

Rural Areas NEWSLINK

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

Agriculture and Biodiversity in Latvia

Farming has shaped the Latvian landscape and rural culture over many centuries. A great part of Latvia's biodiversity depends on the mosaic of forest and fields as well as grasslands that were created by agriculture. Internationally threatened species such as the Lesser-spotted Eagle and the Corncrake are examples for this relationship. Today Latvia's agriculture is in a crisis. The resulting abandonment of agricultural land and spread of the forested area could cause serious loss of the existing high biodiversity. We need to find solutions that will enable farming to emerge from its crisis while supporting our country's wildlife.

During Soviet time small-scale private farming was replaced with large collective farms. Drainage and melioration created regions with vast uniform, drained fields with intensive use of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides. However, areas with more or less mosaic landscape and extensive use also remained. About two million hectares of agricultural land were abandoned which are now overgrown by scrubs and deciduous trees of different succession, providing a mosaic landscape without significant human impact.

Agricultural land still occupies about 40 % of the country's territory (67.4 % arable, 31.4 % meadows and pastures, 1.2 % orchards in 1995). Due to often low land use intensity farmland still plays an important role for the biological diversity of Latvia. However, the economic crisis in agriculture forces more and more farmers to abandon marginal land. The most negative effect of this trend is felt on semi-natural meadows, particularly in floodplains and along the coast, that are of the highest conservation priority according to the National Biodiversity Strategy. Since the late 1980s lack of mowing or grazing has led to overgrowing by scrub and reeds, which causes the disappearance of many plant and bird species.

Research on land use trends in Latvia has shown that Latvian biodiversity is under a twin threat, intensification in productive areas and land abandonment in marginal areas. The

analysis of satellite images over the last 5 years shows a clear increase in the percentage of land used for crop production in the central part of the state where the soils are most fertile. This leads to a more intensive use of fertilisers and pesticides. In other areas low production levels still remain and land abandonment is the most serious problem. The total area of agricultural land and the quality of habitats is continuously decreasing. This does not bode well for the still strong populations of Corncrake, Lesser-spotted Eagle or White Stork, to name a few.

Extensive agricultural land use is essential for maintaining Latvia's biodiversity, but such farms can often not survive on the basis of their production alone. It is highly important, therefore, that additional income becomes available to these farmers via rural development or agri-environment schemes. Rural development programmes should build on the high capacity of the territory of Latvia for the development of organic farming and farm-based nature tourism. Support for agri-environment measures is included in the SAPARD programme for Latvia but only in selected pilot areas.

However, there is clear need to extend the agri-environment programme over the whole country as recent surveys show that there are more valuable but threatened semi-natural grasslands in Latvia than previously expected. Agri-environment measures to maintain important landscape structures and limit the negative impact of agro-chemicals are also necessary in the areas of intensive agriculture. Thus, government support and pre-accession aid for sustainable rural development are very welcome but need to be given much more resources to have a significant positive impact.

Prof. Janis Priednieks
Department of Zoology and Animal Ecology
University of Latvia
Kronvalda Bulvaris 4
LV-1586 Riga
Latvia
Tel.: +371 7 325 593
Fax: +371 7 830 291
Email: jpriedn@lanet.lv



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Integration of nature conservation in SAPARD plans: an assessment methodology piloted through a Hungarian case study

Rural development programmes funded under SAPARD will have a considerable impact on the rural environment in the applicant countries. Article 4.3 of the Regulation (EC 1268/1999) states that SAPARD measures should comply with provisions for the protection of the environment. However, initial analyses of the plans have detected measures which may not meet this requirement. The design of an assessment method for national SAPARD plans was therefore supported by WWF as a key tool for collecting systematic information on the different SAPARD plans in accession countries, and for identifying opportunities to maximise possible benefits of the SAPARD programme for nature conservation.

An assessment package was designed by the author to analyse a number of key aspects of national plans, such as coverage of the environmental baseline, consultation during planning and safeguards for important sites. This was presented as a questionnaire intended for completion by a team of environmental experts in each country. The assessment method was then tested on Hungary, and this pilot study succeeded in producing some interesting results which are discussed below. The assessment package is currently being used on four other accession countries (Romania, Czech and Slovak Republics, and Poland) within the framework of the WWF-facilitated Carpathian Ecoregion Initiative and the results will be published by WWF later this year. Further information on these studies is available from WWF's Danube-Carpathian Programme Policy Officer, Charlie Avis.

The key findings of the Hungarian assessment were that limited time and experience had hindered the planning authority. Like most of the accession countries this was Hungary's first experience of the process of developing national plans according to EU principles and priorities. As the EU gave less than one year between conception to presentation of the plans this provided very little time for establishing meaningful public participation or bottom-up initiatives. Although Hungary has encouraged micro-regions (voluntary groupings of municipalities) to draw up SAPARD plans, a lack of bottom-up initiatives was evident. Micro-region planning has been useful in raising awareness and getting people used to writing plans, but its value was reduced due to being carried out after the national plan had been drawn up. It was also apparent that almost no consultation had taken place during development of the Hungarian SAPARD programme with either the Ministry of Environment or with environmental NGOs. The first consultation meeting took place only after the third draft of the SAPARD plan had been finished, and did not include any environmental NGOs.

The lack of consultation with independent environmental experts was considered to be partly to blame for the minimal coverage of the environmental baseline situation in Hungary, lack of integration of safeguards for important sites, and failure to identify and address some important environmental trends and threats in the SAPARD plan, in spite of the existence of a very comprehensive National Agri-Environment Programme.

The loss of potential benefits gained by consultation could be partly overcome by encouraging planning authorities to prioritise and value input from environmental NGOs. However, NGOs also need to be very active to establish their role in decision-making, and many lack the experience and expertise needed to win the government's acceptance as competent partners. A need for capacity-building amongst NGOs was therefore identified.

The European Commission has stated that "speed is important" in drawing up SAPARD plans, but this should definitely not be at the expense of thorough planning or consultation. In Hungary, the lack of consultation with environmental experts has resulted in failure to identify opportunities for nature conservation in the Hungarian plan. Furthermore, it will be more cost-effective before and after accession to use scarce funds for conservation rather than for restoration. Sufficient time and resources have to be made available, therefore, to allow consultation during development of plans and full integration of nature conservation issues.

More information is available from:

Harriet Bennett
MSc Conservation student
Department of Biology
University College London
Home address:
Glory Farm
Winchmore Hill
Amersham
Bucks HP7 0PQ
Tel: +44 1494 724000
Fax: +44 1494 724077
E-mail: harriet@gloryfarm.org

Charlie Avis
Policy Officer
WWF International
c/o WWF Hungary
Nemetvolgyi ut 78/B
H-1124 Budapest
Hungary
Tel: +36 1 214 5554
Fax: +36 1 212 9353
Email: charlie.avis@wwf.hu

European Conference on environmental standards and cross-compliance in agriculture

The Agenda 2000 CAP reform has given EU Member States the opportunity to introduce cross-compliance measures based on Regulation 1259/1999, the so-called 'Common Rules Regulation'.

The first major European conference on the theme of cross-compliance and environmental standards in agriculture took place in Madrid on 5-7 October. A series of interesting presentations informed the conference participants about cross compliance measures, environmental standards and policy options in the United States, Switzerland and EU Member States. Three of the main themes of the conference are discussed below:

- a) the Common Rules Regulation
- b) the role of environmental standards for agriculture
- c) agri-environmental baselines

a) The Common Rules Regulation

The Common Rules Regulation has introduced new possibilities for raising environmental standards in agriculture. Article 3 of the Regulation establishes an obligation on Member States to undertake environmental action where this has proved necessary. In fulfilling this

obligation, Member States may apply three types of measures singly or in a combination, as follows:

- Agri-environment measures (under the Rural Development Regulation)
- General mandatory environmental requirements (i.e. legislation)
- Specific environmental requirements attached to CAP subsidy regimes

For the latter two options, a reduction can be made in direct payments under the CAP to ensure compliance (environmental cross compliance). Any funds saved in this way must be reallocated towards rural development measures. In the implementation of Article 3 of Regulation 1259/1999 two important principles should be respected:

Policy responses to the Horizontal Regulation should see farming in a holistic way. Distinctions between production sectors can be artificial – for example, there are often direct linkages between dairy farming and silage maize production.

It is necessary that the evaluation of direct payments under the CAP suggested by the Horizontal Regulation should take full account of impacts on the environment. If direct payments are found to create significant negative environmental effects then their continu-

ation needs to be reconsidered – rather than trying to counteract their effects through cross compliance.

b) The Role of Environmental Standards for Agriculture

Delegates agreed that minimum environmental standards for agriculture will play a significant role in future agriculture policies. These will result from both policy measures and changing demands at market level. In the light of international trade agreements environmental standards are becoming a key part of the European model of agriculture.

Both legal and voluntary measures can be used to enforce environmental standards. Those legal standards agreed at a European level, such as the Habitats, Birds and Nitrates Directives, need to be implemented and enforced fully. Under such European obligations Member States should have the necessary flexibility to develop their own standards within a coherent framework.

In developing standards, it is helpful for both agriculture and environmental authorities to work with farmers, NGOs and other stakeholders. Whereas certain obligations are essential, they should be realistic, readily understood by farmers and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. While standards may vary between regions and countries, it is also important to take account both of European priorities and of the need for fair competition.

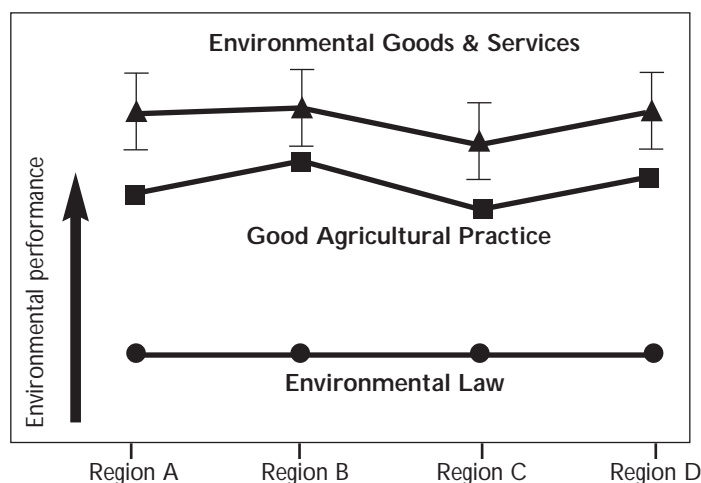
c) Agri-environment Baselines

Conceptually, there are three important levels of environmental performance in agriculture:

The first refers to compliance with national and EU environmental legislation for example the Habitats or Nitrates Directive – this can be thought of as a 'red line', the obligatory minimum.

The second, Good Agricultural Practice, refers to the minimum

Environmental Baselines in Agriculture



standards that farmers should respect – the ‘blue line’. This includes respect for environmental law, following advice from extension services and taking into account scientific and technical progress. A single, uniform code of Good Agricultural Practice for the whole of Europe would not be appropriate given the major variations between localities, regions and individual countries.

The third level refers to the production of environmental goods and services above this baseline within a ‘green zone’. Different ‘green lines’ can be defined within this zone. Environmental entry conditions for agri-environment schemes often combine general codes of Good Agricultural Practice and specific conditions that can be called ‘good

conservation practice’. Farmers who ensure environmental management at or above this green line are eligible for agri-environmental payments.

A number of the points discussed at the conference are also relevant for the candidate countries, in particular the different agri-environmental baselines. To be effective, cross-compliance depends on the existence of subsidies or direct payments to farmers. In a situation where the EU is still very reluctant to extend CAP direct payments to farmers in the applicant countries this concept could, therefore, appear to be of less interest in a CEE context. In principle, however, cross-compliance measures can also be attached to national subsidies (which are subject to

the same political pressure at WTO level as CAP subsidies). Such an approach could be helpful as a means for raising environmental standards in agriculture, in preparation of EU accession, where this appears appropriate. For more information please contact:

Dr Jan-Erik Petersen
IEEP
52 Horseferry Road
London, SW1P 2AG
United Kingdom
Tel.: +44 20 7799 2244
Fax: +44 20 7799 2600
Email: jpetersen@ieeplondon.org.uk

Rusne Fund for Nature – for farming compatible with nature

Rusne Fund for Nature (RGF) is a non-governmental organisation of farmers and environmentalists working on Rusne island in the Nemunas delta (Lithuania). The low-lying island has a unique landscape – meadows divided by delta branches and drainage channels. It is an important stop-over during bird migration and home of many endangered meadow birds.

Although grasslands were used very intensively during Soviet time, livestock numbers have declined sharply, farming has extensified, and renaturalisation of grassland is taking place since 1990. The abandoned grasslands and drainage ditches are overgrowing with grasses and shrubs which creates unfavourable conditions for breeding meadow birds.

Rusne Fund for Nature organises seminars, and discussions for the local population. It runs an ethnographical museum which attracts visitors from Lithuania and abroad. Four farmers provide agrotourism services. To promote the local awareness and protection of nature values RGF also publishes a newsletter “Rusnes gamtos fondo inios”.

RGF has one tractor and some machinery for the management of abandoned meadows. About 53 hectares were mowed in 2000 to improve the meadow bird habitat. With the support of EUCC, the organisation tries to promote silage making as a viable option for maintaining most grassland types on Rusne.

Rusne Fund for Nature would like to expand its activities in future, even on a commercial basis. The main obstacle for the work of the organisation is a lack of funds and machinery. As a non-profit organisation RGF cannot benefit from SAPARD investment funds. However, its farmer members could participate in the planned pilot agri-environment scheme on the island that will receive SAPARD co-funding.

Vytautas Gipiskis
Rusne Gamtos Fondas
Neringos 2
Rusne, Silute
Lithuania
Tel.: + 370 41 585 04
Fax: + 370 41 585 04
Email: rusnesgf@silute.omnitel.net

Enlargement Week in Brussels

WWF has organised an Enlargement Week in Brussels between 1-8th December 2000 to provide an opportunity for decision-makers and NGOs from within the EU and accession countries to meet and examine the important environmental challenges of EU enlargement. During the week presentations, seminars and other events will take place at different venues in the European Parliament,

permanent representations and other sites in Brussels. The objectives of the Enlargement Week are to deepen and widen the debate on EU Accession, promote the exchange of information between stakeholders and decision makers in Brussels and the accession countries, and to highlight the potential benefits of EU enlargement for both EU Member States and accession countries.

For more information please contact:

Annali Bamber-Jones
WWF-European Policy Office
36 Avenue de Tervuren B12
B 1040 Brussels
Belgium
Tel: +32 2 740 0922 Email:
ABamber@wwfnet.org