



STORIES

02.

Arla Foods:

"Collaboration across the food value chain is our X factor"

SmartField:

Technology and unique collaboration are the drivers behind the green transition in agriculture

Glenda Napier, Energy Cluster Denmark:

"We're on a journey from silos to sector coupling"



AGRO FOOD PARK

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Editorial: Lousin Hartmann

Translation: Katie Schwarck

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PREFACE

ANNE-MARIE HANSEN

Director

Welcome to Agro Food Park Stories 02

More than 100 companies are based at Agro Food Park, and around 1,700 people work here. That's quite a number! Stories will provide you with an insight into the many companies that are located here by sharing stories about their day-to-day activities. We aim to bring people closer together and increase awareness across Agro Food Park. Although we are located side by side, we do not necessarily know what our neighbours do. Our ambition is to foster a strong sense of community – because what could be better than that? A community where we know one another and can encourage collaboration, dialogue and knowledge-sharing across organisations.

This second edition of the magazine focuses on collaboration. You can read about how value chain partnerships create value across activities, products and outcomes for many companies. Arla Foods, for example, is working to make milk more sustainable and climate-friendly. There are many links in that particular chain, explains Ejnar Schultz, Vice President of Sustainability, Research and Technology at Arla Foods.

We also explore collaborations that cut across industries because new societal agendas call for smarter and more integrated solutions. Glenda Napier, CEO of Energy Cluster Denmark, describes the obvious potential she sees for future collaboration between the energy sector and the agriculture and food industries. You can also read about the Technological Institute, which has received a major grant from the Novo Nordisk Foundation to carry out an initiative aimed at reducing nitrous oxide emissions from Danish agriculture. Ann-Britt Værge, Head of Section at the Technological Institute, and Project Director of the initiative, and Signe Kynding Borgen, Senior Scientific Manager at the Novo Nordisk Foundation, explain the process and the collaboration required to bring the initiative to life – collaboration that Ann-Britt Værge describes as unique.

In a company profile of Akson Robotics, a business based on drone technology, CEO Albert Sonne, explains what it is like to operate in a highly current reality shaped by future opportunities and risk scenarios.

Agro Food Park is constantly evolving. Companies and collaborations are constantly moving forwards and new ideas and dynamics are emerging all the time. Development is continuous and has been for centuries at this location. Archaeological finds from Agro Food Park testify to this, revealing traces of early farmers and self-sufficient agriculture dating back more than 2,000 years. They tell the story of a foundation that we continue to build on today, as Agro Food Park provides the setting for companies within the agriculture and food sectors developing sustainable solutions for a global market.

From past to future: the development plans for Agro Food Park – from overarching plans to internal developments – continue to unfold and adapt in step with societal changes. The green agenda remains ever-present, and the future calls for even more innovative solutions across knowledge areas and industries. You can read about this – and much more – in this magazine.

Happy reading!



Anne-Marie Hansen





Arla Innovation Centre

Climate-friendly milk
from cow to consumer:

*"Collaboration across
the food value chain
is our X factor"*



“When a company like Arla Foods wants to spearhead the sustainability agenda, it has to be out in front in a number of areas.”

*Ejnar Schultz
Vice-President of Sustainability,
Research and Technology
at Arla Foods*

Every link in the chain counts in Arla Foods' efforts to meet its climate ambition of becoming CO₂-neutral by 2050. In just over four years, the organisation is set to achieve its first specific objective: one that requires collaboration across the value chain spanning research, development and innovation.

It takes 24 hours from the time the milk is collected from the farm until it reaches the supermarket. In short: fresh milk from cow to consumer in just one day. That's what Arla24-milk is all about. When it comes to optimising the processes necessary to produce milk that comes as close as possible to being sustainable and climate-friendly, the path is not so straightforward. The work hinges upon a value chain of collaboration that Ejnar Schultz, Vice-President of Sustainability, Research and Technology at Arla Foods, refers to as an extremely powerful asset.

"Denmark is a successful ecosystem that is built upon incredibly strong and trusting cross-disciplinary collaboration that is especially strong in the food value chain. That is our X factor. The spirit of collaboration. We collaborate closely across research, innovation and product development. Our Innovation Centre, where product development is based, is located at Agro Food Park, as is SEGES Innovation, which contributes to the value chain collaboration in so many different ways. And then across the road is Aarhus University. It's unique and valuable for us to have these key partners within close reach in our sustainability work," says Schultz.

Every link in the chain is connected

"When a company like Arla Foods wants to spearhead the sustainability agenda, it has to be out in front in a number of areas. Cows are ruminants and emit methane, so clearly we have an additional obligation to reduce the carbon footprint of our products. My role is to facilitate some of the initiatives in an effort to identify future solutions, so that we can develop and implement them with our farmers," he says.

Arla Foods is owned by 7,400 farmers across seven countries that produce dairy products for consumers across the world. Being a world-leading dairy company that has set its sights on sustainable production involves major responsibilities across the value chain. These responsibilities are rooted in the Science Based Target Initiative (SBTi) of which Arla Foods is a member. Ejnar Schultz

describes it as the Paris Agreement for companies. SBTi, an organisation founded by the UN, has around 90 per cent of the world's largest companies as members – all committed to specific climate targets. Put simply, Ejnar Schultz explains that a company's climate targets are divided into scope 1, 2 and 3. Scope 1 and 2 are largely within a company's own control, scope 3 is the entire value chain, which for Arla Foods includes the farms that account for the largest share of emissions in the value chain. This means that Arla Foods measures and weighs up all links in the value chain in relation to its own reduction targets, which aim for CO₂ neutrality by 2050. One of the key objectives by 2030 is a 30 per cent reduction in scope 3, i.e. at the farms that produce the milk.

"We collect a wide range of data and documentation from individual farms. This is, for example, the feed that is purchased, the use of fertiliser and its application technology and whether or not electricity is renewable. We also calculate energy consumption at the dairies as well as packaging and transport. So for every litre of milk you buy, we have collected the total carbon footprint," explains Ejnar Schultz and continues:

"When we sell our dairy products to Nestlé or Salling Group, for example, these come with a documented carbon footprint. We are their scope 3. They ask us about the carbon footprint of our products because they have also set targets for reducing their climate impact. In this way, we deliver data for each other's plans for delivering climate reductions."

Although signing up to SBTi is voluntary, it does not appear to affect the commitment to deliver. *"This is deadly serious. Companies put in a real effort to deliver and we're challenged to reduce our carbon footprint,"* says Ejnar Schultz, emphasising the importance of initiating measures and implementing them at the farms. All links matter in the effort to make the milk consumers drink as climate-friendly as possible.



Engine for change

It is no small task to implement these changes on farm. *“It’s a complex undertaking because it involves biological processes and we’re dealing with no fewer than three different greenhouse gases,”* says Schultz.

This is why Arla Foods has developed a financial incentive model, FarmAhead, which helps to motivate farmers in the transition to sustainable agriculture. By switching to renewable electricity, supplying to biogas plants, buying sustainable soy and the like, farmers earn points and the more points they earn, the higher the price they receive for their milk.

“FarmAhead is our engine for driving change. And it works. It’s a financial incentive scheme where we allocate funds to a pool and distribute them to the farmers who deliver the strongest sustainability performance,” says Schultz, explaining that farmers are asked to upload the data that documents their work.

SEGES Innovation plays a key role in the value chain collaboration as an independent research and innovation company that supports sustainable agricultural and food production.

Lisbeth Henriksen, CEO of SEGES Innovation which is based at Agro Food Park, explains how SEGES Innovation contributes to the value chain collaboration within the food cluster:

“SEGES Innovation contributes research, data-driven methods and knowledge that translate complex requirements and targets into practical solutions on farms. The collaboration between SEGES Innovation and Arla Foods helps set a new standard for the future of agriculture. SEGES Innovation, for example, has contributed to the development of the measures catalogue that lies at the basis of Arla’s points system, where farmers earn points for measures such as supplying biomass to biogas plants, efficient feeding and renewable energy. The FarmAhead programme provides farmers with specific tools to reduce their carbon footprint.”

Naturtjek (Nature Check) from SEGES Innovation is yet another good example where natural assets on the farm are mapped and action plans drawn up to make efforts measurable and documentable. This enables Arla Foods to show to the outside world that sustainability is not just a promise but a reality,” says Lisbeth Henriksen who is allied with Ejnar Schulz on the approach to carbon reduction.

“We will not achieve CO2 neutrality in 2050 without a great deal of additional research, development and innovation. Innovation is very much about on-farm implementation, and no link in the chain is indispensable. Researchers have detailed knowledge, innovation develops solutions, advisers and farmers understand what can be implemented in practice. Ideally, we want everyone around the table – researchers, farmers and advisers – because the more ready-to-use solutions we can give to farmers, the faster we can implement them,” says Ejnar Schultz describing the closely connected and collaborative value chain that must be in place to reach the target.



Read more about Arla Foods here:

www.arla.com



SmartField:

Technology and unique collaboration are the drivers behind the green transition in agriculture.

A major grant of DKK 134 million from the Novo Nordisk Foundation has propelled an ambitious initiative led by the Danish Technological Institute as the grant recipient. However, it is not the size of the grant that makes the project impressive, it is also the way in which collaboration across those involved – from the funding body to specialised actors – functions, which the Technological Institute sees as a unique process.

SmartField is the name of the initiative spearheaded by the Technological Institute at Agro Food Park: an initiative whose aim is to reduce nitrous oxide emissions from Danish agriculture by 20-30 per cent by 2030 without negatively impacting yields and without increasing nitrogen emissions elsewhere. The initiative, which began in 2024, extends over a five-year period and is a collaboration between a number of actors across disciplines and areas of expertise. In other words, SmartField has been launched to reduce the climate impact from agricultural fields, an initiative that tallies with the Novo Nordisk Foundation's aim of supporting projects that contribute to the development of sustainable and highly efficient agriculture.

"Working as we do with sustainability at the Novo Nordisk Foundation, we look at where planetary boundaries are being exceeded. This is where agriculture plays a role. This is primarily due to nitrogen, which is essential for plant growth and therefore food production. Loss of nitrogen has enormous negative consequences for the health of the planet – both for local aquatic environments and for the global climate due to nitrous oxide emissions. Our aim, therefore, is to contribute to agriculture reducing its climate impact while maintaining high levels of production," says Signe Kynding Borgen, Senior Scientific Manager at the Novo Nordisk Foundation.





NORRONA

She cites SmartField as an example of a project that directly supports Novo Nordisk Foundation's aim of improving planetary health by supporting more environmentally-friendly and efficient ways of farming.

A unique process

The SmartField concept was further developed at a series of workshops organised by the Novo Nordisk Foundation in close collaboration with all key actors in the area. The Technological Institute was responsible for putting together the application in close collaboration with the Land-CRAFT Pioneer Centre at Aarhus University and other partners.

"It became clear that in order to create real impact, we had to connect science-policy-practice together and consequently get closer to the actors operating at field level: those with networks reaching out to farmers. It's important in a project like SmartField that it doesn't become just an academic exercise, but that research and practice come together so that we can test different measures out in the field. The Technological Institute and other partners in SmartField have considerable experience with field trials and established collaborations with the actors necessary to put the results into practice and share knowledge and experience with the authorities," explains Signe Kynding Borgen.

According to Ann Britt Væрге, Head of Section at the Technological Institute and Project Director for SmartField, the process has been iterative and vision-led. The SmartField vision was to create better calculation methods and reduce nitrous oxide emissions – the next step in the process was how this should be done. A process that was driven by strong collaboration between a number of actors – an approach that both the Novo Nordisk Foundation and the Technological Institute agree as being decisive for creating this impact.

"SmartField was developed in collaboration between the Novo Nordisk Foundation and the project group. We also worked closely with international experts in the area, which underpinned the application. This unique collaboration in terms of developing the application has been part of the SmartField concept and has given us a common understanding of our objectives from the start," says Ann Britt Væрге.

Evidence-based knowledge as the basis

Ultimately, it is the authorities that make the crucial decisions and set the regulations for the future of agriculture and the authorities that are responsible for reporting Denmark's national emissions. They are, therefore, an observing partner in SmartField.

"SmartField contributes the most comprehensive datasets to date and model-based calculations of nitrous oxide emissions and the effect of various technologies on these emissions. Our aim is for this to provide a basis for decision-making, both at the political level and for individual farmers," says Ann Britt Væрге.

Creating a scientific basis for driving change in the agriculture and food system is key to the Novo Nordisk Foundation and is one of the reasons why SmartField has received support from the foundation.

"It is through evidence-based knowledge that the authorities must develop the regulations that set the framework for agricultural production in Denmark. Quantifying the environmental and climate impacts of agricultural production as accurately as possible is essential to create the necessary incentives that drive a sustainable transition," says Signe Kynding Borgen.

Collaboration as a driver

SmartField is an example of how value chain collaboration across institutions and expertise can accelerate the green transition. The agriculture and food system of the future is built on collaboration between actors across the entire value chain, which is one of the reasons why the Novo Nordisk Foundation supports SmartField.

"When we work with the development of projects that support the green transition in Denmark, we try to bring experts together who would not otherwise have worked together. Individual actors do not always have established forums for collaboration or even for getting together. SmartField was developed in part to create the framework for key actors in the area to come together and develop solutions to a challenge that cuts across disciplines," says Signe Kynding Borgen.

The aim is clear: a documented reduction of nitrous oxide emissions of up to 30 per cent by 2030. But the project also points to a way of working together whereby shared visions, an interdisciplinary approach and long-term thinking form the foundation.

"It's about creating solutions that make sense and providing value by continuously engaging with other stakeholders. It's also about keeping abreast of developments in a wider context to ensure that our work is relevant and that we keep our vision firmly in focus. We have adopted a long-term view and have drawn on each other's expertise in the co-creation process that has led to the development of SmartField. Although the process has been longer than what we know from other contexts, it is now clear, as the project gets underway, that the collaboration behind its development is paying off," says Ann Britt Væрге.

FACTS:

Grant provider:

The Novo Nordisk Foundation

SmartField partners:

Danish Technological Institute
Land-CRAFT Pioneer Centre
Aarhus University
Copenhagen University
SEGES Innovation
Colorado State University

Read more about

SmartField here:
www.smartfield.dk



It's important in a project like SmartField that it doesn't become just an academic exercise, but that research and practice come together so that we can test different measures out in the field.

*Signe Kynding Borgen
Senior Scientific Manager,
The Novo Nordisk Foundation.*





“We’re on a journey from silos to sector coupling”

According to Glenda Napier, CEO of Energy Cluster Denmark, the interaction between energy, agriculture and the food sectors is of growing importance as the green transition demands new solutions. By way of clarification, she outlines the potential of cross-sector collaboration, the solutions that require collaboration and some of the elements needed to build bridges.

Where do you see the energy, agriculture and food sectors conjoining?

Historically, energy, agriculture and food have always been linked by biogas, which is produced from organic waste by-products from agriculture and households. We’re seeing the interplay between the three areas become increasingly relevant, particularly since February 2022. We need to become independent of Russian gas, while also reducing fossil energy sources, including gas that is not green.

Where do you see this interaction becoming more relevant?

Focus on biogas has increased in recent years, as has the interest in pyrolysis (ed. a process for breaking down biomass/organic residual waste) which is an age-old technology. A third element is biogenic CO₂, which originates directly from nature. I see the link between the energy sector and the agriculture and food sectors as lying in these three areas and I believe that the overlaps will become clearer as a result of the green transition, society’s need to reduce CO₂ and the necessity of moving away from fossil fuels. As a result, the link between the sectors will become stronger.

Where are we currently?

The biogas value chain is reasonably well established and function-

ing well. Although it is a mature area, it is still growing and needs to adapt to new technologies. There are also some export opportunities that need to be exploited. In the two other areas, the value chains are still in the process of taking shape. The pyrolysis sector must achieve technological maturity to enable the scaling up of production facilities – there is a real need to scale up to deliver the bio-oil required for producing green aviation fuel. We can capture and purify biogenic CO₂, but we must also learn how to use it. Demand is what we’re all waiting for. This is where we need cluster organisations and actors such as Agro Food Park and others to ensure that these value chains connect. This means companies working together and knowledge institutions being involved across disciplines. We need to help bring these value chains together and mature them.

How do we do that?

In my view, we need to bring actors together physically – as you’ve done at Agro Food Park – where the meeting of various areas of expertise drives results. Energy Cluster Denmark’s role is to get the companies in the energy sector to increase joint innovation and become more innovation-driven, to participate in the best projects and ultimately generate revenue. We cultivate innovation projects that sit within this area. By doing so, we bring together actors who go on to collaborate. Our role is to match the right actors and build bridges to the agriculture and food sectors – and help mature the value chains. In other words, we promote innovation projects, but we also ensure that public funding is available for these types of projects. Besides which, the entire business support system needs to enhance private investors’ focus on new technology areas. In my opinion, there is scope for further development across the sectors we’re talking about. As regards the green

Energy Cluster Denmark

is a national cluster organisation with 500 members across the energy sector, appointed by the Danish Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs and the Danish Business Development Board.

The purpose of Energy Cluster Denmark is to facilitate innovation collaboration within the energy sector and bring together partnerships and entrepreneurs, small and medium-sized companies, knowledge institutions, utility companies and public authorities.

tripartite agreement, substantial funding has been allocated to the development of pyrolysis. There are many elements involved in ensuring we mature these value chains together.

Is it all about collaboration?

Yes, it is. We're on a journey from working in silos to sector coupling, which means that we should look beyond our own professional community and towards other actors. We also need professional meeting places where we can discuss our respective fields, exchange knowledge and gain new insights because this will result in us developing something new together. A physical meeting place like Agro Food Park is highly relevant. We need something like this.

Who needs to be involved to get things moving?

You (Agro Food Park) and I (Energy Cluster Denmark) are both facilitators who can get things moving a bit quicker. Ultimately, however, it's all about companies and knowledge institutions working together, e.g. GTS Institutes (Approved Technological Service) and universities. Research institutions and companies need to collaborate, but first and foremost, companies must see that there are profits, competitiveness and innovation potential to be gained by pursuing this path. One example of such collaboration is the SkyClean Scale-up innovation project, which is scaling up pyrolysis technology through a new plant in Vrå in Jutland.

How do you see the future potential for cross-sector collaboration?

From a broad perspective, I see a need to strengthen collaboration between the energy sector and the agriculture and food sectors. This could be Energy Cluster Denmark, Agro Food Park, which also includes Food & Bio Cluster Denmark, getting together to drive partnerships and knowledge sharing, specifically by collaborating on events. This is part of it. There is also the communications aspect, which is about presenting these cases, as you do, and building bridges by describing the journey from silo to sector coupling. There will be greater focus on this area. New communities will emerge and we will see greater collaboration in the years ahead.

“From a broad perspective, I see a need to strengthen collaboration between the energy sector and the agriculture and food sectors.”

Glenda Napier, CEO i Energy Cluster Denmark

How do you see Denmark’s role in the development of these technologies?

I believe there will be a strong demand for these technologies around the world, which means enormous export potential. Denmark is a good test case. We can show that it’s possible to mature these technologies and make them scalable. We have a strong agricultural sector and a strong energy sector – we can show that it can be done. There are different energy systems around the world – some don’t use biogas, but there are markets where there will be customers. Some places already have biogas and are using it. But I believe that Denmark can take the lead and show the world how to succeed in producing green fuel, capturing and using biogenic CO2 and increasing green gas in the gas grid.

Is Denmark a frontrunner?

Denmark has a strong starting point, but I believe that some companies would argue that the framework conditions, particularly for pyrolysis, are currently more favourable in other countries. My point is that Denmark’s strength lies in its strong energy and agricultural sectors. But this must also be supported by the right funding and the right framework conditions. Innovation requires new ways of thinking and the right framework conditions to be put in place.



FAKTA

Biomass:

A collective term for all organic material. Biomass used for energy primarily includes wood (chipped wood), plants, and agricultural residue (e.g. straw and manure). Used both in biogas production and pyrolysis processes.

Biogas:

A biological decomposition process whereby biomass is converted into biogas. It is used for electricity and heat production or injected into the natural gas grid. The residual product, digestate, can be used as fertiliser.

Pyrolyse:

A chemical process that breaks down biomass without oxygen. It produces three products: biochar, pyrolysis gas and pyrolysis oil. Biochar can be spread on agricultural land which helps sequester CO2. Pyrolysis gas and oil can be used for electricity and heat generation but has a lower energy content than biogas.

Sources: CONCITO, AU, Wikipedia m. fl.



Read more about Energy Cluster Denmark:
www.energycluster.dk





*Photo:
Poul Mørk,
Agro Food Park*

Agro Food Park under development

Agro Food Park is evolving in line with global changes and key international agendas. This naturally changes the conditions for the agriculture and food sectors and actively influences the direction of how Agro Food Park will develop both in terms of its expertise and its physical environment. Many companies based at Agro Food Park are involved in the green transition at the intersection of knowledge, innovation and practical application, and this goes hand in hand with plans for new industry specialisations and the expansion of the Agro Food Park area.

“This is why it’s time to take a longer view. Alongside Aarhus municipality, therefore, we are currently revising the municipal plan for the Agro Food Park area and preparing a new local development plan.”

Anne-Marie Hansen, Director, Agro Food Park

There is growing uncertainty in Denmark and across the world. Geopolitics, trade disputes, VAT on food, the climate, the Green Tripartite Agreement and more are all affecting the agriculture and food sectors. According to Anne-Marie Hansen, Director of Agro Food Park, this inevitably creates some turbulence in the industry. Nevertheless, she believes the environment at Agro Food Park is resilient.

“In unsettled times, people look for stability – that’s a natural response. You don’t relocate or make major changes, but stay put and remain focused”.

For many companies based at Agro Food Park that focus is closely linked with the current societal agenda, which calls for action.

“What is happening as a result of the Green Tripartite Agreement, and the focus on land use, is affecting a number of the companies and organisations at Agro Food Park in different ways. It goes right to the heart of what many of the companies are working on and developing towards. For several, it’s a professional challenge,” she explains.

More sectors at Agro Food Park

Another positive challenge is the development of Agro Food Park. In Stories 01, we announced that Agro Food Park aims to expand its industry focus to include healthcare and green energy: *“Agriculture and the food sector play a role in addressing major global challenges. In that way, many of the major agendas are interconnected,”* says Anne-Marie Hansen.

That ambition is now a step closer to becoming a reality as the plans have been approved in Aarhus’ new municipal development plan. This marks the first step towards its integration into Agro Food Park’s official development plan. *“We’ve been waiting to get the go-ahead and the formal framework in place, so we haven’t actually brought it to market yet. But now we can start to define more precisely how we want to do it,”* says Anne-Marie Hansen, who sees Agro Food Park as an area that will increasingly create impact and deliver sustainable solutions to global challenges.

Area development

The Agro Food Park area is also set to develop physically, including the construction of new buildings. In the spring of 2026, the plots west of the Aarhus University – the last available plots within the current local development plan for Agro Food Park – will be prepared for development.

“This is why it’s time to take a longer view. Alongside Aarhus municipality, therefore, we are currently revising the municipal plan for the Agro Food Park area and preparing a new local development plan. The new local plan will incorporate additional building rights, which will provide opportunities for more buildings. The total area we’re developing will be larger, but not all of it will necessarily be built on. We also want to create a larger biodiversity project on the northern section of our site, which will serve a number of purposes. It will provide recreational space for our users and an area where we can manage rainwater. Consequently, our plan is to take more land out of

agricultural production and repurpose it for agricultural use,” explains Anne-Marie Hansen about the local plan currently underway, which is expected to be completed in 2028.

Developments on the inside

In addition to the broader development agenda, there is also a strong focus internally on creating an environment – both in terms of physical space and events – that is continually being adapted and developed for the benefit of its users.

“We’re constantly working to make our buildings inspiring places to work in. Right now, we are getting ready to open a fitness centre at Agro Food Park. We’re also developing a more inviting atmosphere at number 13, with plans for a small orangery where people can share plant cuttings, for example. We’re also planning a small lending library and a games corner. In other words, we’re continually developing our existing spaces to ensure they remain pleasant and inspiring to be in.”

Agro Food Park also offers and facilitates professional and social events and communities throughout the year, both for people within and outside Agro Food Park. Community forum is a new initiative where Agro Food Park users can contribute ideas for activities and get involved in planning and hosting them.



Agro Food Park’s two major recurring events:

The events are announced regularly on Agro Food Park’s website and on LinkedIn, where you can stay updated and sign up.

- **May:**
Farming, Trends & Sustainability/
Food, Trends & Sustainability
- **September:**
Career Day 2026

Additional arrangements and activities in Agro Food Park:

- Morning Masterclass
- VÆKSTmorgen
- Speed networking
- Drop-in meetings
- Yogateams every monday
- Lunch Networkmeetings
- Community forum

Read more about Agro Food Park:

www.agrofoodpark.dk

Follow us on LinkedIn: [agrofoodpark](https://www.linkedin.com/company/agrofoodpark)



Drones on the agenda





In today's world, drones play a significant role – albeit an ambiguous one. They are used for everything from military operations to precision agriculture. For Akson Robotics, whose core product is based on drone technology, this sometimes means operating at the intersection of progress and concerns about its potential.



In many ways, the future is already present at Akson Robotics' office at Agro Food Park 13. Behind their screens works a young and visionary team. Along the windowsills, Star Wars figures are displayed alongside drones – the subject of this article. Akson Robotics has developed CropUp, a software product that analyses drone imagery and transforms it into precise spray maps for farmers: *“for the benefit of both the farmer’s bottom line and the environment,”* says Albert Sonne, CEO at Akson Robotics.

From university ideas to world leading technology

It wasn't simply a clever idea – but one that stemmed from the deep expertise developed by three robotics engineers from Aalborg University – today all co-founders of Akson Robotics. This is evidenced by the large ceremonial cheque of DKK 250,000 from AAU's start-up grant, which is propped up against the far wall.

“At university, we discovered that we were highly proficient in artificial intelligence and image recognition. Actually, Akson Robotics is rather a misleading name because we thought we were building a complete solution. But then we found out that many companies can build drones, but not many can create high quality AI,” says Albert Sonne. Against that backdrop, Akson Robotics decided to leave drone hardware to others and focus all resources on AI. They became first movers in applying deep-learning, where artificial intelligence imitates the brain's neural networks. A method that, within the software, is trans-

lated into highly detailed field mapping.

Akson Robotics moved into Agro Food Park in 2024 to be close to SEGES Innovation and the Danish Technological Institute, who work with them on a daily basis. There are currently six full-time staff and several part-timers who monitor incoming data from the farmers.

Digitalised agriculture

Albert Sonne describes what is currently taking place as a digital revolution in agriculture. Today, everything must be logged and documented digitally. Agriculture must be greener, and technology is set to play a key role. CropUp is a tool for farmers: by having their fields flown over, they can upload the material into the system, which precisely shows where a field needs to be sprayed and where it does not. The farmer therefore saves money and achieves higher yields while protecting the environment.

“The green transition in agriculture benefits everyone. Agriculture is an industry that produces food for a population that is constantly growing. At the same time, farmers must become more efficient and more demands are placed upon them. At Akson Robotics, our mission is to support farmers,” explains Albert Sonne, about the purpose behind the development of CropUp, which is specifically targetted at agriculture.

Technological progress and fear-based scenarios

When, in connection with an EU summit in Denmark, a ban on drone flights was



introduced in the autumn of 2025, Albert Sonne entered the debate:

"We unofficially represented farmers in the media debate, as they stood to lose a lot from such a ban had they not been part of the discussions – and they weren't." Albert Sonne explains that the ban resulted in several drone flight cancellations, which could have had consequences for farmers.

"Precision spraying and drones don't receive much attention in the media, even though farmers are actually doing good," he says, explaining why it was important for him to put himself forward. According to Albert Sonne, the way drones are portrayed in the media has made people suspicious when drones fly over fields. As a result, several of Akson Robotics' drone pilots now knock on neighbours' doors before a flight.

In addition to their use as weapons in warfare, drones play an important role in other peaceful contexts, where technology solves valuable tasks, including in the building and construction sector and in agriculture where the technology contributes to greener agriculture.

Albert Sonne acknowledges the dilemma, but believes there is a better way to address security issues that allows space for both EU summits and farmers:

"Technology has reached a level where it is now possible to identify and track drones during flight within controlled air space. Drones send out identification data that

can be picked up locally, and which enable authorities to see who is responsible for a given flight. A number of mechanisms already exist that support the responsible and safe use of drones. A general ban on drone flights would therefore be a step backwards in terms of technological development."

A Blessing and a Curse

Albert Sonne points out that several advanced drone technologies are on the brink of breaking through, in part as a result of Denmark heavily investing in drones for defence. Akson Robotics is following these developments closely:

"Drones are becoming better and cheaper. The cameras and sensors are increasing in quality. Drones will fly faster and will become easier for farmers to operate. They will also become more sophisticated, allowing them to handle tasks more autonomously. All these factors will make it easier for farmers to get started on using drones on their farms. For now, we're keeping an eye on which emerging innovations we can use." And while Akson Robotics waits, they continue to develop at full speed themselves:

"Some people believe that Akson Robotics has one of the best AI solutions for drone imagery in agriculture, but as AI becomes increasingly accessible, more players will be able to do similar things to us. We'll be faced with some highly skilled competitors," says Albert Sonne, but calmly adds that: *"our developers are already working on new things and new algorithms."*

Akson Robotics is currently at a stage where it's all about developing new AI initiatives.

"We need to move into other operational areas and CropUp must develop into more than just weed detection because it has great potential. A farm manager once said that only imagination sets the limits for CropUp. And that's both a blessing and a curse. Once users get going, their imagination really takes off, and they want to map this and that. But we need to prioritise because we're still a small company," he says with a glimpse into the future: *"Where are we heading? We'll follow the direction that industry is pointing us towards and then we'll develop at full speed, making sure to reach as many people as possible, so we can help make a real difference. 2026 will be a busy year for Akson Robotics."*



Read more about Akson Robotics here:
www.akson-robotics.com



Agro Food Park has its roots in Iron Age agriculture

More than 2,000 years ago, in the area we now call Agro Food Park, the land was cultivated by our ancestors in a landscape characterised by wetlands, streams and rivers. At the time, agriculture was subsistence-based, with crop cultivation and livestock farming ensuring the survival of individual families. Agro Food Park is now a centre for companies in the agriculture and food sectors, supporting the development of sustainable solutions for a global market.





Before long, the yellow markers will be pulled up from the ground and the area once again covered by the mounds of soil that have built up around the excavated trial trenches behind Aarhus University's building at Agro Food Park. Soon, there will be no visible trace of Mogens Høgsberg's and Lise Hjort Riishede's archaeological excavations uncovering evidence of earlier human presence here – just as their own traces will, in time, be erased again when the soil covers the site after a few months of investigation and documentation of past finds.

"It's not at all surprising that our predecessors chose this exact spot to settle. We're on a small moraine hill in the landscape, which slopes towards the south, north and east. It's a location that is absolutely typical for an Iron Age settlement – in terms of sunlight, dryness and providing a good view and overview of the surrounding landscape," explains Mogens Høgsberg about what led Iron Age farmers to settle on this location approximately 2,000 years ago.

A good area with difficult subsoil

"We've found three longhouses here, and the fact that the settlement isn't larger is almost certainly because the subsoil here is extremely difficult," he says, pointing to the heavy clay and, in particular, the number of stones. *"There are stones everywhere, from small rocks to large boulders. It must have been a nightmare for Iron Age farmers digging postpoles here, using nothing but wooden spades."*

He points to a GPS-mapped plan from the preliminary survey that resulted in the excavation. Brown patches mark areas of past activity.



"We place yellow marker sticks point-down in the ground wherever we find something, and turn them over as we investigate each area," says Mogens Høgsbjerg, pointing to yellow sticks protruding from the ground here and there, in some places clearly making out a shape.

"Here we have four postholes and that's definitely been a house. When it looks like this, we're dealing with the early Iron Age, the Pre-Roman Iron Age, around 2,000 to 2,500 years ago. The houses were relatively small back then, about 10 to 12 metres long, and these houses have three to four sets of roof truss posts, which are the postholes where the posts were placed in the ground and supported the roof of the house," he says. Other marked areas on the plan indicate refuse pits and cooking pits.

"At that time, they farmed both crops and animals, as people did for many centuries before farming became more specialised. In many ways, they were farmers in the classic sense. It was a great place for keeping animals and a good place to settle – but a frustrating place to build," explains Mogens Høgsbjerg.

History is hidden in the finds

Archaeologists often find pottery in the refuse pits – as they have done here. The pottery can help determine the period the settlement dates from:

"It is partly on the basis of the pottery, but also the way in which the houses are constructed that we can determine a dating. In this case, we're probably looking at Pre-Roman Iron Age. Once the

pottery has been cleaned, we take a closer look at the types of vessels, the shape of the rims, and whether there is any decoration. We can then narrow down the dating, explains Mogens Høgsberg about the next stage of the process which follows after he and Lise Hjort Riishede have documented the archaeological remains and filled the excavation back in.

The final results of the excavation, however, will take some time. According to Annemette Kjærgaard, Museum Curator at Moesgaard Museum, it can take a couple of years to analyse the soil samples, carry out flotation, and perform radiocarbon dating (carbon 14). She is responsible for the archaeology that precedes construction projects such as this one at Aggro Food Park, where building work will begin soon.

"We've now completed about half of the work – the fieldwork – and are about to begin everything else. A large number of soil samples have been taken, and we'll mainly use them to date the individual houses. We're interested to discover what kind of settlement this is – whether it's a village, meaning houses that existed at the same time, or a single farm where the houses replaced one another over time, which means their location changed slightly over time.

"We can't see any evidence of a fence as no postholes for one have been found. Normally, there would be such evidence to keep chickens and pigs from wandering off. This could be because it was not possible to dig very deep because of the subsoil, so perhaps the fence was marked above the topsoil. But it could



also have been a shieling settlement – a seasonal dwelling used by farmers in the summer to enable their animals to graze. They then returned to the main farm in the autumn. We'll get our answer from the soil samples we've taken for radiocarbon dating," says Annemette Kjærgaard.

"If this is a shieling settlement, I would expect many of the vessels to be strainers used for processing dairy products. We will only know once the pottery has been cleaned. The soil samples will also tell us what type of vegetation there was – whether there was a significant amount of cereal cultivation, or whether the area consisted of forest or heathland, as well as the types of weed. If it does turn out to be a shieling settlement, it may be difficult to determine how this site connects to others – it could be just across the stream (to the southeast) or further away," says Annemette Kjærgaard, who points out that settlements from the same period with a similar layout have previously been identified not far from Agro Food Park.

Subsistence as a way of life

Agriculture was fundamental to the farmers' existence. They were self-sufficient, living from the crops they cultivated themselves and the animals they kept. A good harvest could mean the difference between survival and famine, and daily life was closely linked to the forces of nature.

"The crops included various types of cereals, such as wheat for baking and porridge, and barley for brewing beer. However, a poor harvest could lead to hunger during winter, which was tough. Houses were poorly heated, lighting was inadequate and cooking took place indoors, resulting in smoky conditions. Child mortality was high," explains Annemette Kjærgaard about the living conditions of Iron Age farmers.

From local fields to international industry

Although agriculture in the Iron Age was primarily based on subsistence, development was already underway. Over time, both the population and the need for structure in farming increased and production gradually extended beyond the individual farm's own household.

"The Iron Age is a long period during which things change. Developments began to take place across Europe, and the population began to increase. During the Iron Age, there was significant export of oxen and cattle. People became very skilled at living off agriculture, and the fertile soil of eastern Jutland made it an attractive area for farming," explains Annemette Kjærgaard, adding: *"It was a well-established agricultural society where property rights were relatively clearly defined and almost all land was owned by someone."*

The transition from local subsistence to trade and export laid the early foundations of today's food industry. Over time, it has evolved into a global value chain in which efficiency, innovation and sustainability are key competitive drivers.

Traces of the past – solutions for the future

The excavation on the moraine hill at Agro Food Park has now largely been mapped within the landscape shaped by the last Ice Age, which created the small hills. The archaeological work has now entered its next phase.

"That's how it is with archaeology: it takes a very long time before the results are available. It's a process. And every time we start with the basic question – whether we're dealing with a unique find or not. Both outcomes are equally important if you ask me," says Annemette Kjærgaard.

Although the finds at Agro Food Park do not reveal anything unique in an archaeological sense, but rather the ordinary living conditions of people who lived off agriculture here more than 2,000 years ago, they still put our present into perspective. Where farming in the past at Agro Food Park was about feeding one's own family, today it is about ensuring sustainable solutions for a global agricultural and food industry.



THE AGRO FOOD PARK

TEAM

The Agro Food Park team is responsible for servicing buildings - internally and externally, creating networks events, communicating internally and externally and bringing new companies into Agro Food Park.



ANNE-MARIE HANSEN
Director
amh@agrofoodpark.dk



POUL BLAABJERG
Director of Development
pbla@agrofoodpark.dk



SØREN MADSEN
Community Manager
srma@agrofoodpark.dk



JANNE PLØEN
Project Manager for Properties
jpl@agrofoodpark.dk



STIG EISNER
Building Manager
seis@agrofoodpark.dk



POUL MØRK
Technical Support Engineer
poum@agrofoodpark.dk



TOMMY RATHCKE
Technical Service Supporter
tora@agrofoodpark.dk



IOSIF SERGIU MATISOVSCHI
Service Engineer
iosm@agrofoodpark.dk



TINA SAWONG-CARLSEN
Reception
tica@agrofoodpark.dk



TINA HALD NIELSEN
Reception
tih@agrofoodpark.dk



RIKKE JUEL ANDERSEN
Reception
riju@agrofoodpark.dk



MATHIAS WISMAR
HALVORSEN
Student assistant
mawh@agrofoodpark.dk



LOUSIN HARTMANN
Head of Communications
loha@agrofoodpark.dk

AGRO FOOD PARK

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