

Farming for Biodiversity: Building on the know-how from the results-based payment scheme (RBPS) pilots

17 October 2019 in Brussels



Conference summary

1. Rationale

This is a significant stage in the development and use of results-based payments (RBPS) for biodiversity, which are becoming recognised as a promising way of enhancing the effectiveness of biodiversity measures in farmland, just as the EU prepares for the next phase of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The conference concludes more than three years' work on developing, testing and evaluating pilot RBPS on 148 farms in four Member States¹, proposed by the European Parliament and implemented by the European Commission (EC). The pilot RBPS were designed and implemented in compliance with current and proposed CAP legislation, and the lessons learned are directly relevant to Member States' preparation of their post-2020 CAP Strategic Plans.

The aim of this one-day conference was to showcase the findings of the RBPS pilots in Ireland, Spain (Navarra), Romania, and the UK (England) and to start a discussion about the potential contribution of RBPS to halting negative biodiversity trends on farmland, in the next CAP. After opening presentations from the EC and European Parliament, the focus of the morning was on the achievements, opportunities and challenges of the RBPS pilots. In the afternoon the emphasis shifted, first to the farmers' experiences of the pilots, then to a panel discussion of RBPS beyond the pilot projects. The day concluded with a summary from the Chair and a statement on next steps from the European Commission.

2. Overview of participants and speakers

The 114 people at the conference came from 24 Member States, including staff from managing authorities, paying agencies and agricultural and environmental advisory agencies, and representatives of farmers' associations, NGOs, researchers and other stakeholders. The speakers were the expert staff and the farmers who designed, implemented and evaluated the RBPS pilots; a Member of the European Parliament (MEP); and senior policy staff from the European Commission. The conference was chaired by Dr Brendan Dunford, Director of the Burren Programme in Ireland, one of the longest established RBPS in Europe.

¹ In Ireland, Spain (Navarra), Romania, and the UK (England)

3. Opening session

Pierre Bascou, Director in DG Agriculture and Rural Development (EC) opened the conference, stressing that the higher environmental ambitions and green architecture of the proposed new CAP are seen as a real game changer. He emphasised that there will be a much more explicit link between the CAP and existing EU environmental legislation, in terms of analysis, targets and planning tools, and he pointed to the greater flexibility available to Member States, in measure design and budget allocations, that they could use to improve policy coherence and policy efficiency. The Commission will encourage Member States to offer farmers RBPS as a way of achieving a higher level of environmental ambition. He pointed out that: *“RBPS in our view provides an interesting alternative to the current instruments in Pillar 2 (or the greening of the eco-scheme in the future, in Pillar 1); in our view the system of design can be accommodated either by the compensation system of costs incurred and income foregone or as a top-up of decoupled support in the first pillar.”*



Michal Wiezik, MEP for Slovakia and a biologist, emphasised that in today's simplified agricultural landscapes *“we are losing biodiversity in an enormous way; we are losing species, ecological functions and stability in our soils and ecosystems.”* He welcomed the opportunity we now have to make changes that will improve the biodiversity outcomes of CAP, citing recent criticisms by scientists that the EU definition of CAP 'result' indicators are not proxies for the aspired biodiversity outcomes, as RBPS result indicators are. He noted that a critical part of RBPS success is the need for a very strong Agricultural Knowledge, Information and Innovation system (AKIS), where scientists and researchers support farmers in the transition to biodiversity management. Referring to the negotiations on the new CAP he said that *“Once again the CAP will get nearly 40% of the EU budget and we have the chance to include several steps that should be result-based, related to the agri-environmental measures, to the eco-schemes and even to the forest -environmental measures. I think that in doing so the CAP will become greener, more outcome oriented and less controversial in its alleged environmental spending”.*

Clunie Keenleyside from IEEP summarised the key features of RBPS: the payments are based on verifiable result indicators (proxies) of the biodiversity objectives on individual land parcels; level; that improved result indicator scores mean a higher payment; and, crucially, that farmers decide how to manage their land and livestock to achieve the results, rather than being paid simply to follow prescribed management instructions. She noted that (in contrast to most agri-environment schemes of the past 30 years) the RBPS pilots have all been evaluated for achievement of their biodiversity objectives, using scientific assessments against control sites. She added that RBPS have yet to be tested for other environmental objectives, such as water, soils and forests, suggesting we should be cautious about assuming that what works for biodiversity can simply be transferred to other CAP objectives.

4. The RBPS pilots – achievement, opportunities and barriers

This session was presented by expert staff from the four pilot teams, followed by a panel discussion with the audience.

Caitriona Maher from the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism introduced the two Ireland pilots. In Leitrim the target habitats were species-rich grasslands and habitats for the protected Marsh fritillary butterfly, and in the Shannon Callows the focus was species-rich floodplain meadows and grazed habitat for breeding waders. She explained the 10 point scoring system based on plant species indicators of ecological quality (both positive and negative), and indicators of declining habitat condition, such as bare ground and poor vegetation structure, with a minimum score of 3 required to enter the scheme. She emphasised the need to build trust with the local stakeholders from the outset, noting the expertise and time required to develop robust result indicators and appropriate payment rates, and the importance of locally- based expert guidance and training for the farmers and the farm advisors, integrated with farming advice.

Asunción Berastegi Gartzandia from GAN-NIK explained that in the Navarra pilot the objective was to obtain a diverse vegetative cover and rich habitat elements in the HNV perennial crop systems of vineyards, olive groves and almond groves. She pointed out that scoring indicators should be directly related to biodiversity outcomes, and easy to learn and to measure using a well-designed methodology. During the pilot individual farmers' management choices had led to increased floral diversity on their own plots.

Laura Sutcliffe from IFAB showed that in the Romania pilots, where the objective was the conservation of species-rich hay meadow in two Natura 2000 sites, the RBPS approach proved to be more effectively targeted and more popular with farmers than the equivalent agri-environment management scheme in the current RDP. This is important because there is strong economic pressure on these smallholder farmers to change their farming systems and graze the hay meadows with sheep instead of mowing for hay to feed their cattle in winter - a change which risks rapidly loss of their unique species richness.

Helen Keep of the Yorkshire Dales National Park showed how 17 of the 19 species rich hay meadows in the England grassland pilot achieved an average 24% increase in habitat quality score over two years, as the farmers picked up skills and confidence. There was a very good match between farmer's scores and advisors scores. In the pilot scheme for breeding wader habitat the quality scores declined, influenced by spring droughts, although these farmers made strong improvements in grassland and rush management scores and the pilot sites outperformed the control sites.

Clare Bains from Natural England introduced the pilot in Norfolk and Suffolk where the objectives were to create strips of winter bird food plants, or pollen and nectar producing plants, on arable land. The pilots achieved a significantly better quality and quantity of these 'biodiversity crops' than equivalent plots in conventional agri-environment schemes under the current RDP. The RBPS payment rate calculation included the farmers' time spent on training and self-assessment of their result indicators. At first, the RBPS farmers were daunted by the possibility of getting a zero payment but, as their confidence and ability grew, their field strips significantly outperformed those of the control farms, and their perception of the risk of zero payment changed.

In the discussion which followed, participants asked for clarifications about:

- How to calculate the payment and what extra costs are taken into account?

- How were the schemes monitored and evaluated against their objectives and how does this compare to the amount of monitoring and evaluation of conventional agri-environment schemes?
- How much does the RBPS approach rely on farmer's self-assessment? Is it essential that farmers do this themselves? How critical is the timing? How can you control the quality of these assessments (especially for scoring cover of rush and scrub)? How much time do the farmers need to spend on training and self-assessment?
- What about external factors and risks that farmers cannot control, such as adverse weather conditions, that mean they might lose scores or even get zero payment?
- How could RBPS be implemented within the proposed CAP eco-scheme? What would the baseline be? How to meet the requirements to discourage inappropriate management?

James Moran from Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology emphasised the need, when introducing RBPS, to be aware of differences between Member States in socio-cultural, institutional and advisory contexts. In Navarra the pilot farmers had no previous experience of agri-environment schemes, but the time and effort spent in engaging their interest and building relationships, understanding and skills, means that these farmers now understand RBPS as the norm for rewarding improved biodiversity. He noted that perceived barriers and weaknesses of RBPS can all be seen as potential opportunities to achieve more ambitious biodiversity outcomes within limited budgets. For example, all the pilot teams first had to bring together the technical skills and capacity to design and deliver the pilots, but once this had been done it could be built on in later schemes. Ireland is already upscaling the RBPS approach using CAP funding in the current RDP, through EIP-AGRI groups with more than 2000 farmers now engaging in RBPS for biodiversity, water and climate objectives. These include an RBPS for the Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), a landscape level scheme with 1500 participant farmers and a budget of €25 million. He noted that RBPS can be an effective way to implement the conservation measures needed for Natura 2000 habitats and species, as shown by the Burren Programme, the Romanian pilots, and other RBPS. **Asunción Berastegi Gartzandia** added that RBPS indicators could be a useful source of knowledge for reporting on conservation status under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive.

László Demeter from the Romanian National Agency for Protected Areas and the Pogány-havas pilot area, drew attention to the role of RBPS in protecting threatened Natura 2000 hay meadows in Romania. These are valued not just for their unique flora but also by the farmers, who see a clear link between milk quality and species diversity, and by the local beekeepers too. But economic pressures are a threat - as soon as the pilot finished one important meadow was converted to sheep-grazed pasture. He drew attention to the educational and psychological value of RBPS in making such an explicit connection between the payment and the public good provided by the farmer – in conventional schemes this is not so clear to participants.

Clare Bains and Helen Keep from the England pilots pointed out that RBPS builds the ownership, understanding and trust of farmers and their advisors, and with this they are raising their game, delivering more, and becoming advocates within their own communities. This provides a helpful context in which to find better solutions to the challenges facing agriculture and the environment.

The ensuing panel discussion with the audience raised many points:

- RBPS acts as a quality assurance scheme, because farmers will not sign up unless they are reasonably confident of achieving the results. The schemes bear very little deadweight (of farmland which is under an agri-environment contract but fails to achieve the scheme objectives).
- RBPS needs strong knowledge exchange and advisory support services - farmers do need advice to achieve the results on which their payments depend. This can be built quite rapidly in a pilot scheme but widespread implementation requires RBPS training of significant numbers of both publicly funded and private advisors, and raises the issue of 'who trains the trainers?'. For the future, introducing the RBPS concept in university and college agricultural courses would help.
- RBPS needs an enabling policy environment for the farmers, in the form of a coherent package of support measures, co-operation between actors, trained RBPS advisors – and no conflicting signals from other CAP measures.
- Would the risk of zero payment increase conflicts between farmers and the paying agency? A good appeals system is important. Recent Irish EIP-AGRI experience has shown that although farmers were shocked to get zero scores in the first year, in almost all cases once they had understood their score they focused on improving their management and achieved a higher score in the next year.
- Using environmental investment support as part of an RBPS package of measures – this is already happens in the Burren Programme and could be considered elsewhere, for example in the initial establishment of RBPS wildlife strips on arable land.
- Positive impacts of RBPS can be swift – in the Hen Harrier EIP-Agri scheme (funded under Measure 16 of the Ireland RDP) farmers are paid on result indicators of habitat structure and quality, but the scheme retains a 'dividend pot' which is divided each year between all farmers who both achieve a minimum habitat score of 6 *and* are within 2km of a fledged nest. Persecution rates of the Hen Harrier dropped to zero in the project area, within a year.

5. The farmers' experience of the pilots

The afternoon began with a panel discussion led by some of the farmers who had implemented the pilot RBPS. They explained very clearly in words and pictures how the schemes have motivated them, given them pride, and encouraged them to experiment to get better results (and how talking with neighbours – and a bit of healthy competition – played a role too). **Tommy McPartlan**, a farmer in the RBPS pilot in County Leitrim, Ireland, said that he already knew his land had lots of blue flowers (*Succisa pratensis*) and the best Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas aurinia*) butterfly population in the county, but that was of no help to his business, it just meant that his land would not be approved for afforestation grants.

Tommy McPartlan: *"I did like the RBPS because I was in no other schemes before and it was a good scheme. I know what the butterfly needs and I talk to my neighbours about it – they would like to have it on their land."* **Dolores Byrne** added: *"Tommy did not know he was creating the habitat that was the reason the butterfly was there – now we have a mechanism to pay him for that."*



Romulus Harbada, a farmer in the lowland hay meadow RBPS pilot in Târnava Mare, Romania, explained how he has used the pilot to work with young people in his village to promote ecotourism focused on the flower rich meadows and local food products, and explained that *“without the RBPS payments the farmers in the pilot would have been forced to cut the grass too early”*, before all the meadow species had finished flowering. **Nick Anema**, an RBPS arable farmer in England, said that *“having someone to talk to [an RBPS adviser] means that you make a decision before you make a mistake”* and explained how he experimented with better ways to sow and manage the winter bird food plots, which led to an increase in his RBPS score. **Catherine Harrison**, a livestock farmer in the English RBPS grassland pilot, advised that it was important to *“make sure you take the general public with you”* and said she would like to see the RBPS farmers’ biodiversity achievements acknowledged in the local press. **Michael Davoren**, who farms in the Burren Programme, Ireland, added that *“you can’t bring environment from the southern hemisphere, you have to produce it here – we are not communicating properly to the public what these farmers do!”*



Michael Davoren: *“The environmentalists that want the environment cannot do it themselves – they need us, the farmers, to manage it properly for them. So they are happy – they can now give value for money to the taxpayer and they can measure that value from the scores in the field. The Department of Agriculture are thrilled because they can deliver to the taxpayer and the auditor, and can prove it is value for money. And we, the farmers, can earn a living from doing what we love. It is a win-win-win.”*

6. RBPS beyond the pilots – next steps

For the rest of the afternoon the focus of the conference shifted to the future of RBPS. **Wolfgang Suske** from Austria and **Knut Per Hasund** from Sweden provided an update on recent developments beyond the pilots - there are now other RBPS schemes or pilots in 12 Member States² plus Switzerland. They explained that a new Result Based Payment Network had just been set up to offer scientists, policy makers, farmers and other RBPS experts and pioneers a way to share knowledge and learn from other schemes and studies, **and invited everyone who would like to get involved to email network@themanatur.eu** (the network was subsequently established, <https://www.rbpnetwork.eu/>)

Claudia Olazabal on behalf of DG Environment identified three areas where, if we are to enable Member States make more use of RBPS for biodiversity, there are now barriers and we must find solutions to:

- overcoming perceived procedural barriers to RBPS in the CAP and State Aid (e.g. baseline, controls and sanctions);
- understanding farmer behaviour and how to address effectively farmers’ fear of financial loss and the risk of ‘zero payment paralysis’; and
- bringing together the people with the knowledge, data, expertise and skills needed to develop effective RBPS.

² Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Romania, UK.

She asked the Member State managing authorities to write to the Commission, to say what they see as the main obstacles and solutions to upscaling RBPS, and then to participate in a two-day Commission workshop on designing and running an RBPS within a CAP Strategic Plan.

Olivier Diana on behalf of DG Agriculture and Rural Development added that RBPS are seen as a key element of CAP Strategic Plans that could help to shift the emphasis from compliance with Commission rules to achievement in Member States. He noted the significance of the Member States' Natura 2000 Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs) – these need to be ready in time for the CAP Strategic Plans and must identify priorities for the habitats and species that depend on agricultural and/or forest management. Points raised in discussion included:

- RBPS advisors and control staff should be quality-assured and certified, and their performance scrutinised; managing authorities should offer an RBPS 'control package', comprising self-assessment, risk-based assessment and training, that is equivalent to the level of control applied to management-based schemes; CAP funding can be used for both adviser training and farmer training.
- It is difficult to establish RBPS without good co-operation with the paying agency – and that brings wider benefits through paying agencies sharing their experiences of RBPS.
- We should not exaggerate concerns about managing authorities' transaction costs for RBPS – evidence suggests that these are more cost-effective than management-based schemes, and as they are implemented more widely, unit administrative costs will come down, especially with landscape scale delivery.

7. Summing up

The Chair, **Brendan Dunford** concluded that although RBPS are not the solution for every situation they do have huge potential for all involved:

- for nature, a diversity of approaches to managing farmland for biodiversity;
- for farmers, it is the freedom to farm, the notion of an incentive rather than a penalty, and an understanding of what the money is for;
- for policy makers, there is an inbuilt monitoring system within RBPS; and
- for taxpayers, a guarantee of value for money because if the farmer is not delivering the money is not spent.

He identified the key challenges: developing and testing the scoring systems that are fundamental to RBPS; recognising that RBPS need very strong knowledge transfer, training and education systems; and reassuring managing authorities that RBPS can work within the CAP framework, and reassuring farmers that the external risks are manageable. *“Ultimately what we are trying to do is change farmers' behaviour to give us a stronger biodiversity or other environmental outcome. Working with farmers is about three things: the pocket – we have to give payments that are fair and transparent and that reward the effort that is made; the head – we have to give farmers the research, the advice and the support to farm for biodiversity or other environmental priorities, in the same way that we give them the technical support to farm for beef or dairy; the heart – we find that farmers who have really bought into this do not even need to be controlled, they will deliver, they own the knowledge and the story and we should celebrate this, for them their communities and the next generation.”*

Closing the conference, **Humberto Delgado Rosa**, Director of DG Environment, said that we are facing an ecological crisis, we need a more performance oriented CAP, and these pilots have clearly demonstrated the potential of RBPS, also as a tool for Natura 2000 management.

It is now critical to push for more RBPS approaches in the CAP in both Pillar 2 and the eco-schemes. To improve the cost-effectiveness of the CAP measures for biodiversity requires managing authorities to shift complexity to the design stage of these new schemes. We need to rely on the knowledge and skills of farmers and land managers, and provide clear incentives to unlock their power to deliver results for biodiversity.

8. Conference materials

	<p>Download here and here the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RBPS conference programme and background note • RBPS pilot reports, scorecards, farmer guidance documents and other materials for Ireland, Spain (Navarra) and the UK (England) (Romania reports will be available soon) • posters for the RBPS pilots <p>You can watch the video recording of the conference here and here</p>
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9. Further information on the European Commission's RBPS [website](#)

The pilot projects were preceded by an EP-funded study in 2013-14 which reviewed the advantages and challenges of adopting results-based payments for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity within the farmed countryside. The outputs on the [website](#) include:

- an inventory of schemes (in 2014)
- policy and practice notes
- a guidance Handbook for managing authorities on setting up an RBPS for biodiversity, with detailed information on result indicators used and field guides for farmers
- papers and presentations from the final conference in September 2014

10. Other publications mentioned at the conference

Allen et al (2014) Biodiversity protection through results based remuneration of ecological achievement. Report prepared for the European Commission, DG Environment, Contract No ENV.B.2/ETU/2013/0046, Institute for European Environmental Policy, London. <https://ieep.eu/publications/results-based-agri-environment-schemes-new-report-and-guidance-handbook-available>

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EU SCAR AKIS (2019), *Preparing for Future AKIS in Europe*. Brussels, European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/report-preparing-future-akis-europe_en

Photo acknowledgements: EFNCP, Burren Programme, IEEP.