



European Network of Heads of Nature Conservation Agencies (ENCA)

ENCA is an informal network which fosters exchange of information and collaboration amongst its partners, identifies future challenges and offers information and advice to decision-makers in the field of nature conservation and landscape protection.

ENCA brings together scientific evidence and knowledge of practical application together with experiences in administration and policy advice in the context of biodiversity and ecosystem goods and services. More details can be found at www.encanetwork.eu.

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ENCA Engagement Piece

High Nature Value Farmland – nature friendly farming

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1. Introduction

Change in the agricultural land management is one of the reasons for loss of biodiversity. More traditional, low –intensity farming systems with high nature value are declining in Europe. Extensively used farmland is threatened by abandonment and intensification.

Since 2008 the EEA (European Environment Agency) has worked on an EU level approach to identifying HNV farmland, publishing its first map. This map has been reviewed a number of times, and an updated version is expected later this year. Identification of what is HNV farmland is based on three main types:

Type 1 - Farmland with a high proportion of semi-natural vegetation;

Type 2 - Farmland with a mosaic of low intensity agriculture and natural and structural elements, such as field margins, hedgerows, stonewalls, patches of woodland or scrub, small rivers etc.; and

Type 3 - Farmland supporting rare species or a high proportion of European or World populations.

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the important role of HNV farming in supporting the Green Deal. It plays a role in the implementation of the CAP, the biodiversity strategy, nature restoration



law and the sustainable food system, amongst others. Also the important context of extensive grassland, grazing systems and HNV farming is addressed.

The paper will also provide a number of examples or initiatives to illustrate the way forward to identify/protect, promote and provide a role to these systems and the farmers.

2. Policy context

In December 2019, the Commission adopted the European Green Deal¹, a new growth strategy to boost the economy, improve people's health and quality of life, and care for nature. Sustainable food systems are at the very heart of the European Green Deal. The reformed EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)² was adopted by the co-legislators in December 2021, and the Member States' strategic plans entered into force on 1 January 2023. They will be key to support the implementation of the Green Deal's objectives specific to the agriculture sector. The EU's Farm to Fork Strategy³ and the Biodiversity Strategy 2030, and the EU's Zero Pollution Action Plan⁴ are flagship initiatives under the European Green Deal.

High Nature Value farmland (HNVF) has been an environmental obligatory indicator under the previous CAP periods (2014-20; 2007-13). Under the current CAP framework 2023-2027, it is removed as a compulsory indicator, this may be a step backwards. However, while it has been removed as a formal indicator, the new CAP provides a policy framework which potentially may be more appropriate to support the needs of HNVF areas. For example, the more flexible definition of permanent grassland should allow to include these areas under the support system.

For this reason the ongoing EEA analysis focuses on the context of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 restoration goals, i.e. in terms of nature conservation. Initial analysis by the EEA shows that in many EU countries the size of the extensive grazing livestock herd is smaller than that which would be required for the EU Biodiversity Strategy restoration goals. There is a need to review EU livestock production in context of the EU Green Deal and the Biodiversity Strategy 2030.

The Biodiversity Strategy 2030 specifically mentions various goal which would largely benefit from enhanced extensive grazing in an HNVF context. Effective management of protected areas and habitats is a main target within Pillar 1 Protecting Nature in the EU⁵. Many of these areas are dependent on extensive agricultural activities such as grazing or mowing by blocking or reducing succession (Halada⁶ habitats). Other practices (e.g. tilling where appropriate) are generally less important for biodiversity maintenance due to bigger disturbances. Pillar 2 involves the plan to "bring nature back to agricultural land" by transforming agricultural areas into high diversity landscapes. HNV areas are defined by

¹ COM(2019) 640 final.

² https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/cap-glance_en

³ COM(2020) 381 final.

⁴ COM(2021) 400 final.

⁵ European Commission (2021): EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. Bringing nature back into our lives. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁶ Halada, Lubos; Evans, Doug; Romão, Carlos; Petersen, Jan-Erik (2011): Which habitats of European importance depend on agricultural practices? In: Biodivers Conserv 20 (11), S. 2365–2378. DOI: 10.1007/s10531-011-9989-z.



species richness or diversity of landscape elements and thus are key elements to fulfill this strategy. Further, the restoration of soil ecosystems and the incline of pollinator's targets would largely benefit from extensively managed and grazed grasslands.

The Nature Restoration Law within the Biodiversity Strategy specifically mentions extensive grazing as typical restoration measures in a biodiversity rich agro-ecosystem. Conservation of habitats and management of invasive species requires the reintroduction of recurrent management practices. In regards to fire prevention and management of shrub and heathlands, extensive grazing has proven to be a cost-effective and valuable tool with added social benefits for the local populations. The Nature Restoration Law also proposes, that member states are required to keep and restore habitats of conservation value, not yet covered by the Habitats directive, in good condition. Again, several of these habitats are in need of grazing or mowing for maintenance. Best practice cases introduced in the corresponding Nature restoration law brochure thus include several examples of HNV farms and projects^{7,8}.

The Soil Strategy is considered a key deliverable within the Biodiversity Strategy. It aims to combat desertification and restore degraded land and soil⁹. By increasing soil moisture, extensive grazing and HNV approaches can help to prevent desertification and further enrich the soil biodiversity¹⁰. The soil organic carbon content in mineral soil can also benefit from an adapted grazing management¹¹.

HNV farming thus can be considered a viable tool in sustainable soil management, which are a key element of the Biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategy. Their targets to bring back high-diversity landscape features, maintain and restore valuable habitats, increase soil organic matter, as well as soil biodiversity would all largely benefit from HNV farming and extensive grazing.

Therefore the concept of HNV farming, though removed as CAP indicator, proves more important than ever to reach the ambitious goals as committed to in the Green Deal by the European Member States.

3. HNV farmland, extensive grassland and grazing systems

Inherent to the HNVF concept is that low-intensity (often traditional) management practices maintain certain European biodiversity values. Accordingly, extensive farming systems, favor dynamics of natural processes across large and continuous areas maintaining farmland biodiversity¹². Low-intensity animal husbandry on semi-natural pastures and meadows are a cornerstone of HNV farming. Livestock

⁷ COM(2022) 304 final

⁸ Directorate-General for Environment - European Commission (2022): Restoring nature. For the benefit of people, nature and the climate. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/95311c9d-f07b-11ec-a534-01aa75ed71a1>

⁹ COM(2021) 699 final

¹⁰ Weber and Horst Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice 2011, 1:19; <http://www.pastoralismjournal.com/content/1/1/19>

¹¹ Hewins, Daniel B.; Lyseng, Mark P.; Schoderbek, Donald F.; Alexander, Mike; Willms, Walter D.; Carlyle, Cameron N. et al. (2018): Grazing and climate effects on soil organic carbon concentration and particle-size association in northern grasslands. In: *Scientific reports* 8 (1), S. 1336. DOI: 10.1038/s41598-018-19785-1.

¹² van Doorn, Anne; Elbersen, Berien (2012): Implementation of High Nature Value farmland in agri-environmental policies. Farmland in agri-environmental policies. What can be learned from other EU member states? Alterra Report 2289. Wageningen, Alterra. Online verfügbar unter <https://edepot.wur.nl/200676>, zuletzt geprüft am 03.04.2023



dominated systems have always been the most common HNVF type, either using semi-natural vegetation for grazing or for haymaking¹³.

Extensive grazing systems are diverse and cover large parts of European rural land, from reindeer herding in northern Scandinavia to the complex wood pasture grazing with pigs and cattle in the Iberian Peninsula. East to west, they are found in the highland cattle grazing in Ireland on heaths and shrubs and in the mosaic landscapes of small traditional Romanian farms with sheep and goats¹⁴. Extensive grazing has thus to a large part created the diverse European vegetation and consequently its biodiversity.

Indeed, pastoralism and herding have shaped the cultural landscapes in Europe as we know them today. Seasonal movement of livestock made it possible to keep livestock during the winter periods, thus ensuring survival of farming communities. Livestock was either moved from summer grazing to fallow and stubble land in the winter (transhumance) or grazed on mountain pastures in the summer, while the meadows in the valleys produced hay for the winter. While transhumance systems have mostly disappeared in Europe, mountain grazing is still commonly practiced in Iberia, the Balkans, the Alps and to some extent in Norway. These mobile livestock systems have been important for the establishment and conservation of diverse grassland systems. Other ecosystems have been linked to their own traditional grazing systems, for example silvo-pastoral methods in the Iberian *dehesas* and *montados*. In wildfire-prone areas complex systems of grazing, forestry and other agricultural uses formed varieties of grasslands, heaths, Mediterranean sclerophyllus vegetation and scrubland. Even some coastal regions, *machairs* in Scotland or alluvial meadows in flood plains have long history of grazing¹⁵.

While being an essential part of conservation and rural life in Europe, extensive grazing systems in HNV farmland areas are threatened by abandonment of low-yielding, secluded areas or intensification where economically viable. Extensive grazing has been notoriously inefficient and mostly not profitable. However, a variety of goods and products (e.g. Iberian ham, a variety of cheeses) deriving from HNV land are well-known and appreciated among customers with a very high added value¹⁶. Various farms and initiatives across Europe have proven that HNV-farms can be profitable and still support biodiversity. In the next chapter we included some examples of successful farms and labels. In addition, HNV farming provide a range of ecosystem services, including high quality products linked to the region, biodiversity conservation and management of cultural landscapes. Valuable habitats and the rural landscapes depend on the long-term continuation of high nature value farming.

¹³ IP-Agri (2016): Sustainable High Nature Value (HNV) farming. Final Report. EIP-AGRI Focus Group. Online verfügbar unter https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/sites/default/files/eip-agri_fg_hnv_farming_final_report_2016_en.pdf, zuletzt geprüft am 03.04.2023

¹⁴ Caballero, Rafael (2007): High Nature Value (HNV) Grazing Systems in Europe: A Link between Biodiversity and Farm Economics. In: *The Open Agriculture Journal* (1), S. 11–19.

¹⁵ Oppermann, Rainer; Beaufoy, Guy; Jones, Gwyn (Hg.) (2012): High Nature Value Farming in Europe. 35 European countries - experiences and perspectives. EFNCP; IFAB: Verlag Regionalkultur.

¹⁶ Rodríguez-Ortega, Tamara; Bernués, Alberto; Alfnes, Frode (2016): Psychographic profile affects willingness to pay for ecosystem services provided by Mediterranean high nature value farmland. In: *Ecological Economics* 128, S. 232–245. DOI: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2016.05.002.



4. Examples

PGI Agnello del Centro Italia (IT)

This Italian label focuses on Italian transhumance traditions. In 2020 341 breeders sold certified lamb meat with this label. Animals are required to graze a minimum of 8 months a year on the pastures of the Central Apennines and are exclusively fed with meadow and pasture fodder obtained in the region. The products (mainly lamb meat) are sold at selected butchers, restaurants and farm shops. Due to its tight connection to traditions, the label itself is well known and highly regarded for its meat quality. The European PGI (Protected Geographic Indication) further strengthens the link to the region. While the term HNVF is not used by the label itself, the connection to extensive grazing and traditional transhumance classifies this label as High Nature Value farming. However, increasing biodiversity is not a claimed goal by its requirements. The website of the organisation offers more information on the label: <https://agnellodelcentroitalia.it/>

Naturbeteskött (SWE)

Naturbeteskött (Natural grazed meat) is a Swedish non-profit association working to increase the production and consumption of certified natural grazed meat in Sweden. In 2020 the association had 65 members and certifies over 70 farms in Sweden. While there are membership fees, national or EU financed projects mainly fund the label with the idea to support farmers through the certification process and provide a network for industry, retail and producers. They also work on reaching out to customers and promote the message of environmental and climate benefits of natural grazed meat in comparison to mass produced meat. Since 2019 a variation of this label is sold at a major Swedish retail company. While criteria were slightly altered for this cooperation, the association stuck to its main values without compromises. The criteria require that 50% of the grazed area and 50% of grazing time must be on HNV grassland (designated by Swedish authorities). Rules for additional feed apply as well. Visit their homepage for more background information: <https://www.naturbete.se/>

Bunde Wischen (DE)

This farm in Northern Germany manages 1500 ha of nature conservation areas with cattle and horses. The main goal is to restore and maintain biodiversity on the sites. The livestock stays on the areas all year and maintains the open landscape of the different biotopes, e.g. salt meadows, heaths and dry grassland. Some of the sites are open to the public and also provide educational hikes. For 35 years the nature conservation grazing is linked to direct marketing, cooperation with local restaurants and farm holidays. The range of products include not only meat and sausages in various forms, but also convenience food like ready-made stews. While the farm itself does not use the term, the strong link to nature conservation areas and Nature 2000 sites clearly characterizes it as HNV-farm. More information is available at: <https://www.bundewischen.de/>

Lynbreck Croft (UK)

The Lynbreck Croft Farm is located in the Cairngorms National Park in the Scottish Highlands. The owners manage this farm in traditional, extensive ways, while preserving the local biodiversity. There is a strong link between the local community and this farm with all products (incl. pork, beef and honey) sold only direct and locally. Various awards increased the popularity of Lynbreck Croft, which was used to also share knowledge. There are farm tours, as well as courses on croft farming and a book offered. This examples shows that the economic viability of HNV-farms is not only limited to produce large amounts of goods. Find more information at: <https://www.lynbreckcroft.co.uk/>



Conclusion

HNV farming is vulnerable both economically and socially. Overall, it is crucial to provide appropriate support for extensive livestock grazing and HNVF systems. Eligibility rules for direct payment support should take into account the natural characteristics of these systems and need to be well designed to avoid their exclusion. While not an explicit indicator in the CAP anymore, it continues to play a key role in the context of nature conservation targets, EU policy context, as well as the biodiversity framework.

The following conclusions are based on the outcomes of the Workshop “Revaluating the role of High Biodiverse Farming and Livestock Systems at EU level in a changing climate post 2022”, which was held by the ENCA Interest group on Sustainable Land Use & Agriculture on April 27th 2022¹⁷.

For long-term continuation of HNV farming systems in Europe it is crucial to explicitly distinguish it from other agriculture targets (e.g. organic) and focus on extensive grazing systems. The new CAP provides a policy framework which potentially may be more appropriate to support the needs of HNVF areas. For example, the more flexible definition of permanent grassland should allow to include these areas under the support system. A recurrent barrier for HNV farming systems are the low subsidies and additional costs, which should be covered by payments for participating in agri-environmental programmes. A more flexible way of granting support, addressing the regional differences between HNV farming systems can be key to support HNVF areas.

Education, building social capacity and providing rural development opportunities are also important to maintain these systems. These include farmer’s awareness of the value of biodiversity and the habitats they manage; opportunities to improve long-term economic viability of continued HNVF management, recognition and validation of the farmer’s role by policy makers and farming organisations; and providing opportunities for peer support, learning and innovation.

Our examples have shown, that small HNV farming systems can be profitable and economically viable notwithstanding harsh realities. However, these examples should not be the exception but the rule. Policy support and investments should increase the market access for small-scale farms, while increasing the added value and ultimately the income of the farmer. Branding and labelling, local initiatives or consumer-oriented information campaigns are possible ways to achieve this.

Good environmental data on agricultural biotypes and habitats are important to ensure we can monitor and support the management of HNVF. We suggest that the identification and monitoring of the HNVF indicator remains an essential part of the monitoring and evaluation framework of agricultural programmes.

¹⁷ Summary of the event: Revaluating the role of High Biodiverse Farming and Livestock Systems at EU level in a changing climate post 2022 (encanetwork.eu)