



RURAL EUROPEAN PLATFORM
connecting grassroots and policy

- ➔ stable farmer income
- ➔ regional development
- ➔ biodiversity, natural beauty
- ➔ open space

European Eemland Conference: Versatile Countryside
Session III: Workshop "New arrangements for farming and nature"

- Our Harvest -

Eemlandhoeve, Bunschoten, Thursday 23 October 2008; Info: www.eeconference.eu

Preamble

The Rural European Platform (REP) is very pleased with the opportunity it was presented with to organize this workshop for the European Eemland Conference: Versatile Countryside. The workshop was prepared in cooperation with *Stichting Geldersch Landschap en Kasteelen* and *Stuurgroep Landbouw Innovatie Brabant* and with the EU Interreg funded projects "HEATH", "LIFESCAPE – YOUR LANDSCAPE" and "Farming-4-Nature".

The loss of quality of our European landscape is becoming rapidly more obvious. This loss of quality is symptomatic for some of the severest challenges we are facing today.

A versatile European countryside can be seen as a promising answer to these challenges, providing this versatility can be based on multifunctional production and innovative social networks between urban and rural areas with sound economic benefits for the people involved. We need functional relationships between agriculture, nature management, and the growing needs of urban consumers.

The initiatives brought together in this workshop are representative of what needs to be done and how it could be done. They are part of current developments in the Netherlands and correspond to similar initiatives elsewhere in Europe. This is also demonstrated by the video documentary *Versatile Farmers* with four examples, validating multi-functionality as a rural standard to bridge the gap between city and countryside.¹ Hillar Pulk from Estonia annually attracts ten thousand city residents to his bison saloon, where they eat local products and party late into the night. Karl Ludwig Schweisfurth from Germany started his own organic village, including a butcher and a baker, a restaurant and a shop, and many pigs. Jan Huijgen from the Netherlands turned his Eemlandhoeve into a city oasis and Alfredo Cunhal from Portugal farms in the traditional Portuguese way on his 6500 hectares of land. He sells his products in nearby villages and in Lisbon, and provides jobs for local residents.

Activities

In preparation of the European Eemland Conference a pre-meeting was organized on 2 and 3 October by the REP and the Portuguese Catholic University in Vairão, Porto Metropolitan Area of Portugal. The subject of this pre-meeting was the development of a regional agricultural policy for Europe.

Such a regionally based approach to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will enable the new post 2014 CAP to coordinate with other EU and national sectoral policies so that social, economic, and environmental externalities can be fully taken into account, and cost effective and

¹ The video documentary *Versatile Farmers* by Stijn Postma, made in co-production with the European Multifunctional Farmers Network (EMFN), is part of the conference kit of the European Eemland Conference.

purposeful rural development can be achieved. A regional agricultural policy can make a much better contribution to innovation and sustainable economic growth in Europe – in line with the Lisbon Agenda objectives – than the present CAP. The meeting in Vairão brought together about 20 experts from all over Europe. The papers that were presented can be found on www.ruraleuropeanplatform.org.

The REP position paper "**Why rural areas need a regional approach**" draws on the ideas brought forward at the Porto meeting and was written as a contribution to the European Eemland Conference. It concludes that a versatile countryside is crucial to reduce vulnerability, enhance the capacity to adapt to the impact of climate change, price variability and to the more general changes in social demands. Heterogeneity is reflected in the range of differences in the distribution of natural, human and economic resources between regions in Europe. This helps to create many regionally specific opportunities for sustainable development. Much more thought should be given, therefore, to the potential and definition of such regionally specific approaches.²

The workshop "**New arrangements for farming and nature**" at the Eemlandhoeve was based on the presentation of a number of innovative experiences. The focus was on farmers and their social relationships with new developments in agricultural production, city life, and nature conservation.³

Taking advantage of the European Eemland Conference being situated in the Netherlands, the examples presented were taken predominantly from ongoing developments in the Dutch regions of Brabant and Gelderland. They all reflect the efforts of modern farming practice to deal with today's challenges. Such challenges often go beyond, but still include farming as a crucial expertise and entrepreneurship.

Presentations

The initiatives presented include a fruit producing farm near the city of Eindhoven with ancient roots linking it to Philips industries, an early example of corporate social responsibility. "*Philips Fruittuin de Wielewaal*" of Carlos and Anneke Faes produces apples, pears and plums and is operating more and more as a modern gateway between urban Eindhoven and the surrounding countryside, including the National Landscape Het Groene Woud. Their newly opened pancake house attracted 7.500 visitors on its opening weekend last month and has catered for 200 to 300 guests on a daily basis ever since.

A second initiative that was presented concerned the development of viable farming systems in a new and innovative collaboration of the Dutch Farming Organisation LTO Nederland and a number of nature organizations in Gelderland: Stichting Geldersch Landschap and Nationaal Park De Hoge Veluwe. The inspiration to set up new and economically viable farms is drawn from traditional farming practices which connect crop producing infields and heath land outfields and also from direct sales of regional special food products at the castle and farm shops of the Geldersch Landschap. The initiative is centred on about twenty breeding programs that were set up to revive extinct types of former Dutch heath-cattle: a new economy in support of ecology.

A third set of initiatives came from Noord-Brabant and focused on sustainable farming systems. Willem van Laarhoven of Valacon Dairy in St.Oedenrode explained how his ideas on durability of dairy cows – extending their productive lifespan from about 3 to 8 years – are catching on and reaching a growing circle of dairy farmers in the South of the Netherlands. The number of participants in the project is expanding from 50 to 250 farmers. Another, similar success story concerns the rediscovery of biodiversity as an important resource for agricultural production. This may involve increasing the genetic variety of domestic plants and animals, increasing the number of wild flora and fauna in the region as well as improving growing conditions through, for example, encouraging soil microbes, predators, and pollinators. A pilot project involving 100 farmers identified a set of over 40 measures to be implemented at farm level which would improve biodiversity, landscape quality, and the economic results for individual farmers. The result of both

² The REP position paper "Why rural areas need a regional approach" has been distributed at the European Eemland Conference and will be available at the REP website www.ruraleuropeanplatform.org.

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developments is a decrease in environmental problems (ammonia, methane, CO₂, raw materials and energy), with an increase in farmers profits, biodiversity and public acceptance.

A final set of initiatives that were presented by Triple E and the *Innovatieplatform Duurzame Meierij* (IDM), in cooperation with Alterra, addressed the development of novel financing mechanisms provided by private payments for environmental services and for enhancing the quality of our regional landscapes. Presently, a more robust plan is being developed for a regional fund for landscape restoration and management for National Landscape Het Groene Woud which builds on the initial success of the Regional Savings Account (*de Streekrekening Het Groene Woud*). It is one of four national pilot projects based on the Deltaplan of *Vereniging Nederlands Cultuurlandschap*. Frans van Beerendonk of IDM explained how building trust is at the bottom of a successful regional development. People need to find each other in their challenge to enhance the quality of their own region. The Regional Savings Account has helped to create a new dimension for developing these social contacts which may be even more valuable than the establishment of an independent regional source of income.

Additionally, Triple E and Alterra announced that they are preparing an initiative for the establishment of a Europe-wide Trust Fund for investment by the private sector to stimulate simultaneously the local rural economy (thus contributing to the development of these areas) and the conservation of biodiversity. Both these goals are set by the European Commission.

Common ground, new ideas and proposals for action

The pressure is on and the quality of our European landscape is at stake. We need to preserve and enhance a versatile European countryside to safeguard our future, even though the urgency of this challenge is not always felt by everyone yet. Taking the REP position paper "Why rural areas need a regional approach" as a point of departure, two guiding principles became obvious during the workshop: regional scope and interregional solidarity.

The first one – **regional scope** – indicates that the growing urban demand for new services from the countryside in densely populated territories such as Brabant and Gelderland in the Netherlands requires collaborative action between farming practices and nature conservation. Such collaborative action helps to build the much needed relationships between urban areas and their countryside. Europe needs regional entrepreneurship and cooperation, based on a common vision about functional connections between agriculture, nature, and urban life. The second principle – **interregional solidarity** – reminds us about the necessary connections that have to be established between low populated areas with their huge supply potential for green and blue services and the growing demands from densely populated areas in the EU.

The participants of this Eemland workshop observed that some of the most successful examples in support of a sustainable, regional development are based on personal leadership and entrepreneurial spirit. Bringing such best practices together will help to increase their potential for systemic change and growth in the direction that is needed. It was concluded that basically two lines of action are required.

On the one hand it is important to offer a supportive and facilitating environment for entrepreneurs who have the ambition to innovate and to explore a new perspective.

Experience learns that they often have to surmount many barriers. Therefore, a supportive environment is needed that can offer those pioneers opportunities for reflection, for getting in touch with other similar motivated individuals, and to be introduced to new domains of knowledge, experience and networks when preparing for a next step in the development of their initiative. Above all such a supportive environment should help them to communicate these successful examples and underline their significance for sustainable regional development.

On the other hand it is important to motivate others by communicating best practices and their benefits.

Other entrepreneurs need to be encouraged to team up with these ambitious pioneering initiatives or to follow in the footsteps of some of these inspiring examples.

Both requirements can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The concept of 'regional branding' can thus be understood to promote the region's name and fame by promoting the products of successful entrepreneurship.

In view of these observations the following actions have been proposed and will be organized building on the success of the Rural European Platform network:

1. An exchange visit will be organized later this year within the frame work of the Interreg HEATH project inviting representatives of Geldersch Landschap and LTO Nederland to present their business case for traditional farming practices for an interested audience of practitioners from Bretagne, Cornwall and Ireland. Thus the much needed cooperation between farming organisations and nature organisations can be further explored at a European level.
2. A visit of Dutch dairy farmers to meet interested colleagues in Portugal, England and the Czech Republic will be organized in 2009 by the Stuurgroep Landbouw Innovatie Brabant, ZLTO and Valacon Dairy, providing them with new incentives for future cooperation.
3. In Noord-Brabant a network of like-minded farmers will be set up by the Stuurgroep Landbouw Innovatie Brabant based on the growing support for farming and biodiversity.
4. Triple E, Alterra, and their Polish partner will prepare for the establishment of a Europe-wide Trust Fund for investment by the private sector, while the Innovatieplatform Duurzame Meierij will explore a possible combination with their Regional Savings Account. The objective is to stimulate the local rural economy and the conservation of biodiversity simultaneously in buffer zones inside national parks in low population regions in Europe thus generating a much needed economic perspective for these areas.
5. The Interreg HEATH project will prepare a book: "Crossing Borders" about innovative ideas and initiatives in nature and farming and about the results of the workshop.

Interested parties are invited to join one or more of these initiatives or to add their own and to help extend the European exchange networks of practitioners, landowners and policymakers. They can contact Herbert Diemont at Alterra, Wageningen.

Participants

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Beldman, Alfons	WUR - LEI
Boers, Bart	Nat. Park Hoge Veluwe
Corporaal, Albert	Alterra - WUR
Diemont, Herbert	Alterra - WUR
Faes, Anneke	Philips Fruittuin
Geraerds, Wim	Geldersch Landschap en Kasteelen
Hoop, Jitske de	WUR - LEI
Keddeman, Suzanne	WUR student
Laarhoven, Willem van	Valacon Dairy
Maessen, Rob	Provincie Noord-Brabant
Oers, Peter van	Innovatieplatform Duurzame Meierij
Oostindie, Henk	WUR - rurale sociologie
Sonneveld, Marien	Stichting Regiowaarde
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