

The 4th meeting of the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on 'Sustainable Management of Water and Soils' took place in Turku, Finland. The TG meeting was organised in cooperation with the Finnish National Rural Network Support Unit. It was preceded by a 'Mini-seminar' that brought together TG members and more than 15 Finnish stakeholders in a half-day working session. The event helped TG members to learn about relevant initiatives on soil and water management in Finland, share and exchange experiences with local stakeholders and get inspired in view of fine-tuning the TG recommendations for improving the design and implementation of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs).

Event Information

Date: 15 & 16 May 2018

Location: Turku, Finland

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point & Finnish National Rural Network Support Unit

Chair: Ben Allen (ENRD Contact Point/IEEP) & Eija Hagelberg (Baltic Sea Action Group)

Participants: 30 - including Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, European organisations, farmers, researchers.

Outcomes: Fine tuning and validation of the TG recommendations.

Web page: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/4th-meeting-thematic-group-sustainable-management-water-and-soils_en

Introduction to the day – 'Mini Seminar'

The 'mini-seminar' featured [presentations](#) by the ENRD Thematic Group as well as various soil and water management initiatives and projects in Finland. The seminar was followed by 34 online participants through a [live-stream](#). The introduction to the day emphasised the importance of soil and water protection in rural areas across Europe and the role of RDPs in identifying and implementing sensible solutions for combining and balancing agricultural production and environmental protection.

4th meeting of the ENRD Thematic Group on "Water and Soils"

The TG meeting was hosted at [Qvidja Farm](#), a pilot experimental farm looking at the potential for nutrient recycling combined with agricultural production, generating energy, and aiming to minimise diffuse agricultural pollution into the Baltic Sea. The purpose of the TG meeting was to discuss and validate the TG recommendations on how to improve the environmental effectiveness of RDP implementation and the design of schemes to achieve local soil and water objectives. These were observed through three different 'lenses' a) the added value to farmers, b) transferability of policy tools to other EU MS contexts, and c) RDP Managing Authorities' needs to implement the recommendations.



Nutrient/Soil management plans (NMPs/SMPs)

In the context of NMPs/SMPs, the discussion focused on the recommendation relating to making SMPs (including a nutrient management component) a pre-requisite for the support of soil and water management through the RDPs. Participants agreed that the SMPs' added value of for farmers is to get increased knowledge and 'soil awareness' towards better soil quality and productivity. However, it was also emphasised that several elements should be put in place for farmers to accept SMPs as a pre-requisite for support. The first is to provide strong advisory and capacity building support accompanied by relevant templates and guidelines to enable them to prepare effective SMPs. Moreover, targeting was also considered: while participants agreed that the SMP requirement is relevant to parcels where soil and water-related RDP supported actions are planned, for other parcels – or full farm level - they considered that a NMP may be sufficient if there were no soil or water management issues that needed to be addressed. Another aspect highlighted was related to the status of land – the difference between 'owned' and 'rented' land parcels should be considered when Managing Authorities define requirements.

The 'spade test' - supplemented with a smartphone application that allows farmers to perform a rapid 'analysis' of the soil sample - as used in Finland was highlighted as a relevant example. The spade test allows farmers to have an initial visual overview of the condition of the soil of their farm. The spade test is complementary to any laboratory soil analysis. As it does not require any specific equipment and is not time consuming it can be applied easily and frequently.

Multi-actor approaches

This discussion touched upon a wide number of the recommendations which the TG recognised as interlinked. A two-stage approach in the application for funding for specific RDP measures was of particular note. Participants indicated that support to set up a new partnership and/or agree on the objectives of an existing one is the essential pre-requisite for designing successful multi-actor approaches. They agreed that the added value to farmers is maximised if the partnership is strongly tied to the local needs. Although no specific challenges to transferability were identified, the TG highlighted that MAs would benefit from access to a network of good facilitators; greater and more varied resources should be made available within RDPs to fund focused extension services, as well as training and knowledge development for facilitators/initiators supporting collaborative and multi-actor approaches. MAs should also consider – if possible - using the 'transaction costs' component or 'cooperation' support to cover expenses related to cooperative approaches and setting out selection criteria that are focused on results and outcomes delivered by groups or collectives, if the latter offer maximised benefits compared to individual beneficiaries. Furthermore, participants highlighted the need for "small, but flexible funding streams made available at local level to fund a number of cooperative activities"; as well the need to make facilitation costs eligible for the entire duration of the collective AEC scheme. Finally, they encouraged the collection and exchange of best practices and pilots at EU level to enhance their transferability in other EU MS.

Result-Based Payment Schemes (RBPS)

The recommendation on securing funding across programming periods for agri-environment-climate contracts (for lasting improvement in soil quality) was discussed in detail. Long-term contracts would need to be maintained if ownership or management was to change. This could be achieved through attaching the contract to a parcel rather than a farmer given that several tenants might actually manage the land over such an extended period of time, or ensure the transfer of contracts between land managers, as is currently permitted in the Regulation. Participants also emphasised that in order to promote RBPS among farmers and to ensure their better 'take up' by farmers, the 'hybrid' model combining result and management-based approach could be first encouraged and tested management based payment schemes, where a 'bonus' could be paid, in addition to the payments for implementing management practices, if the relevant results are achieved. Setting adequate indicators to monitor the progress towards the specified soil quality objectives on a regular basis is essential. 'Pilot schemes' could be launched to establish the appropriate set of indicators prior to the launch of a scheme. As such schemes need to be area specific it would be necessary to develop and test in advance on pilot farms the indicators that can capture accurately and easily the progress achieved by participants, before the scheme is up scaled in the area concerned.

Thematic Group work next steps

The recommendations 'fine-tuned' at the 4th TG meeting were circulated for a round of consultation among the TG members and finalised accordingly. They will be presented at the [ENRD Seminar on 'Sustainable Management of Water and Soils' on 14th June in Brussels](#) before being widely communicated through a series of final dissemination products, including detailed reports, factsheets, etc.