

NETHERLANDS

Sustainable use of agricultural land

Location

Wageningen

Programming period

2007 - 2013

Axis / Priority

Axis 2 – Improving the environment and the countryside

Measure

M214 - Agri-environment payments

Funding (EUR)

between €25 and €150 per nest, depending on the scarcity of the bird species
EAFRD 75%

Project duration

2007 – 2013

Project promoter

Agri-environment cooperatives (ANVs)

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Agri-environment cooperatives in the Netherlands use results-based schemes to distribute payments to farmers according to on-farm nature conservation results.

Summary

Farmers can play an important role in farmland conservation. However, the benefits of their work can be increased if they cooperate on habitat level and if there is more flexibility to respond to local and seasonal circumstances. Results-based agri-environment payment schemes (RBAPS) can offer many benefits for RDP stakeholders. These include more flexibility for farmers and better nature conservation outcomes, as well as improved value-for-money and visibility of RDP results.



Results

160 agri-environment cooperatives were operational during the 2007 – 2013 programming period, resulting a drastic decrease in the number of applications and beneficiaries.

Studies showed that certain species responded better than others (such as the Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) and Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) as opposed to the Redshank (*Tringa tetanus*).

Socio-economic results include: increased pride from farmers in their ecological achievements; increased knowledge and understanding of species for farmers.

Ecological results indicate that support for nest protection may not be sufficient on its own. ANV's are therefore now considering new RBAPS indicators that are based on the survival rate of chicks.

Lessons & Recommendations

- ❑ Two notable success factors for this type of rural development methodology are firstly farmer acceptance of the approach, and secondly the cultural significance of cooperatives in the Netherlands which enables this approach to take place.
- ❑ Proposals have been made to strengthen the schemes' monitoring framework.
- ❑ Another challenge relates to maintaining farmer motivation and interest in the scheme that uses a voluntary redistribution of payments, even if this might lead to reduced payments for some individuals.

Context

RBAPS are commonly used to manage floral habitats (such as flower meadows on livestock pastures) and they can also be used to conserve fauna, like this example from the Netherlands. The Dutch meadow birds RBAPS applies an innovative implementation method whereby RDP agri-environment payments are first provided directly to farmers but then transferred to an agri-environment cooperative (Agrarische Natuurvereniging [ANV]) which redistributes the funds according to on-farm nature conservation results. These schemes operate mainly in the western part of the Netherlands.

Objectives

The meadow bird RBAPS focus on improving the conservation status of grassland bird populations, because these species have suffered continuing decline following intensification of agricultural practices in their habitats. The aim of using a RBAPS model is to ensure that “the money follows the birds” so that farmers who perform well in nature conservation practices get rewarded accordingly. Using a cooperative approach provides a more strategic and territorial coverage of the birds’ habitats. ANV’s broad memberships also promote inclusive approaches to agri-environment action and act as a successful stakeholder involvement models.

Activities

The schemes have been on-going since 2005 and focus on nest protection (which primarily involves marking and avoiding nests when carrying out farm operations). Payments are made per nest. Each cooperative has a different pricing policy with payments varying between €25 and €150 per nest, depending on the scarcity of the bird species.

The results-based element of the scheme requires participants to map and monitor meadow bird nests on their land as an indication for the number of breeding meadow birds on site. The scheme is financed largely by RDP agri-environment payments granted to ANV members, a proportion of which are voluntarily redistributed through the ANVs. Part of farmers’ willingness to pool a proportion of their agri-environment payments through the cooperatives comes from the strong and historic role that the cooperative approach has in Dutch farming. The cooperatives also provide advice and support to the farmers engaged in agri-environment schemes.

Farmers are responsible for counting and monitoring the meadow bird nests in conjunction with local conservation volunteers, which are facilitated through the cooperatives. Through this approach, farmers identify the location of the meadow bird nests on special maps, which are supplied by their respective ANV, and submit them to the ANV for review. The nests are then checked annually by ANV staff according to where they have been mapped by the farmer. Many ANVs publish the results in their annual reports and some include additional monitoring information such as the proportion of nests that produced fledged young or the number of eggs laid. However, the monitoring of survival rates of chicks is time consuming and not yet standard practice in most ANVs.

Results

160 established agri-environment cooperatives resulting a drastic decrease in the number of applications and beneficiaries.

Studies have explored how these result-based approaches can benefit a selection of meadow bird species. The findings showed how certain species responded better than others (such as the Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) and Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) as opposed to the Redshank (*Tringa tetanus*). Socio-economic results include: increased pride from farmers in their ecological achievements; increased knowledge and understanding of species due to farmer engagement with conservation volunteers and experts and training, all of which is facilitated through the ANV.

Observed ecological results indicate that concentrating too much on nest protection may not act as sufficient incentive to protect wading birds once they have hatched, which has led to a decline in meadow bird populations despite conservation efforts carried out through this scheme. Hence support for nest protection may not be sufficient on its own and wading bird populations need areas of extensively managed land for their chicks to develop. There are concerns that the focus on results, in terms of a payment per nest, does not take into account wider conservation factors, such as the quality of the habitat. As such habitat quality has been observed to deteriorate in certain locations. ANV’s are therefore now considering new RBAPS indicators that are based on the survival rate of chicks.

Key lessons

Two notable success factors for this type of rural development methodology are farmer acceptance of the approach, and the cultural significance of cooperatives in the Netherlands. Only through the ANVs has it been possible to continue a results-based element of the meadow bird scheme in the Netherlands. Cooperatives are able to provide on-going training to participants at no additional cost to the farmer.

Proposals have been made to strengthen the schemes' monitoring frameworks, particularly as these depend currently on the active engagement of volunteers to monitor the results, but also because the payment might not be targeted at the optimal indicator (i.e. nest presence rather than successfully fledged chicks). Another challenge relates to maintaining farmer motivation and interest in the scheme that uses a voluntary redistribution of payments, even if this might lead to reduced payments for some individuals.

Quotes from beneficiaries/participants

There are a lot of ways to spend agri-environment funding. The standard approach is to design rules about how to manage grasslands. The disadvantage is that nature does not always keep to the rules, so the rules do not always benefit the birds. This is why a number of farm cooperatives in the Netherlands decided to take a different approach and pay for results as well.

In order to know if you are doing well you need to carry out more monitoring. With this knowledge you can regularly adjust the management. In this way, the cost-effectiveness of spending agri-environment money is much higher. It would be a pity introducing a scheme and after years having to admit that it didn't deliver. I think this can easily be avoided by closely monitoring how you spend your money annually and by paying for results rather than measures.

This approach makes it possible to follow and check the progress of the birds from year to year. By following the birds, we can optimise the conservation measures yearly, adjusting them to the conditions at present. The scheme monitoring shows that this approach is quite effective.

In order to assess the schemes' effectiveness a baseline needs to be set first of all, and then it's possible to measure any changes in the bird populations as a result of the chosen conservation measures. Now we are measuring not just the number of birds breeding, but also the survival rate of their chicks. If both numbers and survival rates increase we know the scheme is working. If not, it indicates a problem that needs to be solved.

Our approach to grassland bird management goes beyond farm-level, because to get good results you should organise it at regional level so this is what happens in the Netherlands. To be effective, you have to know how the birds are reacting to the farmers' management. The monitoring needed to follow this closely is also used as a basis for the result-based payment. Monitoring is therefore essential for this regional approach and it creates dual benefits.

Mark Kuiper

Dutch agri-environment advisor, Waterland

I am involved with this results-based scheme from the agri-environment cooperative here in Waterland. I think it is important to have a result-based scheme because this way the money goes to the people who perform the best.

The cooperative provided me with a training to help me recognise the birds and the nesting places. They also give me help by providing volunteers who look for the nests. And the cooperatives staff come to advise me about additional measures, like postponed mowing in fields still crowded with chicks.

Wim Terlouw

Waterland dairy farmer

The experiences from this results-based scheme are rather good in the Netherlands. In years when fewer individual nests are recorded the cooperative has spare funds. The surplus is then spent on other measures that benefit birds. For example, in dry years the money could be spent to create wetter conditions. In years where there are many birds all the budget will be spent on payments for nests. The results-based approach works well here. A major advantage is that the money follows the birds.

Our results-based scheme covers the number of nests and the type of bird. The principle is that farmers get paid for the number of birds. So the more birds the higher the payment, and one farmer contributes to the results of the other farmer. The farmers provide the co-operative with 75% of their nest protection payment from the Paying Agency and €20 per hectare of all other agri-environment payments. The co-operative then redistributes the money among its members according to the biodiversity results.

The reason why farmers agree to work this way with the farmer co-operative is because the co-operative provides administrative services to the farmers. So the farmers have less paperwork when applying for agri-environment payments.

Martine Bijman - Waterland & Dijken
agri-environment farmer co-operative