



## **Enhancing the outreach of the EU Green Infrastructure**

Policy paper of the Rural European Platform 2015<sup>1)</sup>

1) with inputs from the BEF Life Viva Grass project and reflecting a discussion<sup>2)</sup> during the CEEweb Academy meeting on Building Blue-Green Infrastructure in Budapest, 6-7 October 2015..

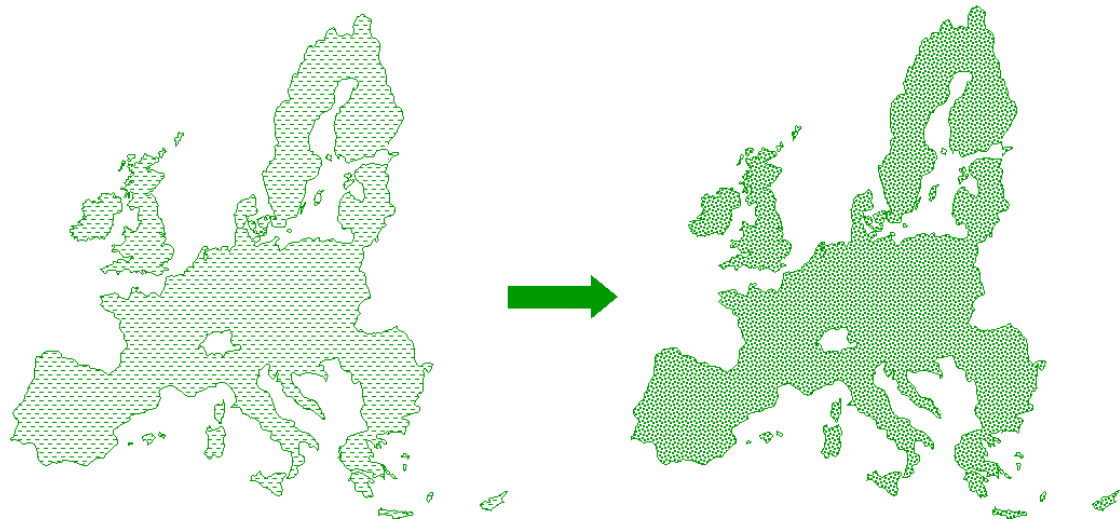
### **Summary**

**The outreach of Green Infrastructure(GI) in the EU could be doubled by the inclusion of currently abandoned land as well as marginal farmland such as grassland, shrubland and moorland. This would also support the necessary landscape and watershed approach required to capture a range of ‘in demand’ private and public services , such as flood protection, carbon sequestration and wildfire prevention, as well as a contribution to restoring biodiversity and cultural landscapes and providing opportunities for outdoor recreation and bio-based farming. Such an approach would enable GI to truly contribute to a smart, inclusive and sustainable growth strategy of the European Union, taking on board all sectoral interests and mobilizing all available financial resources to achieve the necessary changes even in areas of the EU presently deficient in human resources in these landscapes.**

### **Outline**

The potential of Green Infrastructure (GI) to contribute to the European Union’s 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth could be doubled by including land often labelled as ‘marginal’ or ‘abandoned’, for example, cut-over or partially drained peatlands, shrublands and certain types of grassland. To this end the Commission is asked to make available (additional) funding to enable transition of formerly farmed land (ie land already or about to be abandoned for use by agriculture) to multiple land use resources, providing opportunities for tourism and outdoor recreation as well as bio-based products and environmental services or raw material for the wood based industry. Such a move would also provide opportunities linked to the natural and cultural landscape heritage of Europe, as recognised by the European Landscape Convention as well as contributing to EU targets to restore biodiversity. Funding to support such transitions could come from LIFE (in cases where Natura 2000 habitats are involved), particularly if certain changes were made to widen eligibility to semi-natural habitats outside Natura 2000 sites, also, supported by private investments. However the opportunities afforded by strategic use of CAP funding should not be underestimated either. EU Member States are able to decide on the land they include in their Utilized Agricultural Area and land previously excluded or not so far incorporated in UAA (‘lost land’) could be brought back into the policy and decision- making process so that , with a modest amount of investment it can be enabled to yield a variety of public and private goods. Looking further into the future it could be possible that public money could be channeled via the CAP to provide for efficient production of essential and valued public services this land provides which could also lead to private investments in bio-based farming, tourism and outdoor recreation, providing ecosystem services.

## Abandoned and marginal farm land included in the Green Infrastructure



The land resources in the Natura 2000 network represent 111 million hectares of Green Infrastructure (2015) but by including the approximately 87 million hectares of the most marginal farm land in the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANCs) (equivalent to about 50% of the farmland in the EU's UAA) as well as another 60 million of 'abandoned' countryside including grassland, cut-over or partially drained bogs and shrubland<sup>3</sup> there is the potential to more than double the land resources for Green Infrastructure. This would foster Green infrastructure into a much more robust tool for effective and resilient provision of modern services such as flood prevention, provision of freshwater resources for the cities, improving carbon stocks and preventing wildfires, as well as creating economic opportunities in outdoor recreation and tourism. In addition, for the same investment, EU goals for protecting cultural landscapes, carbon stocks and increasing biodiversity are also achieved. In all these cases a landscape / water catchment approach is required to optimize results in terms of providing most of the anticipated potential ecosystem services.

### Background

In a recent CEEweb organized meeting on blue-green services of wetlands it became evident that a restriction of blue services to the traditional categories of wetlands would unnecessarily narrow down its impact, since blue services such as flood protection also depend on upland habitats such as grassland, shrublands and blanket bogs, not all of which are included in the Natura 2000 network because some Member States are richer in these resources than others and have therefore selected a proportion of their available land for designation. The argument could thus be logically extended from designated sites to include some types of land outside the network, especially if we take account of evidence that many services including the conservation of cultural landscapes, flood protection and fire

prevention are at their most effective when implemented at a watershed or landscape scale. Here we elaborate further on options to expand the provision of blue-green services within a wider context of land use planning and strategic policy, taking into account integration of sectoral demands,

The need to integrate sectoral interests, such as have been identified in the Water Directory, the 'Birds' and 'Habitats' Directives and the Common Agricultural Policy are already acknowledged in COM(2013)249 final on Green Infrastructure. It is the CAP which impacts on many of the GI habitats (including grasslands as well as shrublands) and which thus may, or may not, qualify to be included in the UAA.

Strategic policy-making in the EU increasingly recognizes the dependence of its citizens on services provided by the natural environment (blue and green services). Indeed the definition of 'Green Infrastructure' provided by COM (2013) 249 final includes the words "strategically planned". The same communication recognises the key role that the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) plays as an instrument to encourage GI, including that this role is not just limited to those specialised measures associated with rural development programmes but also crucially to the first pillar which provides the large-scale direct support for farmers. Thus one of Europe's earliest strategic policies which delivered food security to its citizens is also perhaps its most potent financial mechanism for providing green infrastructure.

Green and blue services in Europe will require integration of various sectoral interests, such as have been identified in the Water Directory, Natura 2000, the 'Birds' and 'Habitats' Directives and the Common Agricultural Policy. It is the latter agricultural policy sector which currently includes (but sometimes excludes) many of the landscapes and semi-natural vegetation types vulnerable to abandonment. Green infrastructure is one of the EU's investment priorities and CAP makes use of over one third of its budget and influences management on around half of its terrestrial area. It therefore profits the policy maker to consider how the relationship between CAP funding and the functionality of GI can be mutually supportive to deliver green-blue services and contribute to sustainable development in the regions.

The extensive grasslands and shrublands of the EU have great potential as part of a strategic GI network but in these areas the challenge is often whether farmers' income from the sale of traditional products from grazing livestock is now sufficient to retain an economic base for farming. While these landscapes may appear 'wild' and be composed of native species of grasses and shrubs they have generally formed as a result of long-term interaction between European society and its environment and removal of the human component will effect change in the landscape. The abandonment of a farm may be a household-level decision but there are significant ecological and social consequences for European society as a result of the aggregation of hundreds or thousands of such decisions. This includes impacts on the services flowing from this GI with potential costs incurred eg fighting wildfires, as well as social and economic opportunities forgone with regional decline.

Within the flexibility of the CAP, Member States can choose to either include or exclude extensive grasslands and shrublands within their Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA) and thus provide financial support to this form of GI. For example most of the UK's heather moorland is still part of the UAA and receives CAP support though much of the value of this landscape

to the Member State comes from ecosystem services. In Portugal while rather similar landscapes are not included in their UAA, it has still been possible, on the basis of a small amount of funding, to develop an approach (via land management interventions by the common land organizations) which uses GI to defend against, and reduce, wildfire risk. This approach has successfully reduced the costs to the public purse that are associated with large wildfires. In the densely populated Netherlands the needs of society for nature and amenity have resulted in some 10 percent of the intensive UAA grassland being altered back to extensive grassland and heath while in the Baltics large areas of grassland that had previously been used for agriculture have either been abandoned, or in the case of land that has been included as UAA, are mowed solely for the purpose of the subsidy, while strategically valuable additional uses and services (including among others bio-based innovations) could be provided.

In the historic past an increase in population generally led to a drive to make greater use of 'marginal' agricultural land or to out-migration in search of new land or income sources but the ability of the modern agri-food industry to use technological innovation to increase food production and changes to the way the EU trades for food within and without its borders has fundamentally altered the relationship between population, food and agricultural land requirements. Indeed it is not just in semi-natural pastures that such changes are being played out, the same process has also reached categories of intensive grassland where market conditions have deteriorated and the present support is no longer sufficient to counteract the worsening market conditions.

It can be argued that intensification of food production on some of Europe's landmass is in fact creating new marginality in some regions with consequent impacts on local communities as well as the environment. However, such conditions can also contribute to sustainable development, if new opportunities to also deliver other GI goods valued by Europe's citizens are strategically grasped. The speed of innovation in the agri-food industries is such that it is imperative that the question of the strategic value and implementation of GI is dealt with in parallel and it cannot be postponed indefinitely if the EU is to achieve all of its development goals.

At the present time an international team in the Viva Grass LIFE project in the Baltics, assisted by the Rural European Platform is making an inventory of actions which can contribute to an economic perspective for grassland and shrubland, one which is not limited to the most species-rich habitats. At this stage the inventory is also taking into account options for immigration of farmers within the EU and the potential of the bio-based economy to increase income from grassland. Our proposals could significantly support the transition and in fact provide excellent opportunities to make use of the increasing surfaces of "wasteland" to foster a transition to multiple use of land resources contributing to a smart, inclusive and sustainable growth in the EU.

1) The Rural European Platform was founded by research institute Alterra and the Norwegian Crop Research Institute Bioforsk and launched in July 2004 during an international workshop in Lien, Svartal, 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.

2) Presentation on October 6, 2015 A.H.Kirkpatrick, H.Ritzema, R.Schrijver, J.Stibinger & W.H.Diemont: Perspectives for Delivering Ecosystem Services from Agricultural Wetlands

3) the total farm land area in the Corina Land Cover classification includes 229 million hectares and approximate 60 million hectares higher as the Utilized Agricultural Area of 171 million hectares according Eurostat FSS data 2010; R.Schrijver & W.H Diemont 2013 High Nature value farming and food security in Europe In: Economy and Ecology of heathlands .