

# Rural Areas NEWSLINK

NEWSLETTER FOR AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL  
DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

## Integrating the Environment into Agricultural Policy

The protection of the environment and natural values has become an important element of modern social and economic life. Society is aware of the decline in our natural resource base and the increasing socio-economic costs of environmental pollution. To reverse negative environmental trends it is necessary to integrate environmental objectives directly into sectoral policies. Against this background the Hungarian Government has recently adopted a National Environmental Programme that spells out the environmental protection tasks for different sectors of the economy, among others agriculture.

In September 1999 the Hungarian Government issued a decree on the 'National Agri-environment Programme and the measures necessary for its introduction'. This programme is part of the Hungarian efforts to prepare for the implementation of EU agricultural policies and instruments on accession to the EU. Agri-environment programmes are an obligatory part of EU rural development policy. Agri-environmental policy in Hungary will focus on two major areas:

- Protection of natural and biological resources, and
- Quality assurance for food and non-food products.

The protection of natural resources and high standards of food safety are interdependent and mutually re-inforcing. Both will contribute to building an image of Hungarian agriculture as producing 'healthy, premium quality and safe food from a clean environment'. Hungary has outstanding agro-ecological potential, a rich tradition of farming and food production but limited energy resources and high unemployment in rural areas. This makes it advisable to move away from an industrialised agriculture that requires costly imports of fertilisers, chemicals, machines and fuel. Low quality mass production of this kind will continue to depend on export subsidies and disadvantage the Hungarian countryside and the character of its products.

Technological innovation is not enough to

advance from industrialised agriculture to quality production that meets the social needs of rural areas. Such a step change requires a new conceptual framework and different policy instruments.

At EU level the model of multi-functional agriculture recognises that farming is not only responsible for the production of food and non-food products, but also contributes to the environmental, social and cultural quality of rural areas and landscapes. The Hungarian agri-environmental programme follows this concept and sets out seven objectives:

- wide scale introduction of environmentally friendly agricultural production methods;
- establishment of a sustainable agricultural land use, based on the agro-ecological potential of different areas;
- increasing the production of high quality, competitive products;
- diversification of rural employment and income opportunities;
- improvement and exploitation of the tourism potential of rural areas;
- successful linkage to other rural development measures such as marketing and processing;
- environmental awareness raising among producers and other rural inhabitants.

One of the key instruments for realising these ambitious goals is the implementation of agri-environment schemes. Hungary is investing considerable national resources into the preparation of the national agri-environment programme. We hope that the EU SAPARD programme will provide co-financing for the implementation of pilot agri-environment schemes in this country.

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ISSUE 6 | APRIL 2000

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Edited by Jan-Erik Petersen  
of IEEP London  
Design: [www.edition.co.uk](http://www.edition.co.uk)  
This newsletter is financially supported  
by the PIN-MATRA programme of the  
Government of the Netherlands.  
ISSN 1561 591X



IEEP London

[www.ieep.org.uk](http://www.ieep.org.uk)

Views expressed within this Newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of the editors, supporting organisations or the publisher.

# New Concepts for Romanian Mountain Areas

## Combining Rural Development and Agri-environmental Measures

The Romanian Carpathians still harbour wildlife of European importance in their alpine pastures, mountain forests and small-scale farming. The mountain areas were least touched by agricultural collectivisation during the Communist era and maintain many features of traditional farming systems. However, mountain communities are often poor, isolated and have little prospect of economic development. This leads to an ageing of the population and, sometimes, to an unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, such as forests. New concepts are required that combine an adequate income for local communities with the protection of the environmental heritage.

Low input, small scale agricultural systems are a reliable source of food and limited income to farmers in mountain areas. They provide opportunities for long term production of high quality products, e.g. through organic farming. However, to be economically viable such systems need a premium above the average market price or payments for the environmental services they provide to society. Plans for developing mountain agriculture, therefore, need to pay particular attention to marketing measures, the building of brands, producer co-operatives, to rural development measures aiming at diversification and new services such as agro-tourism. Agri-environment measures are a key part of such a concept as they enable farmers to take care of wildlife and landscape for the common good and for maintaining an attractive local environment.

A Romanian working group, consisting of representatives from government ministries, research institutes and environmental organisations, has elaborated

proposals for pilot areas in the Carpathian mountains that combine rural development and agri-environmental measures. The proposals relate to four different fields: environmental resource protection, cultural heritage, conservation management, and marketing and processing.

The resource protection measures include guidelines for the spreading and use of organic fertilisers to prevent water pollution (buffer zones etc.), the promotion of locally appropriate crop rotations, grants for animal waste storage, and the conversion of arable land to grassland to limit soil erosion. Cultural heritage encompasses such diverse measures as the promotion of local livestock breeds and transhumance systems, the planting of (fruit) trees, the restoration of traditional farm houses and wooden fences as well as the promotion of agro-tourism.

The conservation management measures will need to be implemented via agri-environment schemes. They include:

- the exclusion of vulnerable habitats such as peat bogs or marshlands from agricultural use,
- limitations on fertiliser use and grazing densities,
- the protection of bushes and other landscape elements, and
- specific conditions on the use of semi-natural habitats such as species rich hay meadows.

Proposals for improving marketing and processing relate to:

- the quality control of milk production,
- the establishment of local trademarks, e.g. for cheese,
- the development of the local timber industry for adding value,

- training courses for farmers and their wives, and many other measures.

There are also ideas for a credit programme for farm enterprises, the introduction of new crops such as mushrooms and medicinal plants, the establishment of fish ponds etc.

A significant part of the proposals developed by the national working group has been included by the Romanian Government in its national rural development plan under SAPARD. Pilot agri-environment schemes will be developed in two mountain areas. The working group is currently preparing the funding framework for work on :

- collecting environmental baseline data in the pilot areas,
- the design of management agreements with farmers,
- building the administrative capacity for agri-environment schemes,
- training of government officials and extension officers, and
- monitoring and control measures.

Romania is confident that agreement can be reached with the European Commission on financing the institutional capacity building for pilot agri-environment schemes as well as their practical implementation in later years. For further information please contact:

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## Conference on the Ecology of European Grazing Systems

The European Forum for Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP) has two main aims:

- to explore the links between agricultural livestock systems and wildlife conservation, and
- to build on this knowledge for proposing better policies for high nature value farming systems.

Every two years EFNCP organises a pan-European conference to promote a

dialogue on the above topics between researchers, policy makers, conservationists and farmers. The Burren, a region shaped by grazing in north western Ireland, will be the venue for the next meeting from 17 - 20 June 2000. This year's conference places particular emphasis on farm visits and workshops to investigate the effect of policies on the ground. Other sessions will explore the ecology of livestock systems and the

impact of agriculture and rural development policies on such farming types.

Further information on the meeting can be found at the EFNCP website: <http://www.efncp.org>

It is also available from:

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# IUCN Seminar: Natura 2000, Rural Development and Ecological Networks

In December 1999, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), through its Office for Central Europe in Warsaw, organised an expert seminar to discuss the links between enlargement policies for rural areas and nature conservation objectives. The seminar was attended by representatives of agriculture and environment ministries of all applicant countries, EU and CEE experts, as well as scientists and officials from Ukraine and Belarus.

After greetings from Polish ministers, the seminar began with a presentation on the implementation of EU nature conservation legislation by a representative of the European Commission. The Birds and Habitats Directives are the main tools for wildlife protection at EU level. When they are fully implemented they will create the Natura 2000 network, a system of protected areas in all EU Member States. The Commission representative explained the envisaged timetable for transposing and implementing EU wildlife legislation in the applicant countries and stated that the European Commission does not favour any transition periods for the implementation of horizontal environmental legislation, including Natura 2000. This is to avoid potential damage to important sites by infrastructure or other development projects immediately after accession without recourse to legal challenge in the courts.

The following presentations reported on the practical implications and progress of ecological mapping and planning in Poland. They analysed the possibilities for using computerised geographical information systems (GIS) in the design of the Natura 2000 network and the potential overlap between the national ecological network (ECONET) and future Natura 2000 sites. This overlap was found to be considerable, which shows the possibility and desirability of using current ecological planning tools for the preparation of Natura 2000 in the applicant countries.

The next session analysed the relationship between biodiversity objectives and various sectors of the economy, such as forestry, agriculture, tourism and transport. Presentations from various applicant countries showed the close relationship between economic use and wildlife protection in rural areas, and the potential benefits that can arise from a pragmatic approach, if combined with clear environmental objectives, in the planning of large transport links.

Further sessions explored the scientific development of national ecological networks in central and eastern European countries and the possibilities for integrating nature conservation into rural development policy. In this context, one presentation discussed the use of ECONET data as a tool for the definition of a nature

conservation baseline for rural development plans, including agri-environment schemes. A practical example for the application of ECONET as a planning tool was presented for an island in the Hungarian Danube.

The meeting concluded with the elaboration of conclusions and recommendations. The most important recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- Finance for conservation measures at European level should be directed towards preserving existing sites rather than restoring degraded ones.
- Nature conservation policy should not only focus on protected areas, but contribute to a rural policy that integrates conservation objectives into sustainable rural development.
- Measures need to be initiated to improve awareness of the links between agriculture and nature conservation. Such measures should target, in particular, the staff of ministries, the scientific community and affected stakeholders. Environmental NGOs have a key role in awareness raising and should be supported in their efforts.
- The information exchange between accession countries and with the European Commission needs to be deepened. This process should include a WWW discussion forum and be open to partners in non-accession countries.
- Conservation experts from accession states urgently need up to date Annexes for the Birds and Habitats Directives and an interpretation manual for Natura 2000 habitat types to allow effective adoption of EU wildlife conservation.
- Funds for pilot projects, including research support, should be extended to facilitate the rapid and effective development of agri-environmental schemes in accession countries.

More information and the proceedings of the seminar are available from:

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Romanian mountain area

## The ECONET Concept and SAPARD

The European Ecological Network (ECONET) builds on the concept of linking representative areas of key European habitats between all countries through a network of substantial ecological corridors and additional buffer zones. Among CEE countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Baltic States have developed national ECONETs.

Work in Poland has shown that there is a close correlation between the ECONET network and the distribution of important sites identified by the EU CORINE programme. This highlights the substantial contribution ECONET principles can make to strategic planning in rural areas, such as the SAPARD programme or NATURA 2000. Unfortunately, the important findings of national ECONET plans still require adequate funding and appropriate legal backing in most CEE countries.

During the enlargement process all applicant countries require good environmental planning to reduce the impact of EU integration and to support the sustainable development of rural areas. Current trends in agriculture lead to habitat degradation and species decline. ECONET can and should play a key role in identifying priorities for rural development and agricultural policies. It can help to combine nature conservation objectives and income opportunities in rural areas.

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## Preparation of Agri-environment pilot schemes in the Czech Republic

Three pilot agri-environmental schemes have been proposed for the Czech Republic: Bile Karpaty – species rich extensive meadows; Blaník – wet meadows with small pools; and Moravský kras – intensive farming above limestone caves. After overcoming many difficulties in the development of these schemes, there is now an opportunity to start pilot schemes in the framework of SAPARD.

The potential institutional structure for the implementation of pilot projects was unclear for a long time. SAPARD is mainly targeted at investments into agriculture and the food sector. Agri-environmental pilot projects are of state interest but it seemed that the government could not become a supporting applicant under the SAPARD programme. Soon the question arose: who would be an applicant for the

proposed pilot schemes? Could it be an NGO or farmer associations? How would they deal with payments to farmers and control procedures? After an investigation of many alternative solutions by national experts the EU officials finally agreed that government can be the supporting applicant, which appears the best arrangement after all. It is only a pity that the EU did not indicate this earlier in spite of repeated questions from representatives of the Czech Agriculture Ministry – valuable preparation time was lost.

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## Guidance on Environmental Appraisal in CEEC

The organisations 'dienst landelijk gebied' (DLG), Environmental Resources Management (ERM) and Veen Ecology are leading a project supported by the Dutch Government, to provide support for rural environmental appraisal and environmental impact assessment in the applicant countries. The project aims:

- to offer technical guidance in relation to prior environmental appraisal in the framework of the EU pre-accession instrument SAPARD;
- to assist the applicant countries in their preparations to comply with future obligations for environmental appraisal under the EU Structural Funds, and the environmental impact assessment obligations under EU law.

The project is divided into three phases:

1. An analysis of relevant institutional structures and approaches in the applicant countries leading to the preparation of

guidance on environmental appraisal for rural areas;

2. A series of training courses for representatives of agriculture and environment ministries, regional and local government and NGOs;
3. case studies in the CEE countries to demonstrate best practice in integrating environmental considerations at the strategic and project level. This will result in a final document on best practice examples and lessons learnt, as well as further seminars.

Further information and a first guide to environmental appraisal in rural areas is available from:

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### Newsletter Sponsorship and Website

IEEP would like to thank all the sponsors of the first five Newsletter issues. Without financial support from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB, BirdLife Partner in the UK) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-UK and WWF Sweden) it would not have been possible to publish 'Rural Areas Newslink'. Their support has also helped us in finding a new sponsor for the coming five issues. A generous grant from the PIN-MATRA programme of the Dutch Government will cover all Newsletter expenses over the next year. Thanks to the PIN-MATRA grant it is also possible to publish the Newsletter on the Internet. This includes the first five issues from 1998/99. Rural Areas Newslink is available on the IEEP web site at: <http://www.ieep.org.uk>