

Preserving the EU's natural resources and farm landscapes

Introduction:

One of the objectives of rural development policy, as laid out in the Community strategic guidelines for programming period 2007-2013, is to improve the environment and the countryside.

In this respect a significant share of resources are devoted by Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) to support the preservation of the EU's natural resources and the farm landscapes.



Identifying the needs

The performance of EU agriculture in the preservation and enhancement of natural resources in recent years has been mixed. As regards water quality, total nitrogen surplus has declined since 1990, although some areas still experience nutrient leaching pressures. Also, problems of ammonia emissions, eutrophication, soil degradation and biodiversity decline persist in many areas.

However, an increasing share of agricultural area is devoted to organic production and renewable resources. Long-term trends in climate change will increasingly shape farming patterns.

High nature value farming systems also play an important role in preserving biodiversity and habitats, as well as in landscape protection and soil quality. Finally, in some areas the abandonment of farming could engender serious environmental risks.

Rural development policy offers a range of possibilities to support the preservation of the EU's natural resources and farm landscapes, through maintaining biodiversity, preserving and developing high nature value farming systems and traditional agricultural landscapes, protecting water quality and combating climate change.

The interventions at “a glance”

Preserving EU's natural resources and farm landscapes is targeted by a range of RD policy interventions. In order to avoid land abandonment and its negative consequences for the countryside and the environment, natural handicap payments are granted to farmers in mountain areas and in areas with handicaps other than mountain areas. In both cases, these payments aim to facilitate the continued use of agricultural land and contribute to maintaining the countryside as well as to maintaining and promoting sustainable farming systems.

The preservation of natural resources and farm landscapes is also supported through the provision of Natura 2000 payments and payments linked to Directive 2000/60/EC. These payments compensate farmers for costs incurred and income foregone due to environmental restrictions associated with Natura 2000 and Water Framework Directive areas. This type of compensation is considered necessary for ensuring compliance with environmental requirements and safeguard farming in these areas. Agri-environment payments is an important RD policy tool contributing to the preservation of EU's natural resources and farm landscapes. They are granted to farmers or other land managers who make a voluntary agri-environmental commitment for a specific period. They aim to encourage them to serve as a whole through the introduction or continued application of agricultural

Relevant RDP measures

- ❖ Measure 211 – Natural handicap payments to farmers in mountain areas
- ❖ Measure 212 – Payments to farmers in areas with handicaps, other than mountain areas
- ❖ Measure 213 – Natura 2000 payments and payments linked to Directive 2000/60/EC
- ❖ Measure 214 – Agri-environment payments
- ❖ Measure 215 – Animal welfare payments
- ❖ Measure 216 – Non-productive investments (agriculture)

Preserving the EU's natural resources and farm landscapes

production methods which are compatible with the protection and the improvement of the environment, the landscape and its features, natural resources, and soil and genetic diversity.

RD policy also supports animal welfare through granting payments to farmers who make voluntary animal welfare commitments for a specific period. These payments answer societal demands for welfare-compatible animal husbandry and aim to encourage farmers to adopt high standards of animal husbandry which go beyond mandatory standards.

Finally, EU rural development efforts to preserve natural resources and farm landscapes are also pursued through the provision of support to non-productive investments in agriculture. These investments are necessary for the achievement of agri-environmental commitments, and the on-farm enhancement of the public amenity of Natura 2000 areas and of other areas with high natural value.

Target groups

The target groups of these interventions are farmers and, in the case of agri-environment payments and non-productive investments, also other land managers. Eligibility for natural handicap payments and Natura 2000 / Directive 2000/60/EC payments is conditional to beneficiaries pursuing farming activities in relevant designated areas. Also, agri-environment and animal welfare payments beneficiaries are obliged to make voluntary relevant commitments for a period between 5 and 7 years.

Selection of measures in the Member States

According to their needs and priorities, as identified in their National Strategy Plans, Member States have decided to implement a number of the measures previously described to support the preservation of natural resources and farm landscapes.

Drawing from the menu of available measures, RDPs generally implemented from 2 to 6 measures together. As shown in the figure on the right, the majority of RDPs implemented 4 (30 RDPs) or 3 (27 RDPs) measures together. Around 20% of the RDPs implemented 5 measures. Few programmes chose to implement only two or all six measures.

Preserving natural resources measures: number of measures activated in the 88 RDPs

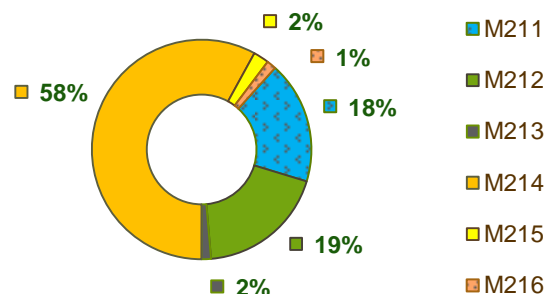


Financial support

EU-wide, the six aforementioned measures support the preservation of the EU's natural resources and farm landscapes through a budget (programmed total public expenditure) of €64.8 billion for 2007-2013. The EAFRD contribution to the above amounts to €39.2 billion. This allocation accounts for 42.8% of the total public expenditure - of €151.5 billion - for rural development for the 2007-2013 period at the EU27 level.

The figure on the right provides a breakdown per measure of the allocated budget at the EU27 level. It shows the dominance of agri-environment payments (58%) followed by natural handicap payments for mountain areas (18%) and areas with handicaps other than mountain areas (19%).

Breakdown per measure of the programmed total public expenditure for 2007-2013 supporting the preservation of the EU's natural resources and farm landscapes (EU 27)



Preserving the EU's natural resources and farm landscapes

Financial implementation progress

By 2013, €58.2 billion - or almost 90% of the programmed €64.8 billion - had been disbursed in the Member States to support the preservation of natural resources and farm landscapes.

Up to 2013, the relevant measures have been implemented at various rates. The measures 211 and 212 have spent €11.8 and €11.4 billions – respectively 100% and 93% of their programmed budgets (programmed total public expenditures).

On measure 214 €33.2 billion of support – or 88% of the programmed €37.5 billion - has been granted to farmers or other land managers who made voluntary agri-environmental commitments.

Farmers who participate in the voluntary animal welfare commitments scheme (measure 215) have received support equal to €986 million up to 2013. This accounts for 66% of the programmed total public budget of €1.49 billion for the current programming period.

Payments equal to €589 million – or 66% of the programmed €899.6 million - have been made under the non-productive investments scheme (measure 216).

Finally up to 2013, almost €300 million – or 33% of the programmed total public expenditure of €912.5 million - had been paid to compensate farmers for costs incurred and income foregone due to environmental restrictions associated with Natura 2000 and Water Framework Directive areas.

Physical outputs (2007 - 2012)

Across the EU, more than 1,000,000 farm holdings and 15 million ha of agricultural land located in mountain areas have been supported through the provision of natural handicap payments to farmers (measure 211).

Compensatory allowances granted through measure 212 supported almost 1.9 million farm holdings and 38.3 million ha of farmland located in other less-favoured areas and areas affected by specific handicaps.

Natura 2000 payments and payments linked to Directive 2000/60/EC, up to 2012, were granted to almost 59,000 farm holdings, while agricultural area supported by this measure amounted to more than 1.1 million ha. Most of agricultural area supported was located in Natura 2000 areas.

By the end of 2012, the agricultural area under agri-environment payments in the EU27 accounted for almost 43 million ha (i.e. 25% of total UAA in 2007).

In the context of the implementation of the animal welfare payments measure, nearly 138,000 contracts were signed and 78,000 farm holdings were supported up to the end of 2012.

Regarding non-productive investments, by the end of 2012, 24,981 applications were approved and 24,357 holdings were supported. These results were achieved through a disbursement of €365 million total public expenditure by the end of 2012 generating a total volume of investments of €605 million.

Conserving HNV grasslands in southern Transylvania, Romania

(RDP measure 214)

EAFRD in Romania supports a High Nature Value (HNV) agri-environmental initiative which aims to maintain the grasslands' HNV characteristics in a family farm located in Brasov County.

A five-year environmental management plan commits the beneficiary to apply only natural, traditional organic fertiliser on grassland, and refrain from ploughing, rolling and reseeding of pastures. Also, mowing is controlled in a manner that reduces risks to insects, birds, flowers, animals and other species. The maintenance of these traditional farming practices underpins the farm's diversification into both rural tourism and the production of traditional meat and dairy products.

Total support received to cover income foregone and costs incurred by the family amounts to €3,276 per year.



Preserving the EU's natural resources and farm landscapes

Promoting traditional vineyard management on a Greek island (RDP measure 214)

EAFRD in Greece finances an agri-environmental scheme targeting 1,100 ha of vines on the island of Santorini. The scheme aims to preserve traditional agricultural practices and the biodiversity and ecosystems of this volcanic island, protect soil from erosion and conserve indigenous vineyard varieties.

Farmers receive €900/ha for 5 years to maintain traditional cultivation methods, terraces and lines of trees/hedges, and refrain from using herbicides or fire. They are also requested to comply with rules set by the relevant national and European legislation. Currently, 605 vineyard owners with 657 ha participate in the scheme.

The scheme is contributing to the continuation of local wine making, and has clear socio-economic benefits for the island community.

The total cost of this initiative was nearly €3 million, in which EAFRD contributes with €2.5 million.

Preventing river pollution from farming activities in the Dommel and Warmbeek river basin, Belgium (RDP measure 214)

Farming activities in the Dommel & Warmbeek river basin in Flanders, Belgium have resulted in the run-off of residues of fertilizers & pesticides into the rivers. EAFRD support facilitated activities aiming to protect and improve water quality and biodiversity. These include the creation of buffer zones; the encouragement of farmers to sign a 'Brook Bank Management Agreement' with local Municipalities; the provision of assistance to farmers to complete administrative requirements and maintain brook banks and; the promotion of the scheme within the region.

Nearly 12 km of buffer zones were created by the project, offering benefits for water quality and biodiversity, and allowing for the easier management of brook banks.

The total cost of the project was approximately €560,000.



Source of the data:

- Programmed expenditures 2007-2013: RDP budget allocation following Health Check revision (December 2013)
- Expenditures 2007-2013: DG AGRI
- Output indicators: monitoring tables submitted by Managing Authorities along with the 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 Annual Progress Reports. Data referring to programming years 2007 to 2012. Only commitments made from year 2007 onwards are considered.
- Output targets 2007-2013: DG AGRI
- Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007 to 2013) http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/leg/index_en.htm
- Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/eval/index_en.htm
- ENRD Projects Database http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects/en/projects_home.cfm