

RURAL AREAS NEWSLINK

NEWSLETTER FOR AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE



EUROPEAN LANDSCAPES AND RURAL POLICIES

Europe has a great heritage of diverse and beautiful landscapes. In the Czech Republic, scenic landscapes have been enjoyed by our people, and by visitors from other countries, for many years. They are also a source of income for many rural communities. Farming and forestry, handicrafts and rural tourism are important factors for employment in many mountain regions.

The European Union (EU) has implemented policies for a considerable time that help to maintain its rural landscapes. Direct support payments to farmers in so-called Less Favoured Areas (LFAs), agri-environment schemes where farmers are paid for the management of landscapes and habitats, and rural development programmes such as LEADER contribute to this goal. This support for the maintenance of landscapes and often quite small farmers distinguishes the EU Common Agricultural Policy from large-scale production systems on other continents. The policies pursued under that goal are often said to follow the 'European model of

agriculture'. The Czech Republic fully supports the objectives of this policy.

Agriculture in the Czech Republic has undergone enormous re-structuring and extensification in the last 10 years, just as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. We are aware that change is necessary and that our agriculture has to become more competitive. However, it is also important to us that landscapes that have been created over centuries are maintained and that the population in these areas has adequate sources of income. To this end, the Czech Republic has provided direct payments to farmers in our equivalent LFAs for several years. These cover an area of up to 1 million hectares, mostly in mountainous areas where livestock farming predominates. To ensure a minimum management of grasslands, eligibility for payment is tied to the farmer maintaining a livestock density higher than 0.1 (for organic farmers) or 0.25 (for conventional farmers) livestock units per hectare. To further support sustainable farming methods the Czech Ministry for Agriculture also

runs an organic farming scheme (see page 4). Whenever budgets permit we plan to develop these policies further.

At the same time, the Czech Republic is investing substantial resources in adapting its laws, institutions and economic sectors to EU standards. The EU pre-accession funds will be a great help in this respect. SAPARD, the pre-accession fund for agricultural, rural development and agri-environmental policies, will provide 500 million Euro per year to all 10 applicant countries. However, this sum is equivalent to the money that is spent in Austria, a recent EU member, on its agri-environmental programme alone (528 MEuros in 1998). Further efforts must be made by everyone to realise the European model of agriculture in all parts of Europe.

Tomás Zidek, Deputy Minister
Ministry of Agriculture
Tesnov 17
CZ-117 05 Prague
Tel: +420 2 2181 2334
Fax: +420 2 2318 245
email: zidek@mze.cz

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SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN LATVIA

Over 60 years ago the Lake Pape area in southwest Latvia was a well developed agricultural area. Extensive agricultural activities, mainly cattle breeding and grain production, covered most land suitable for agriculture. Agriculture, fishing and other activities were integrated into the area's diverse habitats, which consist of sand beaches and dunes, coastal lagoons and reedlands, peat bogs, wet meadows, forests and rivers. However, due to wars, Russian military occupation, deportation and the economic decline of traditional agricultural systems, the population in Rucava municipality fell from 5,000 to 1,800 people between the 1930s and 1996. Large-scale collective farms were installed, wetlands drained and modern intensive farming practices introduced. All these systems collapsed after 1990: many small private farms were established, land use extensified or was abandoned. Agriculture and forestry are still nearly the only sources of employment but provide a poor living (average income about US\$70 per capita per month).

To preserve the natural values of the area and to provide new income sources for the local communities, WWF began a sustainable rural development project in 1995. In co-operation with the local population several activities have been carried out:

- The re-direction of the Ligupe and Parupe Rivers back to their natural flow.
- The building of a birdwatching tower on Lake Pape and other visitor facilities in the coastal zone.
- Local capacity building in the form of business education, language classes and environmental seminars in the municipality.
- Procurement of equipment for reed-cutting and nature conservation activities.

Since summer 1998 the project has focused on the management of abandoned grasslands, especially coastal meadows. These meadows are being overgrown by shrubs and trees and would disappear without human management. Within the project 'Grazing of coastal wetlands – large herbivore reintroduction' WWF plans to introduce semi-wild grazers (Konik horses initially) to the area. These will restore natural grazing pressure, which is a necessary component in the maintenance of grassland habitats. The goal of the project is to promote environmental restoration activities as an alternative use of agricultural land, and as a tool for sustainable rural development.

The following activities have been initiated:

□ NEGOTIATIONS WITH LAND OWNERS:

Local residents were surveyed to assess their attitudes toward environmental protection and alternative land use. In general, residents were informed, interested, and enthusiastic about the WWF project and the potential benefits it can bring to the local environment and economy. Land for the pilot grazing area was leased from local landowners.

□ INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL MUNICIPALITY AND NGO:

WWF has been active on the management board of the emerging Lake Pape Nature Park, a local initiative to protect the local environment and develop tourism.

□ EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMMES:

The local environmental NGO, having received a WWF scholarship for NGO management training, will be the local administrative body for the Nature Park and the grazing project. This NGO will serve as the focal point for discussion and education regarding local land use issues.

□ DIVERSIFICATION OF THE RURAL ECONOMY (RURAL TOURISM, REED CUTTING):

WWF has helped to establish a local reed-cutting business as an alternative use of the marshy lakeside grasslands. In addition, WWF has been assisting the local government in the development of a rural tourism programme with accommodation and walking tours throughout the project area. Our goal is to foster a viable non-productive land management regime that can serve as a model project for other similar areas in Latvia.

By mobilising the local community, WWF would like to emphasise that land reform and rural development require not only the guidance of government agencies but also the participation of an informed and engaged public.



Illustration by Dan Powell

WORKSHOP ON AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEMES FOR THE APPLICANT COUNTRIES

On 25–26 February 1999 the European Commission (Directorate General VI, Agriculture) and the TAIEX office organised a workshop on agri-environment schemes in Central and Eastern Europe. The programme included speakers from the Commission, Member States and Applicant Countries, research institutes and NGOs. About 50 participants represented agriculture and environment ministries as well as NGOs from all 10 Accession Countries. The workshop aimed to analyse the design and administrative implementation of agri-environment schemes, but the participants also discussed the possibilities for introducing such schemes under SAPARD, the agricultural and rural development pre-accession fund.

In the EU, agri-environment measures have grown from single schemes in individual countries during the mid-1980s to obligatory programmes that encompass much of the territory of most Member States since 1992. Agri-environment schemes are the only obligatory measure under the Rural Development Regulation, agreed under Agenda 2000. They are likely to gain further importance as an agricultural policy instrument in future international trade negotiations. Within this context, agri-environment schemes should not be seen as a subsidy but as a payment for providing environmental services.

Experience in EU Member States suggests that agri-environment schemes should initially be simple. The structure and detail can be elaborated over time, with the benefit of experience, fine-tuning the various elements to meet specific environmental, agricultural and administrative needs. Recommendations during the workshop included advice to:

- create few and effective measures
- base schemes on the entire farm and not on individual fields
- keep the basis for the calculation of payments simple
- adopt a clear structure for schemes, with few conditions in individual contracts.

Close contact with farmers and good explanations of scheme objectives and conditions are also important. For example, farmers in Northern Ireland receive two agri-environment newsletters per year when they participate in the 'Environmentally Sensitive Areas' scheme. Attention to information and training of farmers will allow agri-environment schemes to be expanded rapidly when the opportunity arises.

The participants also discussed monitoring and evaluation of agri-environment schemes and their application in protected areas. All schemes should have clear objectives that can be measured. This facilitates

monitoring of results and enables a comparison of the latter with scheme objectives during the evaluation process. Agri-environment schemes can be implemented in protected areas. Often this will be desirable. However, payments under such schemes cannot be simply used as compensation for legal obligations on landowners arising from the protected area legislation. This means that farmers in protected areas cannot be paid for not draining a meadow if they are not allowed to do so by the rules. But they could receive a payment for specific management, ie late mowing of meadows.

From the Commission's point of view, agri-environmental activities under SAPARD should focus on:

- developing know-how and practical experience in setting up and operating agri-environmental schemes
- transferring agri-environmental friendly production practices to farmers in the applicant countries.

This should be achieved through:

- implementation of well-defined agri-environmental pilot programmes that should operate in accordance with EU agri-environmental programmes
- training and transfer of best practices to farmers in the applicant countries.

There was considerable discussion about whether the resources under SAPARD would suffice for financing any payments to farmers under such pilot schemes, which were generally considered to be desirable. A majority of speakers from the Commission and other groups saw operational pilot schemes as a logical and necessary step in the preparation for implementation of the full EU agricultural policy. The Commission made clear that it is up to the individual applicant countries to identify priority areas for assistance under SAPARD. All sides agreed to support future information exchange regarding the development of agri-environment schemes in Central and Eastern Europe.



Illustration by Dan Powell

Jan-Erik Petersen
IEEP London
52 Horseferry Road
London, SW1P 2 AG
Tel: +44 171 799 22 44
Fax: +44 171 799 26 00
Email: JP@ieeplondon.org.uk

INTEGRATED RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND NATURE CONSERVATION

Slovenia is a densely populated country where nature has been profoundly changed by people's influence. In this process agriculture and forestry have created rich cultural landscapes and new habitats such as alpine meadows. The connection between traditional land use systems and biodiversity is particularly strong in Triglav National Park (TNP) in the Slovenian Alps.

Farming in mountain areas is often uneconomic without additional sources of income such as forestry or tourism. Such new income sources must be developed and farmers must be supported in obtaining a higher value from quality products, e.g. through direct marketing. Only then will they have an incentive to continue and develop extensive farming systems. As a third pillar, agri-environment schemes can also support such systems.

The Slovenian state budget provides support to farmers in mountain areas. Specific funds in TNP subsidise the mowing and grazing of special alpine meadows. The National Park also supports the development of other sustainable economic activities. All these policies need to work together in an integrated rural development concept to successfully combine economic benefits with environmental protection. National Park staff have prepared proposals for agri-environment and other measures in one area of TNP. We hope to implement these as an integrated package in one pilot area with SAPARD funding. A better co-ordination and integration of policies is an important goal at EU level. The understanding of this concept and its practical implementation should also be one objective of the pre-accession process.

Dr Marija Markes
Triglav National Park
Kidriceva 2, SI-4260 Bled, Slovenia
Tel: +386 64 741 188 Fax: +386 64 743 568
Email: Marija.Markes@tnp.gov.si

RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND AGRICULTURE IN ROMANIA

Recent studies on input use in Romanian agriculture show a significant drop in the application of fertilizers (roughly 70%), pesticides (60%) and the use of irrigation (95%) compared to 1985-1989. The recent closing of the largest intensive livestock farms accelerated the strong decline in livestock numbers. In spite of this (involuntary) extensification, considerable environmental problems remain. In lowland areas, the major concerns relate to various factors that limit the productive capacity of agricultural soils (erosion, salinisation, compaction, low soil humus content), high nitrate concentrations in water bodies and biodiversity losses. Unjustified forestry cuttings and land abandonment are environmental concerns in mountain areas.

Agriculture provides employment for 35% of the Romanian population. Over 71% of all agricultural land belongs to farms of 3 ha or less per family. Under these conditions only subsistence agriculture is possible, leading to a negative agricultural trade balance. Romania faces a large task to restore its agricultural productivity and to improve the living conditions for its rural population. In this context, an efficient use of agricultural inputs can help both the environment and farmers. Low-input agricultural systems are appropriate for small farms with little capital. Agri-environmental schemes that combine the preservation of soil productivity and biodiversity with practical training programmes for farmers can also play an important role in the sustainable development of agriculture. These issues are part of the EU accession preparations of the national Ministry of Agriculture and Food.

Professor Mihail Dumitru, Director
Research Institute for Soil Science and Agrochemistry
Marasti, nr. 61, sector 1, cod 71331, Bucharest, Romania
Tel: +40 1 2229 442 Fax: +40 1 2225 979
Email: mdumitru@icpa.ro

USEFUL EU COMMISSION WEBSITES

The European Commission provides much information about the work of its Directorates General, official documents, the EU enlargement process and pre-accession funds on the internet. This list reviews some of the relevant websites for enlargement, agriculture and environment.

EU Enlargement Process:

General information: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/enlarge/index.htm>

Agenda 2000 proposals: <http://www.cc.ccc/home/dgserver/sg/agenda2000/en/index.htm>

Progress reports: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/enlarge/index.htm>

Pre-accession strategy: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/agenda2000/en/rpas/rpas.htm>

The EU's pre-accession strategy underpins the whole accession process. It comprises: Accession Partnerships for the individual candidate countries:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/enlarge/access_partnership/index.htm

The PHARE programme: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/phare/index.htm>

More information from the PHARE and Tacis Information Centre:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/site/contacts/phare_tacis_info_centre.htm

Sectoral Information on EU Accession:

Agricultural country reports:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg06/new/peco/index_en.htm

A series of 10 reports on agriculture in the applicant countries prepared by the Commission with national experts.

Enlarging the Environment:

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg11/news/enlarg/index.htm>

A series of electronic newsletters from DG XI (Environment) on environmental issues in relation to the EU accession process.

Approximation guide: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg11/guide/contents.htm>

A guide on the approximation of environmental laws to EU conditions.

Further information on the environmental approximation process only is available from:

DG XI Help Line

Rue de la Loi 200, B-1049 Brussels

Tel: +32 2 296 87 46 Fax: +32 2 299 41 23

Email: enlargement@dg11.ccc.be

SUPPORT FOR CZECH ORGANIC FARMING

The Czech Republic is putting increasing emphasis on developing its organic farming sector. Since 1995 the Czech Ministry of Agriculture has been accredited by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) for programmes certifying organic agriculture and processing. In 1997 the government created a legal framework for direct support payments to organic farmers. The average payment per ha of organic farmland was about 50 Euro in 1998.

The state subsidy contributed to a strong increase in the number of holdings and total land area farmed organically. The number of organic farms grew from 211 holdings in 1997 to 335 holdings in 1998. During the same period, the organic farm land increased from 20,238 ha to 62,042 ha (1.45% of the agricultural land in the Czech Republic).

The Czech Republic is negotiating third-country status with the EU for trade in organic products to gain easier market access. Accreditation according to the article 11.1.(a) Regulation No 2092/91/EEC is expected to be completed in 1999. The Czech Agricultural Ministry will also prepare a law on organic farming in accordance with the above regulation for 2000.

Further information is available from:

Ivan Landa
Ministry of Agriculture
Section of Ecology
Tesnov 17,
117 05 Prague
Czech Republic
Tel: +420 2 21 81 28 19
Fax: +420 2 21 81 28 18
Email: Landa@mze.cz