Influences on uptake of agri-environmental schemes in Spain

New research in southern Spain has studied what influences participation in agri-environmental schemes (AES). It indicated that the uptake of schemes that involve a major change in farm practices depends on the farm structure, whereas for schemes with minor changes, individual farmer characteristics play a greater role.

AES are the main policy instrument used by the EU to encourage environmental improvements in agriculture, but their adoption in Southern Europe is relatively low. Much research has been conducted on identifying the factors that influence participation in AES, but less has been carried out on whether these factors differ according to the type of AES and its demands on farmers.

The study investigated the influence of intensity of change on the AES uptake. This is the change in farm management resulting from the requirements imposed by adopting the scheme, for example, restricting livestock or changing crops. Since uptake is a particular issue in Southern Europe, the research studied two AES for rainfed arable crops in Southern Spain. The AES deployed in Andalusia was environmental fallow (EFM) which required little change in management except cutting and leaving straw on fields (i.e. low intensity), whereas the AES in Aragon was the alternative crop in special protected areas (ACM), which required the introduction of a new crop and a loss of land for growing cereals (i.e. high intensity).

The researchers interviewed farmers in both regions – some had enrolled in the AES and some had not. Data were gathered on the farm itself, the farmers’ attitudes and their socio-economic status. The factors that influenced the uptake of AES varied with the intensity of change. In Aragon, where the AES was high intensity, sign-up was highly dependent on farm management and structure. For example, the greater the focus on cereal production, the less likely the uptake of the AES because of a greater fall in profit. However, the better the knowledge of pulse crops, the more likely the uptake, as there would be greater confidence in changing crops.

Uptake in Aragon was less likely when the land was worth more, as the ACM scheme would limit the uses of the land, reducing its value. In Andalusia there was less influence from farm characteristics. The greater the amount of livestock, the less uptake of AES, because leaving land fallow will lower profits from livestock. Another influence was the expectation of future irrigation projects: this would increase the profit from crops so putting land to fallow would not be so attractive.

The greater the connection between stakeholders, the greater the uptake of AES in both regions, i.e. if farmers were involved in farmers’ unions and social networks. The research suggested this was because greater connection reduced uncertainty in the AES. For the low intensity AES (environmental fallow) the socio-demographic characteristics of farmers played a role. Older farmers and those with more education were more likely to participate.

In the future AES are likely to be more demanding and the findings from this study could help improve their design and management. For schemes requiring significant change, the farm structure and practice should be considered at an early stage of design and level of compensatory payments. For schemes with less change, targeting specific types of farmers could be beneficial. For both types of scheme environmental cooperatives could play a role in increasing the connection between farmers and improving uptake.


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