



High Nature Value grasslands

Securing the ecosystem services of European farming post 2013

CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS PAGE 1

The EU target to halt biodiversity decline by 2010 has not been met. High Nature Value (HNV) farming is the main economic activity which actively conserves a major part of Europe's biodiversity, including the semi-natural grasslands that were the main focus of this conference. Biodiversity conservation through HNV farming is extremely cost-effective, since it also brings social and economic benefits. We call for greater priority for the maintenance of HNV farming across the EU from 2010, to complement existing biodiversity instruments such as Natura 2000.

Climate change has become a leading environmental concern. The ecosystem services derived from HNV farming and especially from HNV grasslands are highly relevant to the climate change challenge, and these services should be better quantified and explained. Services include carbon storage, resistance to floods, fire resistance in dry areas, and landscapes allowing species and habitat adaptation to climate change. Other responses to climate change, such as grassland intensification for biomass, and change of use for biofuels, entail threats to biodiversity.

HNV farming also fulfils social objectives, particularly in more marginal rural areas, providing food, meaningful employment, strong communities which keep rural cultures and traditions alive, and resilience to economic crises.

HNV farming thus uniquely delivers multiple policy objectives cheaply and efficiently.

In spite of this, HNV farming faces severe threats to its economic viability. Abandonment and intensification of land use are occurring unabated across Europe. Once HNV farmland is abandoned or converted to other uses, recovery is very difficult; restoration on a significant scale is an unrealistically expensive option.

Many Natura 2000 sites include important areas of HNV grassland. Some countries are using Natura 2000 compensation payments to encourage management of these grasslands for biodiversity. Agri-environment measures also reward farmers for maintaining HNV grasslands in some regions.

But we know that these existing measures are simply not sufficient at present. There are vast areas of HNV grassland across the EU where no such measures are applied. There are major inconsistencies in the use of measures between regions and Member States. And the fundamental socio-economic challenges faced by HNV farming are not addressed effectively by compensation payments and the "income foregone" approach to payment calculation.

Urgent economic measures should be applied across the EU to support the viability of HNV farming in a consistent manner.

CAP reform 2010-13 is a major opportunity to implement a pan-EU support scheme for HNV farming. It may be the last chance to secure a sustainable future for HNV farming through an EU strategy with a sufficiently resourced package of measures.

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We call for a targeted HNV farming payment within Pillar 1 that ensures a fair economic reward for the farming types that deliver the public goods that society demands. HNV farms should be identified by clear farm-level criteria. Since economies of scale dictate less requirement for support for larger holdings, HNV payments per hectare should be strongly degressive: higher per ha for smaller farms, so providing sufficient support to these to continue delivering public goods; lower per hectare as holding size increases.

Support should be targeted to HNV farms through clear farm-level eligibility criteria. Giving priority to zones that have a high concentration of HNV farming may be a useful complement to farm-level criteria, as a means of pursuing optimum conservation results within limited budgets.

Many HNV holdings in the EU are excluded from CAP support owing to their small size (under 1 ha). These holdings represent a significant part of the EU's HNV landscape, delivering significant social, economic and public goods. The targeted HNV farming payment should include small holdings under 1 ha without imposing a disproportionate administrative burden on Member States or farmers.

A key component of HNV farming is semi-natural pasture and meadows, including pastures with a high proportion of scrub and trees. All such land should be eligible for CAP support payments if grazed and/or mowed, and should be included in EU permanent grassland statistics and control mechanisms.

Common land, often with herded livestock, is a widespread feature of HNV farming. Commons have developed from ancient management systems, involving shared property rights within undivided landscapes. It is essential that rules founded on modern concepts of enclosed parcels with exclusive tenure, do not militate against support for traditional systems. Many graziers have no land of their own. HNV payments should include mechanisms to allow support for these systems that are important for survival of HNV farming.

Regulations designed for mainstream farming are often inappropriate for HNV farming, and make life difficult for the farmer while bringing no commensurate public benefit. Livestock rules such as veterinary visits and controls on livestock movements should be adapted to HNV farming conditions, and be no more restrictive and onerous than necessary for the public good. The same applies to food production hygiene regulations, without compromising food safety for the consumer.

Effective data systems are essential for directing support to HNV farming and for monitoring its extent and condition. Semi-natural grassland and other biodiversity features should be registered explicitly on LPIS, in order for cross-compliance and HNV monitoring and HNV support payments to be effective. A specific category for semi-natural grassland should be developed with the existing category of permanent pasture. A European data base and map of HNV farming landscapes should be developed.

Top-down payment schemes to support HNV farming are unlikely to succeed by themselves, particularly in more marginal situations. Local projects that work pro-actively with HNV farmers are essential and should be mainstreamed into rural development policy, for example as a special type of LEADER project for HNV farming. Mainstreamed local actions could in this way address a range of socio-economic issues, leading to greater social recognition and motivation of HNV farmers, and ensuring a critical mass of activity, farmer succession and improved living conditions.

Signatories



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Nature Conservation
and Pastoralism



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