

AUSTRIA

Lifelong learning & vocational training

Location

Nationwide

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P1- Knowledge transfer & innovation

Measure

M01 – Knowledge transfer & innovation actions

Funding

Total budget 339 958.45 (EUR)

EAFRD 159 107.74 (EUR)

National/Regional 158

032.24 (EUR)

Other 22 818.47 (EUR)

Project duration

2020 to 2022

Project promoter

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Peer-to-peer advisory services help raise biodiversity awareness among Austrian farmers.

Summary

The Austrian Board of Trustees for Agricultural Engineering and Rural Development (ÖKL) started the project 'Biodiversity on my farm—strengthening the farmers' in 2019. As part of the project, farmers were trained to become facilitators and enable peer-to-peer exchange about biodiversity at farm level. A key outcome of this bottom-up approach was a positive mindset and a practical approach to nature conservation beyond obligations and restrictions.



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Project Results

- By the end of 2021, each of the 370 participating farms had created their own biodiversity portfolio and were implementing new biodiversity-protecting actions.
- Biodiversity established as a mainstream topic among the farming community. Greater networking and stakeholder involvement at regional level.
- 65 biodiversity facilitators now acting as regional multipliers and drivers for regional cooperation.

Lessons & Recommendations

- ❑ Significant potential exists for biodiversity actions on farms and even small changes can have a positive impact.
- ❑ As biodiversity is not usually a prominent topic in conversations between farmers, a lack of acknowledgement and feedback can occur for those farmers that are committed to biodiversity conservation. Reversing this can help boost confidence in, or uptake of, eco-schemes.
- ❑ Nature conservation programmes often implicate strict regulations and controls, which may not be attractive to farmers. Public support schemes can overcome this negative attitude and strengthen farmers' motivation to conserve biodiversity.

Context

Improved awareness and understanding about biodiversity can lead to better uptake and acceptance of the Austrian Environmental Programme's (ÖPUL) management requirements and other nature conservation measures of the federal states. Through the daily practice of land management, farmers influence a variety of habitats for flora and fauna, and they often have extensive knowledge of the relationships between animals and plants.

Despite this hands-on experience and expertise there is still potential for improving and expanding biodiversity on farms, and many farmers are not aware of the services they are already doing to conserve biodiversity.

On the other hand, where farmers have already successfully implemented RDP measures to enhance biodiversity their practical knowledge and experience is not yet fully used in educational programmes, where the benefits of practice-oriented learning have been underestimated.

Credibility, practical relevance, and face-to-face communication are factors that are often missing in agricultural education and advisory services. This gave rise to the idea of developing a new agri-environment educational approach with a focus on the practical transfer of knowledge from farm to farm.

Objective

The aim of this project is to raise practice-oriented awareness among farmers about biodiversity through peer-to-peer exchanges.

Activities

The project was developed by the Austrian Board of Trustees for Agricultural Engineering and Rural Development (ÖKL) in 2019. It was a free-of-charge rural development service and included:

- Conducting peer-to-peer conversations during farm

tours, where biodiversity facilitators discussed biodiversity-rich habitats and structures with farmers, drawing their attention to things like single trees, low-yield meadows, orchards, nettle corners, dead wood, and other landscape structures that are important for biodiversity protection. The aim was to raise awareness and give positive feedback to farmers about their efforts for biodiversity.

- Using photography to record and create individual biodiversity portfolios for the farmers involved in the project, so that they are more aware of and can better communicate their achievements.
- Organising visits to agricultural schools to raise awareness among 'future farmers'. Here, the programme was implemented in cooperation with teachers to highlight the variety of animals, plants, and habitats around a farm and to promote discussion of biodiversity in class.
- Training farmers to become biodiversity facilitators through a four-day training course in Tyrol and Vorarlberg. Here, the participants learnt about diversity in fields, grasslands, and orchards, as well as communication techniques that would help them mediate discussions about biodiversity.
- Organising hands-on biodiversity workshops in cooperation with facilitators across Austria. These were held on different farms and covered practical topics such as creating meadow orchards, nest box construction for rare breeding birds, forest edge design, making a cairn for reptiles, plant identification, etc.
- Working with experts and the biodiversity facilitators to organise a series of regional information and networking events and webinars where ecologists and farmers could meet, discuss, and exchange ideas.
- Producing short videos with practical tips from farmers about their experiences of implementing biodiversity actions on their farms. These short videos were promoted on the project website and on social media to encourage other farmers to protect biodiversity too.

Main results

- The project's evaluation demonstrated that participants of the peer-to-peer conversations were more likely to implement new actions on their farms, and by the end of 2021 all 370 farms had created their own individual biodiversity portfolio.
- The 22 biodiversity workshops were the starting point for biodiversity networks and stakeholder involvement at regional level. Additionally, other educational actions like the short videos or the agricultural school lectures helped to establish biodiversity management as more of a mainstream topic among the farming community.
- The 65 biodiversity facilitators are now important regional multipliers and drivers for regional cooperation. They have formed a strong network and every year they gain more experience and knowledge. They connect farms across the regions to establish joint actions such as workshops, excursions and collaborations with institutions, associations, and companies.

Key lessons

- Significant potential for biodiversity support exists on farms including small changes (e.g. leaving unmown strips in grasslands or sustaining old trees in traditional orchards) and these can benefit insects, birds, and

plants. Awareness raising about possibilities is essential.

- A comprehensive view, together with a biodiversity facilitator, can initiate new ideas and actions adapted to local farm circumstances and to the individual vision of the farmer.
- A lack of acknowledgement and feedback can occur for those farmers that are committed to biodiversity conservation and reversing this can help boost confidence in, or uptake of, eco-schemes.
- Nature conservation programmes often implicate strict regulations and controls, which are commonly not favoured by farmers, so there is a need for public support schemes that overcome this negative attitude and strengthen farmers' motivation to conserve biodiversity.

"The joint farm walkabouts are always a great enrichment for me. Here you get a lot of suggestions for yourself and you can pass this experience on to other conversations. I get a lot of appreciation for my work - probably because I am showing appreciation to other farmers for what they do and for their daily work. The grand finale for me is when I can hand over the beautiful posters with photos of biodiversity on their farms."

facilitator Michael Kuhn

Additional sources of information

www.oekl.at