What encourages farmers to participate in EU agri-environment schemes?

Isolating specific reasons for involvement in agri-environment schemes (AES) is a key step in the formulation of schemes that are more appealing to Europe’s farming community. Through a comprehensive exploration of the literature on AES across the EU, this study contributes to a better understanding of what drives farmers’ participation in such initiatives, revealing important factors, such as previous experience with schemes and flexibility in management.

AES have been a component of EU policy since the 1980s, with their significance increasing following changes to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 2013. Between 2007 and 2013, over €22 billion was allocated to EU Member States to cover AES payments, which are distributed to participating farmers following their commitment to greener farming practices. The fact that such large amounts of public money are invested, means that there is a need to assess performance. This study, which was co-financed by the EU, reviews the existing literature on the factors that influence farmers to join AES, resulting in a series of recommendations for policymakers.

One of the central principles of AES is that they are voluntary, but this means that environmental policy objectives will only be achieved if the schemes are appealing to farmers. To assist with this, farmers are incentivised for their participation, but payment needs to be set at a level that encourages uptake whilst remaining cost-effective.

This study pinpoints the main influences on farmers’ participation in AES by undertaking meta-analysis of papers published in peer-reviewed journals between 2000 and 2013. The papers selected covered surveys performed in most EU Member States. Over 160 variables affecting uptake were identified, and grouped into five major categories: economic factors, farm structure, farmer characteristics, farmers’ attitudes towards AES and social capital (i.e. the connections, shared values and understandings between individuals and groups).

Results indicate that farms less likely to join AES are those where there is a high dependence on agricultural activities for farm income, those where there is the presence of a successor on a farm (farmers are unwilling to agree to long-term contracts that may affect their successors) and farms with a high proportion of family labour.

On the other hand, previous involvement with AES or lower agricultural capacity were positively associated with AES uptake — perhaps because farmers, by being paid for additional work under an AES, can more significantly increase their income with AES payments and also use some areas that are not available for agricultural activities.

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Unsurprisingly, payment emerged as one of the most important drivers. Many of the farmers indicated that they would consider smaller payments and lower levels of disruption to their activities as an alternative to higher payments with greater disruption. This has important implications for policymakers, as it suggests that a more flexible system, including an incremental adoption of measures of increasing intensity with linked increases in payment, could cut costs while encouraging uptake among farmers. This might also encourage farmers to adopt more innovative practices, such as landscape-scale management measures with neighbouring farmers, which could achieve greater environmental benefits.

Other recommendations made by the researchers include holding community workshops to promote AES among farmers. Farmers previously involved in schemes might act as advocates or champions of the benefits of AES participation. Additionally, they recommend greater involvement of farmers in the design of schemes to improve participation and engagement.

Finally, it is important for policymakers to consider the interplay between AES and other policies that impact on the rural community (such as rural development, food safety, climate change, sustainable development and regional policies), as they may serve to either increase or decrease participation.