

Farmers and non-farmers are both worried about climate change and willing to act, but underestimate each other's worry and willingness¹

Lucie Martin, Shane Timmons, and Pete Lunn

June 2026

ESRI Research Bulletins provide short summaries of work published by ESRI researchers and overviews of thematic areas covered by ESRI programmes of research. Bulletins are designed to be easily accessible to a wide readership.

Introduction

Climate change is a collective action problem that urgently requires people to work together. Most people decide whether to cooperate based on whether they think others will too. However, perceptions of others can be inaccurate due to "pluralistic ignorance" (when people collectively underestimate the majority's views) and false consensus effects (when people overestimate how common their own view is). This could be harmful for climate action, as different groups in the population (e.g., urban residents, farmers) are asked to contribute in different ways and may not directly see others' cooperative actions.

This study investigates climate misperceptions within and across groups. It compares how farmers and the (non-farmer) rural and urban

1 This ESRI Research Bulletin summarises the findings from: Martin, L., Timmons, S., & Lunn, P. D. (2026). 'Misperceptions of Climate Attitudes Among Farmers and the General Public'. Environmental Research Letters. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ae6c38>. Corresponding author: lucie.martin@esri.ie.

public see their own, their peers', and each other's worry about climate change and willingness to take climate actions.

Data and methods

We undertook an original survey in Ireland. We surveyed 467 farmers (from diverse regions and farm types) and 1,200 non-farmers (600 urban residents and 600 rural residents). Participants in each of these three groups rated their own worry about climate change and willingness to take climate action, then rated farmers and the general public using the same scales. For the general public, climate action involved various lifestyle changes (e.g., transport, energy, and food choices), while for farmers it involved using climate-friendly farming methods and technologies. Thus, we compared actual and perceived levels of worry and willingness, within and across groups.

Results

Both farmers and non-farmers expressed worry about climate change and willingness to take climate action. However, all groups (except farmers themselves) underestimated farmers' worry and willingness, and all groups underestimated the general public's worry and willingness. In other words, there is widespread pluralistic ignorance. Rural and urban non-farmers did not differ in their perceptions.

We also found strong false consensus effects. The more that people were worried and willing to act, the more they thought other people were - and vice-versa. False consensus effects were larger than pluralistic ignorance effects, suggesting that individual biases may be even more important than collective misperceptions.

Conclusions

These findings help to advance our understanding of misperceptions that hinder climate action. They highlight the need for communications

to counter misperceptions by emphasising that positive attitudes to climate action are, in fact, the norm. Moreover, there is no evidence of an urban-rural divide in attitudes to climate change.