

Science for Environment Policy

New framework aids identification and assessment of High Nature Value farmland

With over half of Europe's species dependent on agricultural habitats, protecting 'high nature value' farmland is vital to biodiversity conservation. However, the identification and assessment of such farmland requires careful co-ordination, concludes a recent study. The researchers present a framework to help with this process and make a set of key recommendations.

Almost 40% of land cover worldwide is farmed and [agriculture](#) has been associated with unprecedented levels of [biodiversity](#) loss. However, farming – low-intensity practices in particular – can play an important role in halting biodiversity loss and protecting wild species. In Europe recognition of this came in the 1990s, with the development of the concept of 'High Nature Value farmlands' (HNVf).

High Nature Value farmlands are defined as one of three types¹: (i) farmland with a high proportion of associated semi-natural vegetation, (ii) farmland dominated by low-intensity agriculture and mosaics of semi-natural and cultivated land and features such as hedgerows, ponds and trees, and (iii) farmland supporting a high proportion of the European or world population of rare species or species of conservation concern.

The European Commission requires that all Member States monitor their HNVf, as part of assessment of [Rural Development Programmes](#), and suggest a selection of indicators for this purpose. However, each Member State decides individually on which indicators and types of data to collect and consider. While this approach allows flexibility, there are no minimum data standards or guidelines on the way local and regional information should be structured. As a result there is often a lack of accurate data on the distribution of farming systems and it is difficult to gain an EU-wide perspective on the extent and condition of HNVf.

In this study, researchers developed a framework which allows detailed local data to be combined to give a cohesive assessment at the Member State, and ultimately EU, level. They propose a bottom-up structure, where local organisations such as farmers' organisations, NGOs and local authorities contribute to an integrated database. Careful co-ordination to implement standards and guidelines at this point will ensure that the data collected can also be used for national and EU-wide assessments.

The researchers recommend that the guidelines address the following issues:

1. Clarification of HNVf concepts. This includes clearer definitions of HNVf types but also the connections between them.
2. Common guidelines for surveillance. This will ensure that the data can be used for assessments from local to EU scales.
3. An effective communication and reporting structure. Again, this will allow integrated reporting and will aid the assessment of common aims.
4. Data integration. This should extend not only to HNVf field management data but also to other information, such as remote-sensing databases.
5. Data exchange. The data should be available to other Member States at both technical and scientific levels.

The combination of these five points will, the researchers say, provide a common structure that will greatly aid policy implementation and decision making, helping to protect this important land use in Europe.



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1.For further background on this
topic see:

[http://www.ieep.eu/assets/646/
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