European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism

Deutscher Verband für Landschaftspflege

POLICY SEMINAR:

Semi-natural Pastures and Meadows – A golden thread through EU environmental and agricultural policies

13th November, 2012 - First Euroflat Hotel, Boulevard Charlemagne 50, 1000 Brussels

Programme

Morning – chair: Brendan Dunford, EFNCP & Burren Farming for Conservation Programme

Session 1: Setting the scene

0915 Welcome and aims for the day - chair
0920 Europe's semi-natural meadows and pastures – Carsten Hobohm, Flensburg University
0945 Trends in state of pasture and meadows and characteristic species and how to improve data and understanding – Sue Collins, EFNCP and Butterfly Conservation Europe
1015 Beyond nature policy - semi-natural grassland and wider public goods – Gwyn Jones, EFNCP
1045 Discussion

1100 Coffee break

Session 2: Better policies, better implementation: country case studies in recognising and identifying semi-natural pastures and meadows

1120 Regulation and inspection examples of grassland and natural areas in Denmark – Heidi Buur Holbeck, Agricultural Knowledge Centre
1130 Pillar 2 implementation in Denmark – Annita Svendsen, Danish Nature Agency
1140 Making Direct Payments work for semi-natural habitats in Germany – Jürgen Metzner, DVL
1200 Commission approach to permanent pasture rules and their implementation – Andreas Lillig, DG Agri
1220 The view from Parliament – Andrzej Nowakowski, Advisor to Green/EFA Group, European Parliament
1240 Discussion

1300 Lunch

1400 Agri-environment subsidies for semi-natural grasslands in Romania – Inge Paulini, Mozaic Association and Rheinische Friedrich Wilhelms Universität Bonn
1420 Identifying semi-natural grasslands on LPIS under agri-environment implementation: the Northern Ireland experience – Patrick McGurn, EFNCP
1440 Integration of semi-natural grasslands on LPIS making for improved policy delivery in Slovakia: successes and challenges – Dobromil Galvánek
1500 Semi-natural pastures - an integrated policy please! – Guy Beaufoy, EFNCP
1530 Discussion
1600 Close

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Background information

Introduction

This seminar is concerned with a type of farmland whose importance is increasingly recognised: uncultivated grasslands. This broadly-defined category of land covers self-seeded herbaceous and scrub vegetation that is used for livestock grazing and/or mowing (i.e. pastures and meadows), and is also known as semi-natural grassland. These grasslands cover approximately a quarter of all EU farmland.

Semi-natural grasslands are the most important farmland for a range of EU policies, including biodiversity, climate change, soil, ecosystem services and green infrastructure. A greener CAP that is focused on public goods should recognise the importance of semi-natural grasslands, and give them special attention.

However, at present the CAP does not recognise the *existence* of semi-natural grasslands, lumping them alongside cultivated grasslands (ploughed and sown) in the single category of "permanent pastures". Despite their special characteristics and environmental importance, there is no specific category for semi-natural grasslands, no specific cross-compliance requirements, and no mention of them in the proposed greening mechanisms.

In fact, with the move to hectare payments and the introduction of new payment eligibility rules linked to vegetation types, the CAP has become increasingly biased *against* semi-natural grasslands by penalising characteristics that are typical of them, such as a high proportion of shrubs, trees and other landscape features. Thus for semi-natural grasslands, there is a clear absence of joined-up EU policy, with the CAP apparently being in conflict with a range of environmental goals, rather than supporting them. Though the CAP aims to support 'multi-functional' agriculture, integration with other policy goals is notably absent for the farmland type which best encapsulates this multifunctionality.

This seminar will consider how to correct these deficiencies in the CAP, in relation to:

- Definitions of permanent pasture, including the question of non-herbaceous pastures and the possibility of creating a sub-category for semi-natural permanent pastures.
- Eligibility rules for CAP direct payments in relation to semi-natural grasslands, including characteristic features of pastoral farmland, such as shrubs, trees, rocks and hedges and seasonal pastures.
- Defining "minimum activity" in relation to semi-natural grasslands, as a better approach to determining eligibility than vegetation types.
- The pros and cons of identifying and registering semi-natural grasslands on the Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS), and its potential usefulness for efficient implementation of the EIA Directive, Renewable Energy Directive and Biodiversity Strategy targets relating to habitats, ecosystem services and green infrastructure.
- The possibility of specific cross-compliance and greening rules for semi-natural grasslands, as an integrated policy approach (i.e. CAP rules that support environmental Directives).

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More on semi-natural grasslands

Agronomists and ecologists recognise fundamental differences between farmland that is cultivated (crops and grassland that are ploughed and sown) and farmland that is not cultivated (grasslands that are not ploughed and sown).

Uncultivated grasslands are farmed by grazing with livestock and/or mowing, resulting in vegetation communities very similar to natural grasslands. Because they depend on human intervention for their maintenance, these are known to ecologists as *semi-natural* grasslands. They mimic the natural grasslands that would have existed historically (maintained by wild herbivores, fire and extreme climate conditions) but are now very rare in the EU, being limited to specific situations (e.g. tops of mountains). Semi-natural grasslands may be predominantly herbaceous or may have a large proportion of shrubs (e.g. heather), and may have significant tree cover (e.g. wood pastures).

Semi-natural grasslands are generally of quite low agricultural productivity, but they are of exceptional environmental value compared with cultivated farmland. For example, they harbour the majority of EU farmland biodiversity, the majority of EU farmland carbon, and provide the majority of water catchment services on farmland. For EU policies concerned with biodiversity and ecosystem services, it is essential to recognise this particular type of farmland, and to ensure that it is appropriately protected and targeted for support under the CAP.

A number of EU Directives attempt to maintain semi-natural grasslands, although at present not in a very coherent way. The EIA Directive has included protection of "semi-natural land" from conversion and agricultural intensification since 1985, although implementation has been very deficient in many Member States. The Renewable Energy Directive (RED) aims to prevent the conversion of "highly biodiverse grasslands" to cultivation for biofuels, but has given rise to difficulties with defining and identifying this newly introduced category of grasslands, although in practice it coincides broadly with semi-natural grasslands covered by the EIA Directive. All of the farmland habitats on Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive are semi-natural grasslands, and the aim of this Directive is to ensure they are maintained in a favourable conservation status. Target 2 of the Biodiversity Strategy is concerned with maintaining ecosystems and their services, especially in the form of "green infrastructure", a large proportion of which is provided by semi-natural grasslands.

Logically we would expect these different policies to be working together to protect and maintain semi-natural grasslands, but at present the links are not made clear in policy or in the terminology used by the different Directives, or in the Biodiversity Strategy.

Semi-natural grasslands as a separate land use class

Crucially, the CAP does not recognise the difference between cultivated and uncultivated grasslands. In fact, with the move to hectare payments and the introduction of land eligibility rules, the CAP has become increasingly unfavourable to semi-natural grasslands and in this regard seems to be going in the *opposite* direction from environmental policies. It neither offers them protection from intensification, nor does it provide consistent support against abandonment through direct payments.

This is a big problem. For Habitats Directive grasslands, abandonment is a major threat and providing consistent support from CAP direct payments is essential. For the EIA Directive and RED, a major hindrance to effective implementation is that semi-natural land and highly biodiverse grasslands (very largely overlapping) are not recorded on databases so their agricultural conversion or intensification is difficult to control. Although integration between these Directives and CAP cross-compliance would make for more

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joined-up policy and more effective implementation, this link is not made at EU level, and in fact is discouraged by parts of the Commission services (although in the UK the EIA Directive requirements are incorporated in GAEC).

The way in which the CAP puts all permanent pastures together in one category is a peculiarity of this policy, which puts it at odds with most agronomic and statistical categorisations of grasslands. The basic difference between cultivated and uncultivated grasslands has always been recognised in data systems such as FAO and the EU Farm Structures Survey (FSS). For example, FSS has a sub-category of Permanent Grassland called Rough Grazings: *Low yielding permanent grassland, usually on low quality soil, for example on hilly land and at high altitudes, usually unimproved by fertiliser, cultivation, reseeding or drainage. These areas can normally be used only for extensive grazing and are not normally mown or are mown in an extensive manner; they cannot support a large density of animals.* Note that this does not encompass *all* semi-natural grasslands, and is not the exact equivalent of the EIA or RED terminology.

If the FSS has such a category, why doesn't the CAP? The way in which farmland and farming activity are defined and recorded on data and administration systems is increasingly critical for the effective implementation of many of EU policies. The systems that manage the CAP at farm and parcel level – the Land Parcel Information System (LPIS) and Integrated Administration Control System (IACS) – are especially important, and hold the key to the effective delivery of several environmental as well as agricultural policy objectives.

LPIS is the only farm and parcel level mapping system existing in all EU countries. It is the obvious data base on which to record the location of semi-natural grasslands. This would make it possible to implement effectively targeted policies, in an integrated manner.

The ideas we aim to discuss at the seminar are not radical or unrealistic, they are intended to make policy more effective and joined-up, and to make more efficient use of public resources. For example, it is clear to many farming and environmental organisations and public administrations that a supposedly "greener" CAP cannot continue to exclude actively farmed semi-natural grassland from direct payments, as currently occurs. Nor can it continue to penalise farmers for the presence of features that form part of functioning farming systems, such as shrubs, trees and hedges. The current mess, where some Member States (e.g. Germany, Denmark, Bulgaria) penalise semi-natural grasslands, while others (e.g. UK, France, Spain) do not, must be sorted out. Examples will be presented at the seminar.

Incorporating protection for semi-natural grasslands into the CAP is not a radical idea, it is an example of joined-up policy and it already happens in the UK, for example, through GAEC rules on preventing habitat deterioration. This option provided for under the current CAP, but not under the Commission's reform proposals for cross-compliance.

Identifying semi-natural grasslands on LPIS is a practical step that some Member States have taken already, for example Slovakia, making it possible to implement efficiently targeted support schemes. In Northern Ireland, semi-natural grasslands are identified by means of aerial photographs through a screening process for agri-environment payments. In Wales, EFNCP research has found that remote sensing technology can distinguish cultivated from semi-natural grasslands with a very high degree of accuracy.

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All of the options we aim to discuss are currently implemented in at least one Member State. The question is whether we can achieve a consistent approach at EU level that incorporates the best practices, rather than applying the lowest common denominator.

Notes:

CAP definition of Permanent Pasture

To incorporate non-herbaceous pastures and exclude more intensive grasslands that are reseeded within 5 years, EFNCP has proposed the following definition:

"land used to grow grasses or other ~~herbaceous~~ forage (self-seeded or sown) and that has not been ~~included in the crop rotation of the holding~~ *ploughed or reseeded* for 5 years or longer" [this is the current definition with words deleted and those in italics added]

Creation of a sub-category for semi-natural permanent pasture

EFNCP has proposed the following EU-level definition, which would be adapted to national conditions by Member States:

"Semi-natural pastures (which includes meadows) consist of predominantly self-seeded* forage maintained by livestock grazing and/or harvesting. The vegetation has not been substantially modified by agronomic improvement (reseeding, fertilisation)."

Commission "concept paper" of 11th May 2012 considering adaptations to the new draft definition

In order to recognise the ecological and agricultural value of these areas and to avoid their abandonment, it could be considered to accept surfaces where non-herbaceous species are predominant. This could be done by considering as eligible, areas where grasses and other herbaceous forage are traditionally not predominant but still suitable for grazing that form part of traditional agricultural systems

Moreover, it emerged that the obligation to maintain at parcels level permanent grassland defined as land out of crop rotation for at least 5 years would constitute a heavy constraint on farms' production choice as e.g. many livestock farmers are having long-term rotation in their production system. In order to adapt to farming realities it could be envisaged to make the definition of "permanent grassland" closer to agronomic reality and to focus on real permanent grassland i.e. those that are out of crop rotation for 8 years or longer.

Danish Presidency proposals for a sub-category of "older" permanent pasture to be controlled under the greening mechanism (Presidency Consolidated Text 2011/0280 (COD) of 8th June 2012):

Farmers shall maintain as permanent grassland the areas of their holdings declared which have specific value for environment, climate or biodiversity. This is interpreted as permanent grassland which has neither been included in the crop rotation of the holding nor been ploughed for 10 years or longer.

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