Agricultural areas with outstanding natural and cultural values

Developing and sharing innovations that support farming systems in areas of exceptional natural values across Europe through a multi-actor approach.

"Many countries in Europe have lost as much as 90% of their semi-natural grasslands over the past 100 years. Farmers and researchers are now finding innovative solutions to keep these biodiversity-rich landscapes alive," says François Lerin coordinator of HNV-Link, a new Horizon 2020 thematic network to boost innovation in agricultural areas across Europe, which are renowned for their outstanding natural and cultural values.

High nature value for the conservation of biodiversity

The High Nature Value (HNV) farmland concept came about in Europe in the early 1990s. High nature value farmland defines areas where agricultural activities are associated with high biodiversity. These areas are an important component of European agriculture not only for the conservation of biodiversity, but also for cultural heritage, quality products, and rural employment. It has since been given high priority within the EU Agricultural Policy, requiring each EU Member State to identify and monitor the extent and condition of HNV farmland.

Lack of management, abandonment or degradation of farmland, intensification of production, and socio-economic decline pose a great threat to these HNV farming systems. HNV-Link wants to support the efforts to increase the socio-economic viability of HNV farming while maintaining natural values of HNV farmland, including ecosystem services provided to society. Guy Beaufoy from the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP) and partner of HNV-Link said: "The fate of such areas is mostly in the hands of farmers, who find ways of incorporating management of the areas with the farm production, often resorting to innovative solutions. But, the farmers need the support of the whole of society." Networking on HNV innovations will help also to identify gaps in research and boundary work, both at the local and European levels.

EIP-AGRI Focus Group on HNV as a starting point

HNV-Link, a thematic network funded under Horizon 2020, was launched in April 2016 and it will focus on collecting, developing, transferring, and disseminating innovative solutions of all kinds for supporting HNV areas through improving both socio-economic viability and environmental efficiency.

The idea for this network was seeded during the work of the EIP-AGRI Focus Group on HNV Farming Profitability: "We all realised that bridging modern research skills and tools with local innovations and motivations is vital in combining productive agriculture with nature conservation objectives in the context of High Nature Value farming systems in Europe," - Iryna Herzon – University of Helsinki, HNV-Link partner and expert from the EIP-AGRI Focus Group on HNV farming.
A similar idea was also discussed during the "Agro pastoral Pindus junction", an expert meeting on cultural landscapes seeking to acknowledge the importance of this perspective in the Mediterranean. Indeed, as Claire Bernard – CIHEAM IAMM and HNV-Link partner - highlighted: “HNV farming systems are a fundamental component of the environmental issues in the Mediterranean region - through the importance of vast semi-natural vegetation areas, agroforestry, and agro-pastoral territories.”

**HNV-Link activities**

"Fusing modern research skills and tools with local innovations and motivations is essential in order to safeguard the future of these unique areas across Europe. Their very uniqueness demands a careful consideration of local ecological and socio-economic conditions,” explains Xavier Poux, from AScA and HNV-Link partner.

Of the 13 project partners, 10 are responsible for areas where HNV farming systems are prevalent and where a lot of innovation has already been happening. These are the network’s Learning Areas, which span a cross section of Europe and will be used as bottom-up innovation case areas. Innovation and expertise will be harnessed in these areas for use in other HNV farmland regions, across Europe. The fate of the world’s grassland biodiversity has been highlighted as critical just recently in a new study published in Science.

This thematic network operates at both grassroots-based and transnational levels and aims to make a difference by connecting farmers, research, and innovation actors in line with the EU innovation vision.

Among the major outputs of the project is an atlas of innovations which are feasible within HNV farming areas. The project will host an “Innovation Fair” to bring people together to learn from one another on this subject. HNV-Link will also identify existing educational material and introduce the HNV concept, challenges, and opportunities to academics and students.

Dr François Lerin, network coordinator from the intergovernmental organisation CIHEAM (International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies, Montpellier - France) stressed the importance of this project for maintaining "strong links between agriculture and environment on the one hand, and analytical and practical focus on the other.”

**Partners**

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