A recent study describes the Agri-environmental Footprint Index (AFI), which harmonises assessment of the performance of agri-environment schemes in Europe. This flexible method evaluates the impact of environmental policies at farm level, and is applicable to all landscape types and farming practices found throughout Europe.

Evaluating environmental aspects of policies relevant to agriculture involves assessing effects on measurable environmental conditions; that is, any change in the quality of the environment at farm level under the impact of a particular policy initiative.

Working within the EU-funded project AE-Footprint, the researchers suggest the AFI could supplement the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), which monitors and evaluates agri-environment schemes in the EU for the period 2007-2013. Using a universal framework, the AFI can evaluate the effectiveness of agri-environmental incentive schemes broadly defined in the Rural Development Regulation, that have been under different farming conditions following the subsidiarity principle. In addition, the AFI can monitor on-going changes to the local farm environment as a result of agri-environmental policy.

Three broad agri-environmental concerns were identified in EU policy: Natural Resources, which include, for example, soil and water quality, Biodiversity, which includes conservation of wildlife species and habitats, and Landscape, which includes the cultural and historical value, and aesthetic quality of the countryside. Additionally, three universal farm management domains were also identified: these relate to management of crop and animal husbandry, physical farm infrastructure and natural and cultural heritage. A structured combination of the broader policy concerns and farm management domains is used to identify criteria for a regionally customised evaluation.

Effective policy evaluation incorporates a wide range of stakeholder views, both expert and non-specialist. The AFI has been developed as an interactive process that encompasses nine progressive steps to describe local agricultural priorities and practices, involving farmers and other relevant stakeholders at each stage. This transparent decision-making process can ensure collective acceptance of an evaluation’s outcome and encourage greater understanding of the local priorities.

Evaluations of environmental schemes using the AFI concept can identify good farm management practices and highlight areas for improvement. It can indicate the strengths and weaknesses of a policy and be used to improve its design. In addition, the AFI method is sufficiently flexible to accommodate likely changing priorities, including dealing with the effects of climate change, energy and food crises, or additional elements that might arise as a consequence of EU enlargement.

The AFI approach is particularly suitable for monitoring EU agri-environment schemes that have broad environmental objectives, as a major advantage of the method is its ability to summarise complex relationships between farm practices and environmental outcomes, and to provide a holistic view of policy from a local perspective.

The researchers suggest that more farmers, including those who practice intensive agriculture, could be encouraged to engage more fully with agri-environment incentive schemes through use of the AFI to create more customised measures to protect wildlife habitats and other landscape conservation features. The AFI could shed light on possible trade-offs between maximising environmental quality and maintaining economic competitiveness, the authors suggest.

1. AE-Footprint is an EU Specific Targeted Research Project. See: http://www.footprint.rdg.ac.uk/en/home_en.html


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