Farming in Natura 2000
In harmony with nature
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Farming in Europe

A long tradition of farming in Europe

For centuries, people in Europe have been working their land in ways that are well adapted to the local environment. Diverse farming traditions have helped to create an intricate patchwork of semi-natural habitats that are exceptionally rich in wildlife, yet largely dependent on continuous management for their survival.

Over the past 50 years however, agriculture has undergone a series of major changes. The combined effects of farm intensification and abandonment have taken their toll on Europe’s nature. It is estimated that, today, only around 15–25% of Europe’s once biodiversity-rich farmland remains.

Well-adapted extensive farming practices are not only important for wildlife, they also provide an important source of local employment, income and food across the EU, which is helping to keep local communities alive, especially in the more remote parts of the EU.

Farmers as custodians of our countryside

Farmers are justly proud of the fact that they are not only producers of food but also custodians of our countryside, providing a wide range of public goods and services for the benefit of all. Today’s society demands greater recognition of the important role agriculture can play in protecting our natural capital – soil, water, biodiversity.

Successive reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) have aimed to encourage more environmentally-sound farming practices that are in keeping with the natural environment. This has led to the decoupling of farm subsidies from production and the introduction of rules to ensure that all farms apply the same EU-wide environmental standards, including those for nature conservation under cross compliance.
The Natura 2000 Network

Natura 2000 sites (under the Birds and Habitats Directives)
Europe’s biodiversity – a rich natural heritage

The EU’s commitment to halting the loss of biodiversity

Responding to international commitments, scientific pressure and strong public concern, the EU has set itself the target of **halting the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020, and restoring them so far as feasible.**

The EU Biodiversity Strategy, adopted in 2012, identifies six major target areas where action is required to address the key pressures on nature and ecosystem services within the EU. One of these targets aims to increase the contribution of agriculture and forestry to biodiversity conservation.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives are core elements of Europe’s Biodiversity Strategy. They aim at preserving Europe’s most endangered species and valuable natural habitats across their entire natural range within the EU, irrespective of political or administrative boundaries.

The Natura 2000 Network

The nature Directives protect around 2,000 endangered species and habitat types, such as alpine meadows and pastures, steppic plains, dehesas and montados, open moorland or lowland hay meadows.

Member States are required to designate core areas for these species and habitats to ensure their survival and long-term recovery. These so called Natura 2000 sites form part of the EU-wide Natura 2000 Network, which today contains over 27,000 areas in 28 countries, covering almost a fifth of Europe’s terrestrial area, as well as an important part of the surrounding seas.

A significant number of the Natura 2000 sites have been designated to protect species or habitats that depend upon, or are closely associated with, agriculture (over 50 habitat types and 260 species respectively). This explains why around 40% of the land in the Network is, or was once, managed farmland.
A partnership between people and nature

Working with nature

Although the Network includes strictly protected nature reserves, Natura 2000 embraces a much wider approach to conservation and sustainable use. It is one that is largely centred on people working with nature, rather than against it. Since every site is unique, the emphasis is very much on finding local solutions in close cooperation with landowners, stakeholders, and all other interested parties.

The Habitats and Birds Directives recognise humans are an integral part of nature and that the two work best in partnership with one another. Because a high biodiversity usually coincides with low agricultural outputs, most of the farmland in Natura 2000 is located in more marginal farming areas.

In these areas, existing farming practices are already likely to be compatible and so should be allowed to continue as before. Indeed, designation under Natura 2000 could further help to reinforce such activities by drawing attention to their societal value and by focusing EU funds towards their maintenance and, where possible, reintroduction.

In others, traditional farming practices may have already been abandoned or converted to other forms of farming that are less compatible with the objectives of Natura 2000, in which case it will be necessary to find ways to reintroduce or adjust existing activities so as to maintain or restore the rare and threatened habitats and species present.

The types of farming systems in Natura 2000

Broadly, the types of farming systems that are typically found in Natura 2000 sites fall into one or more of the following categories:

- **livestock systems** where the forage areas are mainly semi-natural vegetation, including pastures, heath and scrub;
- **low-intensity arable systems** (for example on poor soils, dry, saline or waterlogged areas, or in remote locations), often in rotation with semi-natural fallow vegetation;
- **low-intensity permanent crops**, such as old, traditionally managed orchards and olive groves; and
- **mixed farming systems** with arable and/or permanent crops with livestock. Such farming systems also include farmland with a mosaic of low-intensity agriculture and valuable landscape features, which can support a high species biodiversity, with other associated environmental benefits, e.g. on water quality.

Some intensive agricultural areas have also been included in Natura 2000, for instance, for certain species of geese or small mammals that graze on intensive grassland and cereal crops in the winter.
**Romania**

*Agri-environment scheme for High Nature Value Grasslands*

There are about 3.8 million farm holdings in Romania, of which 68% are under one hectare. Since joining the EU many of these smaller semi-subsistence farms have been struggling to survive, and rural depopulation has become a major problem. Under the EU Rural Development Programme (RDP), Romania has introduced a specific agri-environment scheme for High Nature Value grasslands. The measures involve obligatory annual mowing after 1 July, or grazing, limited stocking rates, no artificial fertilisers and regular scrub clearance.

Of the 2.5 million hectares eligible for HNV grassland payments in Romania, a significant proportion (around half) has been included in this agri-environment scheme to date, involving some 230,000 farmers. Its success is largely due to the simple design of the scheme, the appropriate payment levels and the good working relationship between the Ministry of Agriculture and the conservation NGOs who are helping to implement the scheme. The latter provide much needed local support and advice to local farmers.

**Estonia**

*Agri-environment scheme for coastal meadows*

Estonia has developed an agri-environment scheme dedicated to supporting low-intensity farming on 35,000 ha of semi-natural habitats located in Natura 2000 sites. The scheme has been developed through close cooperation between the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment and builds on a successful pilot scheme that was developed under an EU-LIFE project.

Since its launch hundreds of management agreements have been signed, demonstrating the overall popularity of the scheme to farmers. If the overall target of 35,000 ha is reached then the management of the semi-natural habitats in Natura 2000 that are dependent on farming will be largely secured. This scheme will therefore contribute directly to ensuring that unique habitats such as Baltic coastal meadows, for which Estonia has a particular responsibility under the Habitats Directive, reach a favourable conservation status.
**Germany**

*Integrating nature conservation into wider rural development objectives*

Many of the Natura 2000 sites in the Black Forest harbour valuable, species-rich grasslands, which have developed through centuries of grazing and mowing. Their scenic value attracts large numbers of tourists every year. However, because farming here is labour intensive and increasingly uneconomical for small-scale farmers, many areas have fallen fallow in recent years.

The Landcare Association Central Black Forest (LACBF) was set up to work together with municipal authorities, conservationists and farmers in order to find sustainable solutions for maintaining these valuable areas. In addition to helping farmers find economical ways to farm their grasslands, the LACBF also helps to market the regional products they produce amongst locals and tourists alike. The cooperative and imaginative ways in which LACBF has succeeded in integrating nature conservation into wider regional development objectives has created an effective and trustworthy network amongst stakeholders in the region.

**Spain**

*Selling pasta in support of steppic birds*

The region of Aragon hosts some unique steppic habitats that are of exceptional biodiversity value. Over 75,000 ha have been included in Natura 2000. These habitats have been used over centuries for traditional dry land cultivation of crops such as durum wheat. This type of farming is intrinsically organic in nature, involving typical measures such as crop rotation, fallow practice, little or no use of pesticides and limited use of fertilisers.

Recognising the strong public demand for organic, nature-friendly products, a commercial venture was launched in 2003 to sell high quality organic products, such as macaroni and spaghetti, which are derived from the best steppes in the region (Monegros and Belchite). They are marketed under a quality brand that is linked to the conservation of steppe birds. The venture has proved to be very successful, some 180,000 kg of pasta has already been sold, providing an important source of income for the local farmers within Natura 2000.
Finding local solutions

The EU Directives set the framework for action, but leaves it up to each Member State to decide how best to manage their individual Natura 2000 sites in consultation with local stakeholders. Because every Natura 2000 site is unique, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ rule for the management.

Much will depend on the local conditions, the type of farming practices and the species and habitats present. It is therefore best that the decisions over the management of the site are made on a case-by-case basis in close consultation with the local stakeholders and landowners concerned.

In this way, Natura 2000 supports the principle of sustainable land use. Its aim is not to exclude economic activities, but instead to set the parameters by which these can take place whilst safeguarding Europe’s most threatened and valuable species and habitats.

Commission guidance on farming in Natura 2000

In 2013, the Commission issued guidance on how to integrate Natura 2000 conservation objectives into farming practices. The guide is designed to assist national and regional administrations and key stakeholder groups, who are responsible for agriculture and/or nature conservation, to develop and implement different tools for supporting farming practices that contribute to Natura 2000.

The guidelines, which have been prepared through active dialogue with relevant interest groups (agricultural and environmental authorities, farmers’ organisations, environmental NGOs), examine the relationship between farming and Natura 2000, and outline the management requirements for these sites.

They also offer a wide range of practical ideas, examples and recommendations on how to manage farmland in Natura 2000 sites under a range of different socio-economic and environmental conditions, as illustrated by a number of good practice experiences from across the EU.

Types of farming practices compatible with Natura 2000

Different types of farming practices can contribute to the conservation of farmland habitats and species in Natura 2000, including:

- grazing with suitable stocking rates, seasonality and timing, using appropriate stock species or a combination of grazing animals, rotational grazing;
- shepherding;
- mowing/hay cutting at appropriate times and frequencies, and with suitable equipment, removing the cut hay; and
- maintaining landscape features such as stone walls, hedges, tree-lines and ponds.
Luxembourg
Marketing beef from protected areas

In 2013, the Ministry of Environment, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, launched a scheme called ‘Naturschutz durch Nutzung’ (conservation through usage) – to encourage farmers in protected areas, such as Natura 2000 sites, to convert to low-intensity grazing with hardy breeds of cattle. Since launching the scheme, numerous agreements have been made with local restaurants and butchers within the vicinity of the farms to ensure a steady income to the farmers.

The Ministry also developed a ‘certificate of origin’ label and a strong marketing campaign to promote the products coming from the scheme. Luxembourg’s biggest supermarket chain, Cactus, has since manifested its interest. According to their market surveys, customers are particularly interested in buying meat that is locally sourced and has a solid reputation for being a healthy, sustainable, and high quality produce – the meat from the ‘Naturschutz durch Nutzung’ scheme fits the bill perfectly.

Austria
Selling meat to save nature

The Natura 2000 site ‘Wienerwald’ is situated close to the big city of Vienna. In addition to being a major recreational area, the mosaic patchwork of valuable meadows and pastures provides an important habitat for many butterflies, and birds, like the corncrake. However, because traditional cattle breeding has been decreasing in this region for a while, the once valuable grasslands and their associated wildlife are rapidly disappearing.

To stem this negative trend and help maintain the high nature value of the Natura 2000 area, farmers and nature conservationists have created a new brand ‘Wienerwald – Weiderind’ for their meat products. Farmers can use the brand in exchange for putting their cattle out to pasture for at least 200 days and for carrying out specific conservation measures. The brand has proved to be successful on all fronts: not only are the meadows being grazed once again for the benefit of wildlife but the branded meat originating from these areas is under increasing demand.
**Bulgaria**

*Nature protection and sustainable rural development*

Bulgaria’s Balkan Mountain region is of exceptional natural value but it is also one of the poorest regions in the EU with high unemployment rates and an aging population. Farms are generally very small and are not able to invest in improving the quality of their produce. They also lack the skills and capacity to make the most of the opportunities offered by EU funds, despite the benefits their farming provides for biodiversity.

To address these issues, a coalition was set up to work directly with farmers, micro-enterprises and small enterprises in six Natura 2000 sites in the Western and Central Balkan Mountain Range. Four innovative schemes were introduced to pay farmers to help protect over 15,000 ha of key semi-natural habitats. Products are promoted and sold at fairs and farmers’ markets in Sofia and elsewhere. These creative ways of paying for the benefits of nature demonstrate that Natura 2000 can offer new opportunities for selling products and services of a high quality and environmental value.

**Italy**

*Terre dell’Oasi Co-operative*

The Co-operative Terre dell’Oasi was set up to promote a new ‘Terre dell’Oasi’ brand for organic farming products grown by means of traditional agricultural practices in four different Natura 2000 sites. Local farmers grow spelt, rice and an old variety of wheat that are now sold nationwide. Other products include pasta, olive oil, honey and salt. Creating a special local brand and linking the products to the natural value of the sites has increased the revenues generated from direct sales both on site and online. In addition, agreements with restaurants and other national partnerships have been established. Thanks to this initiative, farmers and producers have expanded their agricultural activities and new organic products are being promoted and sold.

Revenues have increased nine times in five years. This represents a win-win for both farmers and nature conservation. Furthermore, the farmers’ perception of protected areas, which was initially considered a limitation to their work, has changed into an opportunity for organic farming possibilities and new niche markets.
Creating a future for extensive farming in Europe

Enhancing the economic viability of extensive farming systems

Today, many small rural farms find themselves in an increasingly precarious state, having to operate under difficult circumstances, using labour-intensive methods and often working on marginalised land. They are, as a result, extremely vulnerable to wider economic pressures.

For such extensive farming systems to continue to operate over the long term, it is essential that they remain economically viable and ensure a fair income for the farmers. This requires an integrated package of support which will ensure their economic viability while, at the same time, reward them for the management of Natura 2000 sites and the conservation of biodiversity in general.

One way of making Natura 2000 farming systems more economically viable is to find new outlets for their produce and to promote their added value. Studies show that the European public has a strong interest in supporting farmers that contribute to protecting the natural environment.

Natura 2000 can play an important role in this respect since people see it as a sign of quality. Because sites have been protected under EU legislation they are often associated with the highest standards, even amongst people who are not familiar with what Natura 2000 means.

Supporting farming systems through EU funds

The Common Agricultural Policy represents one of the most important sources of EU funding for the management of farmland in Natura 2000 sites. Under Pillar II, a range of measures can be used to support Natura 2000 farmland.

They include, amongst other measures:
- preparing and updating Natura 2000 management plans;
- agri-environment-climate payments;
- non-productive investments linked to agri-environment and Natura 2000; and
- Natura 2000 compensation payments.

Under the current Rural Development Programme (2014–2020), several Member States have successfully developed agri-environment schemes tailored to the management of Natura 2000 sites or High Nature Value (HNV) farmland hosting Natura 2000 habitats and species, as many of the examples in this brochure illustrate.
**Czech Republic**

*Grassland management in the Krkonoše National Park*

Since 2010, the grassland habitats of the Krkonoše National Park and SCI are managed according to the conservation priorities and agricultural practices defined in a 10-year management plan. The initiative stemmed from a pilot model of ‘nature-friendly management’ which has since been applied at the individual farm level.

The measures aim to maintain and improve the status of habitats and species of national and European importance through farming in a way that is also economically viable and well adapted to local conditions. Some of these measures are eligible for agri-environment support, based on existing agri-environment schemes, whilst others are tailor-made for the farm and involve more adapted measures – such as more flexible late mowing, diverse grazing regimes, and a decrease of livestock per hectare. At the same time, a local certified brand has been created specifically for Krkonoše which guarantees the origin and environmental quality of its products.

**Ireland**

*The Burren: farming for conservation*

Located along the Atlantic coast, the Burren is a vast area of limestone karst of exceptional biodiversity value. Grazing on these areas during winter has prevented scrub encroachment, and produced ideal conditions for annual crops of flowers, including rare species of gentians and orchids.

The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme (BFCP) has been launched to provide farmers with advice on how to maximise the environmental benefit from their land. It is then up to the farmers themselves to use their own initiative to create optimal species-rich grasslands, and suggest actions and priorities. The supported activities are subsequently mapped and costed by a trained advisor. A key success of the scheme lies in the fact that the farm plans are simple and clear, made up of just two sides of paper; one side has a map of the farm identifying important habitats, cultural features and proposed actions, and the other a list of actions with a costing attached to each one.
Further reading

Guidance document ‘Farming for Natura 2000’

Case studies on managing farmland in Natura 2000

Commission website on Managing Natura 2000 sites

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