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Water: the essence of rural life

Water is a fundamental resource that much of EU rural development activity depends upon, in one way or another, and this focus article takes a look at some of the issues affecting the quality and quantity of water sources in rural areas.

Water management has been identified by the [Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\) Health Check](#) as a key challenge facing EU agriculture and rural areas, and wise water use can make direct contributions to other challenges that the EU is facing vis-à-vis biodiversity conservation and tackling climate change. Correlations between the latter and sustainable water management have also been reaffirmed by the Commission in a 2009 Staff Working Document titled [Adapting to climate change: the challenge for European agriculture and rural areas](#). The document notes a need for water-related rural policy actions to complement overall EU strategic objectives for water policy, which are set out in the [Water Framework Directive](#) (WFD).

A number of important WFD developments are expected to start full implementation from 2010 onwards and these include the [River Basin Management Plans](#) (RBMPs), which will affect all users of EU water resources in rural areas, particularly agriculture, since farming is

estimated to consume [69%](#) of total EU water use. Completion of the RBMPs later this year will, for the first time, provide a comprehensive coverage of up to date intelligence about water management issues at EU level, as well as the actions at ground level required for sustaining both quantity and quality of supplies in different parts of the EU.

The implementing rules for the specific measure concerning payments linked to the WFD will be in place as from 2010. The measure may be used once a RBMP becomes operational, that is starting in 2010 and by 2012 at the latest. In addition, a number of other measures on water management are already available and being used in the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs).

RDP roles

RDPs provide an opportunity to help land managers implement actions in rural areas that contribute to the RBMP goals. A variety of useful water management actions can be financed from the RDP axes and many RDPs have been designed to take account of water management concerns affecting their individual territories. A select (non-exhaustive) sample of such RDP support options is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Sample of eligible water management actions within EU RDPs

Finland (mainland)	Recycling of drainage or run-off waters and controlled irrigation
France (Corsica)	Support specifically for low pressure irrigation systems
Germany (Bayern)	Flood prevention measures including preparatory costs for flood protection works
Greece	Actions to protect priority wetland habitats
Luxembourg	Reduction of water pollution risks in sensitive areas
Hungary	Communal investments in the development of irrigation outside the farms
Malta	Irrigation systems designed to meet Community Standards and WFD provisions
Portugal (mainland)	Group approaches to tackling water stress
Slovenia	Education and certification for users of sustainable irrigation systems

RDPs in southern and eastern Europe frequently provide funds for different project-related work involved in addressing water scarcity and helping rural areas adapt to drier climatic conditions. Significant sums are available for water management actions and modernising irrigation systems is considered a priority by numerous RDPs. Water efficiency approaches are encouraged through better informed, tighter controlled and more technology-led techniques, such as [deficit irrigation](#), which helps farmers optimise water-use during drought-sensitive growth stages of a crop. Territorial specific agri-environment practices are also widely supported by RDPs in order to improve soil

water holding capacity, reduce risks of contaminants reaching scarce water sources and protect wetland wildlife (*inter alia*).

RDPs from northern and western Europe also offer support for water efficiency measures and these are augmented by further support to help rural areas mitigate against threats from other water impacts, particularly floods and storms. Here, the RDPs are able to offer co-finance for crop protection equipment, such as hail nets, and farmers can also be eligible for compensation payments regarding agricultural land management practices that provide valuable downstream flood-defence services.

In addition, EU rural areas can access RDP schemes to help support investments that upgrade basic infrastructure to reduce pollution risks. LAG cooperation on water management issues is also possible within and between all Member States, as well as neighbouring countries. These partnership approaches can prove especially beneficial for coordinating work that stretches across broad river basin catchment areas.



Agricultural solutions

Rural stakeholder roles in implementing river basin management systems has come under the spotlight during a number of high profile conferences including last year's [Water Conference in Zaragoza](#), which took place as part of [European preparations](#) for the [fifth World Water Forum](#). More recently, DG Environment's [Water for LIFE conference](#) also explored farm-based contributions to WFD objectives and showcased good practices in these fields, such as successful approaches for reducing [eutrophication](#) impacts on Europe's water.

Delegates at the conference heard how around 40% of EU rivers suffer from some form of eutrophication and farm advisors' roles in resolving this problem were demonstrated by a new [Integrated Advisory system](#) that has been successfully tested in Denmark.

Based on a [manual of Good Agricultural Practices](#) and designed by Denmark's Agricultural Advisory Service, the new system found favour among farmers since it afforded equal priority to their economic objectives and proved effective in reducing eutrophication. In addition to underscoring the significance of RDP support that is available both for water-related agri-environment measures, the project helped to build the capacity of rural advisory services to act as 'agents for change' in important issues such as sustainable water management.

Good practice support

Good practices in rural water management are also available in other Member States, including projects demonstrating sustainable techniques for [optimising water use](#) in arid landscapes and guidance covering [self-help approaches to water conservation planning](#) for rural businesses.

Conservation actions are becoming increasingly important as more countries move towards introducing new pricing systems for water use and the uptake of water conservation technologies throughout Europe's countryside continues to be assisted by dedicated RDP co-financing. An example of this is the [Farm Resource Efficiency Programme](#) that provides grants for UK farmers from the Yorkshire area to increase competitiveness and create environmental benefits, through small capital investments including [rainwater harvesting](#) technology and water recycling systems.

[National Rural Networks](#) (NRNs) can help interested parties tap into further information about RDP roles in supporting sustainable management of EU water resources, as well as assist in the identification of relevant good practice examples.

Leader subcommittee news

A third meeting of the EN RD Leader subcommittee took place in November when representatives from rural development organisations, NRNs, managing authorities and the Commission discussed challenges involved in reinforcing Leader's role as a mainstream rural development tool for the 2007-2013 period.

A series of positive conclusions emerged from the meeting which agreed to establish three bottom-up Focus Groups. These have been tasked to identify concrete solutions to challenges involved in: implementing bottom-up approaches across the thematic rural development axes; maintaining Leader's innovation principles within mainstream RDP actions; and facilitating increased cooperation between the new and much larger network of EU LAGs. The materials presented during the meeting of the 3rd Leader subcommittee, including more information on the scope of themes, are available on the [EN RD website](#).

The Focus Groups, which will operate on a voluntary basis and will be led by the members of the subcommittee, and they are requested to report back to the next Leader subcommittee meeting in April. Further information about the Focus Groups is available from [Kasia Panfil](#) at the EN RD Contact Point.

Sweden's first 'Rural Awards' winners

Promoting good practice is an important task for all NRNs, and Sweden's NRN has recently announced the winners of its 2009 good practice 'Rural Awards' scheme. The scheme focuses on good practice rural development projects and attracted over forty different entries covering all four RDP axes.

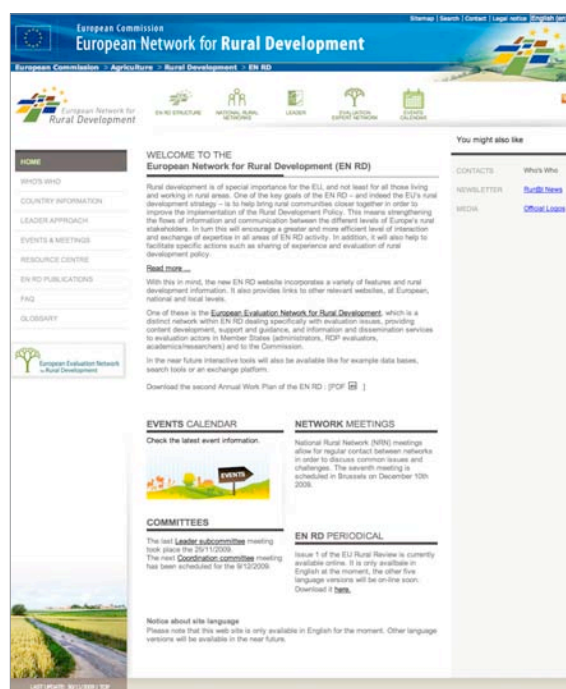
This year's Rural Awards winners were celebrated at a Rural Gala ceremony during October. Some 300 people from Sweden's rural development sector attended the NRN Gala, including the Minister for Agriculture, Eskil Erlandsson, who praised the award scheme entries as "inspiring examples of all the creativity and entrepreneurship that exists in the Swedish countryside and ...of how the measures in the RDP can encourage individuals or groups to realise their ideas".

Good practice projects are nominated for entry into seven separate categories of the NRN's Rural Awards. LAGs nominate Leader projects and all

other categories are nominated by County Administrative Boards. This year's winners include: a project providing on-farm biogas production services which aims to help reduce the impact of manure transportation; a young rural entrepreneur running his own goat farm and cheese business; a novel egg-based festival which generated significant rural tourism benefits; and a cultural integration project supporting social inclusion in rural communities. More information about the Rural Awards and all of [2009's project entries](#) is available from the [Swedish Rural Network](#).

Website developments

The [EN RD website](#) is a core communication and networking tool which continues to be populated with new information that keeps EN RD stakeholders 'in-the-know' about EN RD operations. Recent additions to the network's website include contact details for the [many hundreds of LAGs](#) that are now established around Europe, and new on-line details are also available regarding membership of the [Thematic Working Groups](#), the [EN RD Coordination committee](#) and [Leader subcommittee](#).



Additional rural development fund approvals

New funds from the EU Recovery Plan and CAP Health Check were approved in November which will inject around €1.6 million of additional money into the Member States' RDPs. This new round of approvals builds on earlier RDP amendments and means that nearly half of all the RDPs have now received confirmation of their extra budget resources. Further approvals are expected in 2010.

Common priorities among Member States for the new funds from November included RDP measures supporting agri-environment payments, farm

modernisation, diversification into non-agricultural activities, animal welfare payments, basic services for the economy and rural population, and cooperation for development of new products, processes and technologies in the agricultural and food sector. [Find out more](#) about the new money and its distribution across different RDP priority areas.



Regional and international cooperation between rural networks

There are many different types of localised rural development support groups in the Member States and cooperation opportunities remain strong within and across these varied rural networks. France for example has over 25 functioning [regional rural networks](#). These are proactively progressing work with RDP support, such as in [Normandy](#) where the '[Le réseau rural bas-normand](#)' is involved with projects like those linked to improving local supply chains for food related products, or focused on agriculture's future role in regional rural development. These rural development initiatives are supported by different funding sources, including axes of the mainland France RDP

Other Member States also support regional networks and information about these can be found from the [NRNs](#). NRN roles include facilitating cooperation processes, which does not need to be limited to the EU 27 and may also extend into third countries. Here, cooperation is possible with EU neighbours, like Switzerland, where the '[regiosuisse](#)' is interested to work in partnership with other countries on rural issues such as improving competitiveness, environmental sustainability, quality of life and economic diversification.

Rur@L News readers are encouraged to make the most of the RDP cooperation opportunities so [let us know](#) about any work from your rural network that you would like us to highlight to potential partners from around rural Europe.

Boosting rural skill-bases in Belgium

There are two RDPs active in Belgium's rural areas. One covers the Flanders region in the north and another covers the Walloon region in the south. Both of Belgium's RDPs recognise the important role that education and training play as essential ingredients of successful EU farming. A common link between the two RDPs is their active promotion of 'knowledge investments' for young and qualified farmers as a means to maintain competitiveness and introduce related innovations.

Axis 1's vocational training measure is the main source of RDP assistance for this knowledge building support and, in each RDP territory, traditional productivity-led curricula are nowadays also accompanied by specialised training raising awareness about farm diversification options and sustainable agriculture techniques.

Five educational centres have been certified in the Flanders region to deliver such vocational training courses, that are co-financed by the RDP under measure 111. Start-up courses for young farmers cover several subject areas including business, technology and environment. During 2007, these popular courses attracted 630 participants who between them studied 63 different courses and successfully achieved 431 internship qualifications. Shorter training programmes also run for qualified entrants and a review of course registrations reveals keen interest for skills development in ICT,

management, administration and marketing. Women represented around 40% of the trainees and over 50% were younger than 40 years old.

Younger female trainees are also given special priority for vocational training under measure 111 of Belgian's Walloon RDP. Examples of RDP skills support provided by the Walloon RDP include training packages organised by the [Federation of Young Farmers](#). These cover technical and legal aspects of running agri-businesses, as well as encourage students to venture into new ways of rural working.

In a similar vein, alternative approaches and innovative methodologies form part of the syllabus delivered by Walloon's [CARAH](#) research centre (Centre pour l'agronomie et l'agro-industries de la province de Hainaut), another of the region's education facilities running RDP funded courses. Featuring pedagogical farm research facilities and laboratory services, the centre's vocational training mandate extends across agriculture, forestry and new product developments, such as cheese making. All of the centre's axis 1 supported courses are driven by strategic goals aiming to strengthen regional skill-bases and improve competitiveness in the rural economy.

Further information about Belgium's approach to rural training support is available from the [Walloon](#) and [Flemish](#) rural networks.

Expert support for EU organic sector

A new EU expert group has been set up to improve Europe's expanding organic food and farming sector. Stemming from recommendations in the [European Action Plan for Organics](#), this new grouping of technical specialists in organic production matters will help to strengthen existing organic legal frameworks, evaluate good practices in organic systems and promote these via knowledge transfer facilities. Some 13 experts have initially been appointed by the Commission and a pool of other potential Committee members is also being prepared. [Find out more](#)



Agricultural and rural policy under Commissioner Fischer Boel

A new publication has been released highlighting developments in agricultural and rural policy during Mariann Fischer Boel's five year term as Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural development. The brochure covers work progressed since 2004 including reviews of CAP reforms, simplification procedures and trade agreements. [Find out more](#)



TOUR OF
THE MEMBER
STATES

Slovakia

Located east of the Czech Republic and north of Hungary, Slovakia also borders with Austria, Poland and Ukraine. Much of the country is upland and mountainous and whilst 86% of the total national territory is classified as rural, only around a half of Slovakia's land mass is used by agriculture.

Facts and figures about rural Slovakia

- 40% of the national population live in rural settlements
- Organic agriculture covers circa 128 000 hectares
- Mountain areas contain peaks as high as 2 655 m
- Forest covers nearly 2 000 000 ha

An abundance of healthy forest resources, natural meadows and pasture provide useful opportunities for sustainable developments in a wide range of different rural products and services. However, structural problems, unfavourable population trends, limited existing employment prospects and an undiversified economy, all combine to present considerable challenges for transitional processes in rural areas.

Slovakia's RDP acknowledges these challenges and its measures offer rural stakeholders the tools (including €2.5 billion of EU and national co-finance) to help take advantage of the countryside's strengths. Axis 1 for example supports efforts that increase innovation and improve coordination between agricultural and food sectors. Special funds are allocated to help semi-subsistence farmers adapt to market demands and ICT is considered a crucial tool for all rural businesses.

Mountain farmers receive RDP funds to sustain rural economies in areas with specific handicaps and agri-environment payments help to maintain Slovakia's rich biodiversity. The country's natural heritage strengths provide useful options for economic diversification under axis 3, where budget proportions are earmarked for rural tourism projects. LAGs will be actively involved in these types of RDP actions and cooperation is another high priority for Slovakia's 15 LAGs. Particular areas of interest include knowledge transfer about Leader methods, since such bottom-up rural partnership approaches have not been previously applied in Slovakia's countryside.

Pioneering successful Leader methodologies is therefore a vital task for the NRN, which is overseen by the Ministry of Agriculture's Agency for

Rural Development. The NRN now has over 230 members, including civil society groups and rural business associations, and most of its activities are implemented through a network of seven regional offices, based in existing rural development organisations.

Malvina Gondová, Slovakia's NRN Manager, explains that the decentralised approach allows the NRN to be closer to its main client base and this "helps us understand the different rural development needs in different parts of the country. Our approach is relatively new since the regional offices started work in April 2009 but we are pleased with our progress so far". She goes on to say that "Capacity building remains a core NRN objective and we have been running a programme of events to inform rural stakeholders about how they can use the RDP resources."

By November, 35 different rural seminars had attracted 1551 participants and more people have been involved in the NRN's capacity-building work at national level, such as a recent *international rural development conference*. LAG networking facilities were well received during the conference which drew on international experience in Leader approaches and established links for future cooperation on various RDP projects that are now underway.

For example, in axis 1 alone, the RDP has (by October 2009) provided support for 1 451 projects which account for nearly 75% of the axis 1 budget and target structural changes or training actions to increase rural competitiveness. More funds remain in the RDP's axis 2 allocation but here Slovakia's rural environment has already gained from €195 million of RDP funds supporting 8 407 projects and RDP beneficiaries

involved with maintaining the countryside, addressing climate change, protecting water and conserving soil.

Progress with axis 3 projects has also been steady and 66 projects, investing €29.2 million, are now actively supporting rural tourism initiatives, village renovation works, community education schemes and renewable energy plants. Much of Slovakia axis 4 budget is still in the process of being allocated to the new network of LAGs (15 LAGs have already been approved during 2009) and the NRN is working closely with these stakeholders to ensure good value from the RDP resources.

See the *Slovakian NRN website* for further information about their LAG support services as well as their decentralised regional approach and opportunities for transnational cooperation with Slovakian RDP partners.



Festive footnote

We would like to wish all our readers the very best for the festive season and good tidings for a rewarding 2010.

FIND OUT
MORE

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

European Network for Rural Development:
<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>

EU Rural Development policy 2007–13:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index_en.htm

Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/index_en.htm

The European Evaluation Network:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/eval/network/index_en.htm

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