Do agri-environmental policies support mixed farming systems?

The Large Scale Grazing Systems (LSGS) of the EU are governed by legislation at regional, national and European levels. New research investigates an LSGS in Spain and suggests that the area's traditional mix of sheep and cereal farming needs improved, better co-ordinated regulatory support to survive.

LSGS are large areas of countryside used for grazing in the EU, characterised by cultural traditions. Environmental and agricultural policies have been integrated to encourage sustainable agriculture. For example, agri-environment measures support farming practices that protect the environment and maintain the countryside. LSGSs are often the target of agri-environmental policy.

The research examined an LSGS in Castilla-la Mancha, Spain, with a traditional mix of arable and sheep farming. Data on agri-environment scheme claims, land use change and farming practices were analysed to identify links between agricultural income and support and assess the sustainability of mixed arable-sheep farming. Arable and sheep farmers in the community also completed questionnaires to explain whether their land management choices are driven by regulatory or market incentives. The survey was conducted as part of the EU-funded LACOPE research project.

Sheep farming represents about 35 per cent of the total value of production farming per land unit, but it is a secondary land use that relies on land left over from arable farming. Arable farming is more affected by EU regulations and support schemes than sheep farming, which is regulated at a more regional level. EU support makes up 32 per cent of total farm income for arable farmers and 13 per cent for sheep farmers.

Up to 18 different farming practices are awarded support by Spanish legislation but only one is relevant to sheep farmers – maintaining sheep and goats in danger of extinction. In addition, arable farmers have to charge sheep farmers a regulated grazing fee of just EUR 2-10 per year per hectare of pasture land. This is, on average, ten times less than what they would earn if they sold the feed crop commercially. There is therefore little incentive to rent land to sheep farmers. As a result, sheep farming is more market driven and has turned to indoor feeding.

The results of the study indicate that sheep and arable farming are following disconnected trends that can no longer support each other in the traditional mixed format. Arable farming is being driven towards more intensive cultivation, to the detriment of pastoral sheep farming and has contributed to the growth in indoor feeding. The authors suggest that institutional management of LSGSs at both a European and regional level should consider the structure of the farming system and the interaction of the different stakeholders involved. In order to do this authors suggest it should use a more bottom-up approach.

1. See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/agriculture/index.htm
2. See http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/env/index_en.htm#measures
3. See LACOPE (Landscape Development, Biodiversity and Co-operative Livestock System) was supported by the European Commission under the Fifth Framwork Programme. See: http://144.41.253.33/lacope/index.html


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