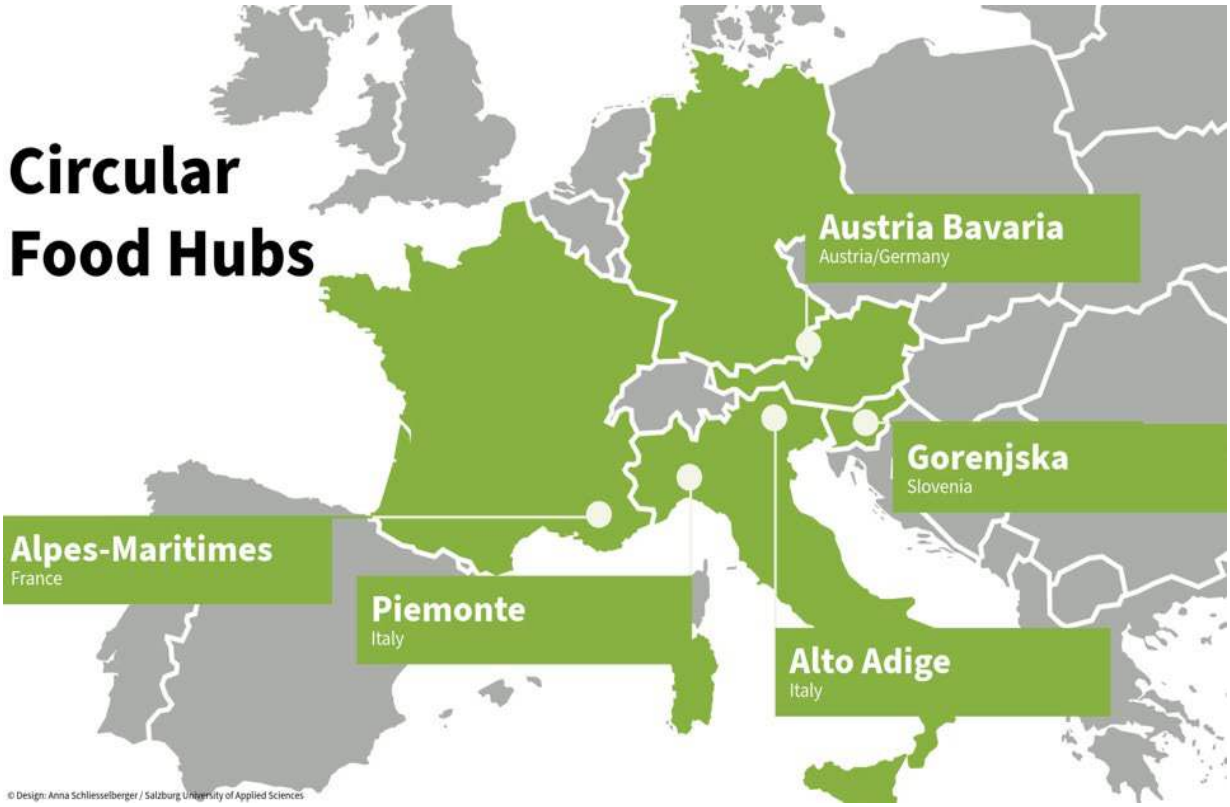

Fig.1: Locations of the Pilot Circular Food Hubs in the Alpine Space

About CEFoodCycle

The CEFoodCycle project (2023–2025), co-funded by the European Union through the Interreg Alpine Space programme, supports the transition towards circular and climate-resilient food systems by piloting five regional Circular Food Hubs. The project promotes cooperation among policymakers, businesses, researchers, and citizens to reduce food waste, foster innovation, and strengthen local economies across the Alpine Space.

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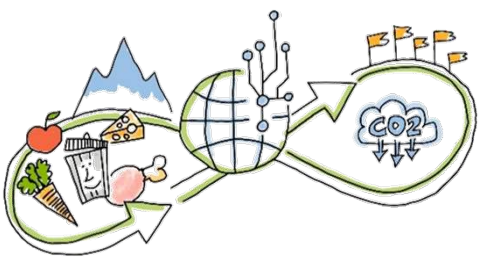

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Learn more:
https://www.alpine-space.eu/project/cefoodcycle/

Project

Interreg Alpine Space CEFoodCycle:
Circular Economy: Mapping Food Streams and Identifying Potentials to Close the Food Cycle