

New Perspectives for Europe's countryside

REP position paper

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Statement

Over 70 percent of the landscapes and biodiversity in Europe is dependent on farming. A preliminary cost estimate to maintain these landscapes and provide services to the metropolises and cities suggests that public costs may be in the range of 200-400 euro per ha on an annual base, which is less than 1 percent of the EU gross annual product, securing sustainable development while enhancing private investments and livelihoods in over 80 percent of Europe's land surface.

Introduction

The Rural European Platform was founded by the Dutch environmental research institute Alterra of Wageningen University and the Norwegian Crop Research Institute Bioforsk and launched in July 2004 during an international workshop in Lien, Svartdal, Norway. During that meeting the Lien Declaration was drafted. The participants of the workshop endorsed the Rural European Platform as an independent European platform for farmers, private land owners, nature conservationists, policy makers and scientists. A platform to exchange ideas on the rural development in Europe, providing examples that convince and policies that work.

Objective

The Rural European Platform's objective is to preserve and enhance the diversity of culture, nature, scenery, food and other products and services in the rural areas. We want to maintain and enhance the quality of the man-managed environment for the future and reconnect urban and rural communities to their surrounding landscape. We see many products and services which the rural areas provide as public benefits for rural and urban communities. Some examples of those public benefits are:

- Sustainable food production
- Protection, maintenance and enhancement of environmental services
- Wildlife conservation and biodiversity gain
- Conservation of cultural heritage
- Maintenance and enhancement of landscape quality and character
- Genetic conservation of livestock breeds and plant species & varieties
- Improving public access and local community involvement

- Underpinning tourism, leisure, rural prosperity, public health and quality of life
- Local rural employment and keeping traditional skills alive
- Flood management and climate change mitigation
- High standards of animal health & welfare and food safety
- Minimisation of all input and output kilometres

Context

The Rural European Platform works on its objectives in the context of a changing European policy on agriculture and environment and several newly emerging social and environmental trends. In 2013 the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union will again be under review, which means that the current agricultural policy of the European Union is now being evaluated using the so-called 'Health Check'. This review is a precursor to a complete European Union budget review, which could result in a substantially different allocation of European Union funds. It is currently uncertain how this will turn out.

Essential for the European Union budget review and the Health Check are the negotiations within the World Trade Organisation. Several countries outside the European Union are pressing for a complete abolition of the European Union support of agriculture, as this does not correspond with the global free market. The WTO, however, might wish to focus on globally-traded commodities, products and services, but at the same time accept that support is needed for public goods and services which, because of their character can only be supplied and delivered at a local or regional level.

The current European Union Single Farm Payment is a major step forward to avoid the distortion of international markets by overproduction and associated subsidised exports. Cross-compliance is also in place as to provide compliance with minimum environmental standards. There are however three major concerns:

1. In the present system farmers are paid principally on an 'income forgone' basis (compensation payments). These will be insufficient for economically marginal areas where positive 'conservation management' payments are needed to keep land managers in business to deliver public benefits.
2. The inequality in the funding, presently approximately 80% of the funds go to only 20% of the farmers.
3. The European Union grows, and the new members will have influence on the broader distribution of the European Union funds.

Besides these 'policy related' changes European societies have to deal with new challenges. One important example is climate change, which will need far-reaching measures for mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and for dealing with the decreasing environmental resilience caused by the changing climate. Environmental security is the essential foundation to medium and long-term sustainability. In many European societies people stress a growing concern for safety and/or security of food, water and energy, for sustainable development and for high animal health and welfare standards. In this concern the connection and integration of the people from rural and urban areas to the resources of food, water and energy play an important role.

Rural development

The Rural European Platform works on realising a genuinely sustainable rural development approach. The rural areas offer resources that must be considered as public benefits, and therefore the CAP payments should be linked directly to the delivery of those public benefits. This means that the Rural European Platform strives for a multifunctional land use and a diversity of goods and services that derive from that land use. The Rural European Platform also aims at a sense of localness which can be a binding factor for participating parties involved in the rural development of a European region. Therefore we want to stress the distinctiveness of rural areas and the differentiation between the areas and regions in Europe.

The Rural European Platform regards the rural areas as key areas for tackling the challenges offered by the changing climate, and for the mitigation of it and the necessary adaptation to it. We want to encourage market recognition of public goods and services as far as possible and not rely on public funds alone indefinitely. In the new challenges we strive for a reconnection of rural and urban population with the rural areas as a source of key goods and services. By doing so we also want to enhance community structures in the rural areas.

Promoting and enhancing rural development means working on several paths. First we have to evaluate the public benefits required for a sustainable rural development. Then we have to establish partnerships, collaborating in international knowledge networks. The public funding has to be organised on a long term basis, in a way that attracts private investment and support. The general public has to be informed and educated to form the needed social support from the local communities. The European, national and local policy makers must combine policy instruments like regulations, advice and incentives in an appropriate balance. And last but not most important, all parties have to use cross-sectoral approaches in dealing with the new ways of enhancing multifunctional land use, crossing the boundaries of the normally closed and separated sectors of economy, ecology and culture.

The Rural European Platform deals with new ways of financing the rural development. It begins with cost-ricing the delivery of the public benefits the rural areas offer. Finance needs to be made-to-measure. Therefore we look at public private partnerships at a local level, and recognise economies of scale instead of flat rate payments. We also want to combine capital investments for restructuring with the annual payments for ongoing public benefits. Finally, we want to articulate CAP payments with other European and/or national funds allocated to rural areas, in order to achieve coherent and cost-effective rural development.

The parties involved in this type of rural development are numerous. To give an idea:

- Rural communities
- Consumers and taxpayers
- Farmers and private landowners
- Local, regional and national governments
- European Commission and European Parliament
- Private sector; e.g. food processing industries, supermarkets, local entrepreneurs
- Parties from other sectors: tourism, health, water, energy, education, etc.

European collaboration

The Rural European Platform stands for European collaboration, in and outside the boundaries of the European Union. There are several reasons for this. Environmental challenges don't stop at the border of a country. The economy is globalising, therefore we need to collaborate to meet the associated challenges. Collaboration helps to achieve agreements which can provide a sound basis for European Union funding.

There are practical reasons too for European collaboration, springing from the experiences which all parties involved in the Rural European Platform have had in international projects. Collaboration brings about a frame of reference for the parties involved. And people which come up with solutions that are both good for them and their neighbours. In that way European collaboration is a way to realise sustainability.

Recommendations

- All CAP direct aid payments need to shift from agriculture to a wider range of rural public benefit services and the policy emphasis needs to shift from agriculture towards land management directed to regional sustainable food production, environmental & ecosystem services and rural development.
- Adopt a multifunctional and cross-sectoral approach to land management and the provision of public goods and services.
- Find new instruments for funding rural areas and organising land management and public involvement.
- Assess the value of public-private partnerships, seek a good blend of public and private involvement and encourage private enterprises to invest in rural areas.
- Dissolve the boundaries between the economic, ecological and community sectors.
- Achieve necessary change through graduated measures
- Develop robust cost pricing of public goods and services.
- Establish National Rural Platforms in all EU member states. The REP can then function as a coordinating body

Europe's global position

In Europe, and different from other continents, most landscapes, biodiversity and heritage is intimately interwoven with farming and woodland management. Over 70 percent of the landscapes and biodiversity (plant species and birds) in Europe is dependent on farming. A preliminary cost estimate to maintain these landscapes and provide services to the metropolises and cities suggests that public costs may be in the range of 200-400 euro per ha on an annual base, which is less than 1 percent of the EU gross annual product, securing sustainable development while enhancing private investments and livelihoods in over 80 percent of Europe's land surface.

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