

## **P O S I T I O N**

on

### **The State of Biodiversity in Agricultural Land**

and

### **Key Needs for its Improvement**

with regard to

CAP key objective 6 for the period 2021-2027

“Contribute to the protection of biodiversity, enhance ecosystem services and preserve habitats and landscapes“

#### **Introduction**

Protection of biodiversity in agricultural land has been a key objective of the Common Agricultural Policy since 2007 and its significance has been increasing with each programming period ever since. The new CAP proposal (COM(2018)392) defines protection of biodiversity as one of the nine key objectives of the CAP for the 2021-2027 period. Furthermore, the proposed regulation clearly emphasizes that the European Commission would require from the Member States to define specific and measurable commitments with regard to the protection of biodiversity, preservation of habitats and landscapes and enhancement of ecosystem services, and these commitments shall **exceed the existing commitments and activities** in this field. The requirements for the Member States and for their CAP Strategic Plan regulations set out in the proposal have been further confirmed and elaborated on in the adopted A Farm to Fork Strategy (COM(2020)381) and EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (COM(2020)380). Considering the increasing requirements for protection of biodiversity, reducing the footprint on the environment and climate as well as for thorough establishment of a sustainable food system, the need for robust and systematically collected data from their monitoring and evaluation becomes mandatory for the programming and needs assessment for support.

Therefore, the STEP team has performed an assessment of the changes occurred in the High Nature Value farmland area in 2019 compared to 2007 and has defined needs for protection of biodiversity in agricultural land, based on the assessment results as well as on research and applied projects<sup>1</sup> that STEP has carried out in the specified period.

## **I. Key findings with regard to the state of biodiversity in agricultural land**

### **High Nature Value farmland**

- ✓ By 2019, High Nature Value (HNV) farmland in Bulgaria has decreased by almost 40% compared to its initial designation in 2007.
- ✓ The loss of HNV farmland is not evenly distributed throughout the country. It is highest in the districts of Blagoevgrad, Vidin, Gabrovo, Kyustendil, Lovech and Pernik and lowest in the districts of Dobrich, Silistra, Haskovo and Pleven.
- ✓ Considering the types of land use, the decrease of HNV farmland is highest for the permanent grasslands, which have decreased from more than 950 000 ha in 2007 to barely 440 000 ha in 2019. This is a substantial loss of valuable habitats of plant and animal species, as well as of open and/or mosaic landscapes and their deriving ecosystem services.
- ✓ The other serious decline is for the lands with mixed land use (mosaic landscape), which have decreased from almost 280 000 ha in 2007 to 170 000 ha in 2019.
- ✓ In the same time, a large part of the HNV farmland of 2007, which is still eligible for support in 2019, has undergone a transformation of the type of land use and now nearly 66% of it is registered as arable land.

### **Landscape features in agricultural land**

- ✓ The loss of land with mixed land use as well as the transformation of significant amount of land with the other land use types to arable land are inevitably accompanied by loss and/or deterioration of the quality of the linear and mosaic landscape features.
- ✓ At least 10% of farmland on the farm level should be occupied by landscape features and elements of green and blue infrastructures, which are highly effective in ecologic terms for the specific region. These include: semi-natural elements such as grasslands including scrubland, trees, wetlands or floodplanes; connectivity features such as buffer strips, field margins, hedges, ditches, etc.; but not in-field productive features such as nitrogen fixing crops, catch crops or green cover.
- ✓ Environmental goals should be adapted to the characteristics of the regions, and their implementation should be on a regional level. In the regions with predominantly extensive farming the best strategy would be to keep the existing landscape elements; whereas in the regions with intensive farming targeted efforts for creation and restoration of the landscape features are needed. The target level for cover with green and blue infrastructure at a regional level range between 10% and 20%.

### **Agricultural land in Natura 2000 Special Protected Areas (SPAs)**

- ✓ The predominant type of permanent land use eligible for support in the protected bird areas in 2019 was arable land (56.9%), followed by pastures, commons (meri) and meadows (35%), and farmland with mixed land use (4.7%).

- ✓ A significant increase of the areas with the following types of land use eligible for support in the Natura 2000 SPAs was observed in the period 2014-2019: pastures, commons (meri) and meadows, perennials and arable land.
- ✓ A significant decrease of the mixed land use areas eligible for support was registered in the Natura 2000 SPAs in the period 2014-2019.
- ✓ The support under the measure for compensatory payments for restrictions on agricultural land use in the Natura 2000 sites effectively covers all types of land use.
- ✓ The implementation of the measure has formed significant territorial clusters of three main “hotspots” of municipality groups. They are characterized by high number of beneficiaries and high amount of subsidies paid and are located south-southeast, northeast and around Capital municipality.
- ✓ The factors that have the most significant impact on the number of beneficiaries and on the amount of subsidies paid under the measure, are the number of beneficiaries and the amount of subsidies paid under the CAP Pillar I schemes: Green Direct Payments and Single Area Payment Scheme.
- ✓ In the same time, the amount of subsidies paid under the CAP Pillar I schemes: Green Direct Payments and Single Area Payment Scheme, has a significant negative correlation with the areas of mixed land use in the Natura 2000 sites, which explains the observed significant decrease in their amount.
- ✓ The indicated trends have different manifestations in the different groups of protected areas for birds. They depend on the share of agricultural land in the total area of the site, the predominant type of land use, and the nature of the territory – plain, mountainous, or with other natural constraints.

## **II. Key needs for restoration, improvement and maintenance of biodiversity in agricultural lands:**

- 1. Preservation and restoration of the scope and quality of High Nature Value farmland.**
- 2. Preservation and restoration of landscape features in agricultural land with a view to achieving efficient and connected green infrastructure in rural areas.**
- 3. Preservation, restoration and increasing the conservation status of habitats and species in the agricultural land within the scope of the European ecological network Natura 2000.**

The main types of land use in HNV farmland are permanent grasslands and the areas with mixed land use. Their effective management and sustainable use would contribute to the achievement of CAP key objective 6 for the period 2021-2027, namely “Contribute to the protection of biodiversity, enhance ecosystem services and preserve habitats and landscapes“.

The specific needs for achieving objective 6 are related to:

- (1) Adaptation of the national definition of permanent pastures and of their eligibility for support under CAP schemes and measures so as to reflect the**

**regional characteristics of pastures and meadows in our country (exceed the existing commitments according to the requirements of the Regulation).**

The direct translation and adoption of the definition of permanent pastures set in the EU Regulation without using the given opportunity for its flexible adaptation in accordance with national and local characteristics, is causing significant loss of important fodder areas for stock breeders with grazing animals, as well as loss of habitats of conservation significance within the European ecological network Natura 2000.

Possible approaches for adapting the definition and, accordingly, their eligibility for support are:

- A) based on their location and characteristics in mountainous or in plain areas;
- B) based on their classification in the Bulgarian Survey for Monitoring the Agricultural and Economic Conjuncture (BSMAEC) (Agrostatistics definitions) to permanent productive meadows, alpine pastures, low productivity grasslands and meadows-orchards.
- C) based on the habitat type in accordance with the Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC).

**(2) Support for permanent grasslands under CAP Pillar I in accordance with their natural characteristics and consistent with the services they provide for protection of biodiversity (exceed the existing commitments according to the requirements of the Regulation).**

Permanent grassland is the only type of land use, which can simultaneously contribute to the protection of biodiversity and for the reduction of the farm's carbon footprint, in line with the requirements of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030.

The higher quality of permanent grasslands from environmental point of view needs to be adequately understood by the agricultural policymakers.

A targeted eco-scheme is needed in order to support the sustainable management of permanent grasslands. It is recommended that the support is stepwise and relevant to the environmental services:

- Basic payment level for permanent grasslands with landscape features and elements in them of up to 10%.
- Level 1 with bonus payment for permanent grasslands with landscape features and elements in them of 10,1% - 15%.
- Level 2 with higher bonus payment for permanent grasslands with landscape features and elements in them of 15,1% - 20%.
- Level 3 with highest bonus payment for permanent grasslands with landscape features and elements in them of 20,1% - 25%.

**(3) Support for permanent grasslands of High Nature Value through the agri-environmental measure under CAP Pillar II (continuation of existing commitments in accordance with the requirements of the Regulation).**

Preserving the schemes “Restoration and maintenance of High Nature Value grasslands”, “Traditional practices for seasonal grazing of animals (pastoralism)” and “Conservation of endangered local breeds”.

Considering the results of the assessment of change in scope of High Nature Value farmland of 2019 against 2007, it is mandatory to carry out a new assessment of their scope and quality in 2020 in order to ensure that the targeted agri-environmental schemes are aimed precisely at grasslands, not at areas with changed land use.

**(4) Introduction of (pilot) result-based schemes instead of agri-environmental with management requirement (exceed the existing commitments according to the requirements of the Regulation).**

The result-based methods offer farmers the flexibility to use their knowledge and land management experience in a way that brings ecological results (e.g. biodiversity, carbon storage, regulation of water reserves, etc.) alongside their agricultural activity. Under this approach, farmers themselves determine which activities to perform, and they have the opportunity to change them depending on the meteorological, soil and other conditions of the area in which their farm is located. The important thing is the ecological result to be achieved.

Bulgaria is one of the few Member States, which have not implemented result-based agri-environmental schemes, even at pilot level.

It should be noted that this is an innovative approach for protection and improvement of biodiversity in agricultural land through the active involvement of farmers, which is recommended by the EU (Biodiversity Strategy 2030).

Result-based agri-environmental payments can be of particular benefit for improving the state of habitats and landscapes with a view to achieving favorable conservation status, as required in Natura 2000 sites. Their implementation in Natura 2000 sites would elaborate on the compensatory payments for the introduced restrictions in the use of agricultural land.

**(5) Preservation of the mosaic landscape in the few remaining areas with high share of land with mixed land use by introducing a targeted agri-environmental scheme (exceed the existing commitments according to the requirements of the Regulation).**

The collective application of this scheme would be much more effective and beneficial in terms of preserving the mosaic landscape on a larger scale and should therefore be encouraged. There are various examples of collective application of agri-environmental schemes. They require the development of a joint plan for preservation

and development of the mosaic landscape, which determines the commitments of each individual farm, the recommended types of land use and landscape elements.

Since Bulgaria lacks experience in the implementation of collective agri-environmental schemes, it is recommended to test them at a pilot level in areas with high share of land with mixed land use and with typical/ traditional landscapes.

**(6) Introduction of trainings targeted at farmers managing agricultural land in Natura 2000 sites, as well as targeted consultations and advice on environmentally friendly farming practices for protection and restoration of species and habitats in particular protected areas (exceed the existing commitments according to the requirements of the Regulation).**

This addresses the needs for clarification of the essential requirements for management of agricultural land in Natura 2000 sites, including for justification of the reasons for the imposed prohibitions of use of agricultural land; what benefits are expected and desired for biodiversity, as well as what benefits the protection of biodiversity would bring for the farming activities and lands; which species and habitats are subject to protection in the respective territories; what are the indications for favorable condition of the species and habitats in agricultural land, etc.

**(7) Development of a system for monitoring and evaluation of the effects of CAP support on biodiversity in agricultural land, both in Natura 2000 sites and outside them (exceed the existing commitments according to the requirements of the Regulation).**

This system should integrate the requirements and needs for monitoring and evaluation of CAP schemes and measures, but also for Natura 2000 reporting in agricultural land.

This position is focused on assessing the state of biodiversity in agricultural land and the key needs for achieving CAP key objective 6 for the period 2021-2027 “Contribute to the protection of biodiversity, enhance ecosystem services and preserve habitats and landscapes”.

The team of the Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP) expresses its readiness to participate with its experience and expertise in the consultations and public discussions of the draft CAP Strategic Plan for Bulgaria for the period 2021-2027.

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<sup>i</sup> Applied projects executed by STEP, which have formed the knowledge of the state of High Nature Value farmland, biodiversity and landscape elements in agricultural land in the period 2014-2020 ( <https://www.step-bg.bg/bg> ):

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HNV-Link Project “High Nature Value Farming: Learning, Innovation and Knowledge”, funded by Horizon 2020 Programme, executed in 2016-2019.

Project “Overarching Initiative on Policy for Protection of High Nature Value Farming”, executed in cooperation with EuroNatur, Germany in the period 2019-2020, funded by MAVA Foundation.

Project “Partnership for Nature-Friendly Management of Pastures”, funded under the NGO Programme in Bulgaria of the European Economic Area (EEA) Financial Mechanism 2009-2014, executed in 2014-2016.

Project “Sharing Experience and Good Practices for Sustainable Use of Mountain (alpine) Grasslands in Natura 2000 sites”, funded by Arklerton Trust, UK, executed in 2016.

#### Research activities and projects:

Monograph on topic “Policies supporting the use of agricultural land in the European Ecological Network “Natura 2000””, authored by Yanka Kazakova-Mateva, published by Publishing Complex - UNWE, 2020.

BIOGEO Project “Testing BIOdiversity Gain of European Agriculture with CAP greening”, executed in 2016-2020 by the University of National and World Economy in cooperation with experts from STEP and the Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services at the Bulgarian Academy of Science. The BIOGEO project was funded by BiodivERSA program of ERA-NET Co-Fund scheme of the European Commission, through the Bulgarian National Science Fund, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the National Research Agency at the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.