TRINET Workshop
Building Nordic-Baltic and European partnership in grassland farming for biodiversity

Sigulda, Latvia, Oct. 11-13 2007

DRAFT CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP

Agreement to continue as a group

The participants to the workshop agree to continue as a group under a single name, but without any formal structure or statutes at this stage (I.e. as a *de facto,* not a *de iure*, association).

Partnership as underlying factor

For many decades, farmers and nature conservationists stood in opposition to each other. There is now a transition under way towards a new partnership model, where farmers and nature conservation bodies work together to restore and maintain high nature value grasslands. **Partnership** implies:

1. Together finding the most effective ways of delivering biodiversity (= creativity in management techniques and monitoring of results);
2. Together evaluating Rural Development and other tools which are available, comparing between countries as well as examining their efficacy (for biodiversity) and user-friendliness, in order to suggest improvements which benefit both partners;
3. Together building up systems to make farming for landscapes and biodiversity economically sustainable, so that farmers get a just reward for their work and greater independence from subsidies.

The tourism sector, or, to be exact, that part of it which deals in rural and nature-based tourism and recreation, benefits from the preservation of landscape and biodiversity. Therefore, as follow-up, establish links to representatives of the tourism sector (**partnership broadening**).

Three partnership themes

Theme 1: Finding the most effective ways of delivering biodiversity

This covers two interlinked activities:

1) **Developing and implementing grassland management and restoration techniques**. **As a suggestion for practical follow-up to the workshop**, exchange information on grassland management and restoration techniques, especially of innovative and unusual solutions and ideas. These ought to be distinguished clearly from common practice which is already being implemented in many countries and grassland contexts.
A number of clearly innovative techniques or tools were already mentioned during the workshop, and more could be envisaged – e.g. experiments with animals (donkeys, goats) which have a strong preference for nibbling woody plants, as an alternative to cows and sheep in grasslands which are heavily overgrown.

2) **Monitoring the impact of grassland management and restoration techniques** (grazing/mowing, etc) on habitats and species. Not just in terms of numbers of individuals, e.g. birds, present, but also in terms of their reproductive success, e.g. % of birds successfully breeding . There is a widespread and chronic lack of funds to do this kind of efficacy research. Funding, when given, is often short-term – more longer-term funding to support long-term monitoring is needed.
Therefore, as a **suggestion for practical follow-up to the workshop**, set up a system to exchange data on what has already been done or is under way, in order to avoid duplication of research and to maximise the dissemination of what has already been discovered. This will help allocate the scarce funds for monitoring towards those areas where there is a major gap across European countries.

Within monitoring, priority ought to be given to monitoring the rate of success of the management methods employed for high nature value grasslands. This means a broad monitoring across species and plant communities, instead of a narrow monitoring of the impact of management on specific taxa and species. I.e., not so much: “this is species/taxon ….. , how is it affected by grassland management?”, but more: “who is affected in what way by this particular form of grassland management?”. Important is to check whether observed effects are purely local (due to local circumstances) or are indeed valid across biogeographic regions.

In turn, this will help identify **indicators of success** for each technical type of grassland management.
These indicators of (biological) success can act as alternatives to the fixed instructions (mow at that date, graze …. LU per hectare) which are typical of current support measures for grassland farming (and which have standardising effects – see below). These indicators mean a results-based approach: this is what we want to achieve, and what will be paid for. How to get there, how to achieve the desired result, is left entirely flexible.
Indicators of success, once defined, could be proposed to the authorities and stakeholders as a new pathway in support for farmers committed to managing high nature value grassland (see next theme).

Universities and similar bodies have the capability to carry out fundamental research on the effects of different management techniques, and there are already large-scale research projects (EU Research Framework Programme, national science programmes). There does appear to be a problem with dissemination of the research results and take-up of recommendations from this research by farmers and conservation managers of sites. Conversely, those engaged in practical work not be succeeding in getting the questions which they have about management forms and their impact, transmitted to the scientific research projects. This could be an issue to investigate for **possible practical follow-up (mediation between the scientific and the practical land use levels**).

Theme 2: Evaluating Rural Development and other support tools which are available

This theme covers agri-environment and other Rural Development support mechanisms; suckler cow premia (where they still exist); support measures for restoration; etc.
A **suggestion for practical follow-up to the workshop** is to examine differences between countries. Such analysis can be used to help members of the group in countries where support is not adequate to the requirements of grassland use for nature, by showing what is possible within the framework of the CAP Second Pillar or other structures. This can strengthen their position towards their ministry of agriculture and other competent authorities or interest groups.
This analysis of similarities and differences between countries can also be useful, at national and EU level, for the **mid-term review of the CAP, the debate on rural development after 2013** (which is starting now!)….The group could seek contacts and meetings with the European Commission and Parliament, national ministries, European-level farmer associations, national and European Rural Development Networks which must be set up according to Regulation 1698/2005, etc.
Connected to this, is the "**standardisation of grassland management**", a topic which came up several times during different presentations in the workshop. What does it mean? Because of the terms of agri-environment measures, there is a tendency for all farmers in a given district to mow on the same date, or employ the same stocking density when grazing, etc. The consequence is that grasslands tend to become extensive, but uniform across space and/or at certain critical points in time (e.g. a week after July 1 every hectare of grassland in a site has been mown short). This is not good for biodiversity. More flexibility would be preferable for landscape and biodiversity values (mowing pieces of the same land at different times, for instance, means more diverse structures). It is also to the advantage of the farmer, who is then better able to use his or her practical knowledge of the farm and of the right way to react to weather and other conditions.
As a **suggestion for practical follow-up to the workshop,** this point could be worked out in more detail, with examples and evidence, and transmitted to the competent authorities and political decision-makers. The issue of standardisation is connected to the support mechanism tools available within each country – e.g. the 200 different agri-environment measures in Austria mean that there is more likely to be a diversity of grassland management within a single district, as farmers have a bigger 'menu' to choose from, than in a country with only 5 or 10 measures.

Theme 3: Building up systems to make farming for landscapes and biodiversity economically sustainable

The workshop showed that in England, Sweden, Belgium and Germany there is parallel work being done on:

- selling meat and other produce from nature-oriented grassland farming directly to interested consumers,
- motivating consumers to buy it,
- investigating the health benefits of grassland meat,
- promoting regional economic cycles.

This could be built upon to:
1) Exchange experience on obstacles (such as restrictions on mobile slaughterhouses or the need to develop appropriate fodder for fattening) and successes (notably in building up consumer loyalty and extracting maximum value from grassland produce).
2) Through this exchange of experience, it would also be possible to make available best practice to others who want to start marketing initiatives in their countries.
3) Finally, obstacles which are connected to legislation or administrative regulations (such as the barriers to on-farm slaughter) or to fiscal policy (such as property taxes which are biased against high nature value grassland because they are based on assessed income from more productive land) could be drawn to the attention of the appropriate authorities and political bodies.
(**suggestion for practical follow-up to the workshop)**.

Such work is also very important to make grassland farming less dependent on subsidies. As much independence from subsidies as possible, is to the advantage of both farmers and conservationists, as it means that grassland farming for nature is less vulnerable to political and financial changes to Rural Development Programmes and other support systems.

Besides the marketing of meat and other animal produce, there are two other areas with potential to give economic returns to farmers engaged in managing high nature value grassland:

1. Tourism and recreation (farm holidays; provision of meat/milk etc to local hotels and restaurants; farm visits/on-farm catering/farm adventure tours/horse riding etc for people staying in nearby villages…)
2. Biomass-based energy – biogas from manure/fermented hay etc, but also wood chips, from clearing land of overgrowth, as a source of (heating) energy

These could be investigated further (**suggestion for practical follow-up to the workshop)**.

Practical suggestions on how to carry out the tasks proposed under the three themes:

Networking:
Continue **meetings and on-site excursions** as at Sigulda. Possibly with Bulgaria and Romania as priorities for the next meeting, so that best practice (in land use, agri-environment programming and marketing of produce) developed elsewhere can be directly exchanged with stakeholders in these two new EU member states where huge areas of high nature value grassland are under threat. Such a meeting in Romania or Bulgaria would also be an opportunity to work out, on the spot, realistic practical pilot projects, submittable for funding. This could be feasible if the meeting is held in a district with potential for grassland work at all levels (land management, stakeholder partnership, economic follow-up) - working groups and site visits would be the tools to elaborate a pilot project.

Contacting other grassland groups. Other groups exist which deal with grassland topics (Grazing Animals Project in UK, BirdLife's Farming for Life campaign, the European Grasslands Forum, the European Federation of Grasslands and Pastoralism). A meeting is planned in June 2008 by one of these groups.
The TRINET group should investigate them to see where there is overlap and where it is dealing with new themes. On the basis of this evaluation, a direct contact with these other groups must take place in a spirit of complementing each other's work. The Sigulda workshop report should be circulated to them. The TRINET group can ask to be invited, as group, to their seminars.

Pooling information and disseminating it:
Set up a **data base on grasslands** – not to collect large amounts of information but to display good examples of grassland management. This data base ought to be accessible through the Internet so that it can be used as a platform towards other organisations (authorities, interest groups, other stakeholders). Each member of the group invests a few hours to fill in its contribution, e.g. through a questionnaire, using the themes decided by the group.
The existing ManTra data base (Association for Traditional Rural Landscapes in Southwest Finland) could be used as the foundation for this data base of good examples. The data base could equally cover issues of monitoring, indicators of success, comparisons of support mechanisms, etc.
From this data base, a **handbook of best practice examples** of grazing and mowing could be produced.
The focus ought to be on innovative ideas and techniques, which should be prominent in the data base and the handbook. A small panel from within the group ought to be in charge of filtering out what is innovative ('peer review' system).

Set up a **distribution channel** so that each can see what others are doing, and those who need it or want it can get advice and help from those who have already built up more experience in a particular field. The Veeakker (Belgium) informatics system is offered as host for such a distribution channel for information exchanges, especially on themes such as meat quality, hay and fodder, marketing and business models.

It is by asking questions that one gets answers. Therefore, similar to the Grazing Animals Project 'Nibblers' system, an **e-mail based chat system** could be developed in which people pose questions, to an e-mail list, about grassland restoration, management, monitoring or marketing problems they encounter. They then get replies from others on this list. This could start within and between members of the group, and hopefully it snowballs as others join in.

Organisation and financing

The proposals for pooling and disseminating information in the previous section mean that a **dedicated website** for the group may be necessary, with links to e.g. the data base or the chatroom (if these are hosted by different members of the group). Such a dedicated website will make the group and its work known to the outside world.

However, some form of **coordination** will be needed to run the website and to bring together the contributions from the group. If a professional coordinator is required (as opposed to voluntary work) then funding will need to be found.

One way to obtain financing is to **elaborate a proposal for a group project** which can be funded, e.g. through Interreg, LIFE+, or through national funds. This implies looking for possible funds and finding out how they work. A lesson which is already clear from past Interreg experience in Estonia: do not have too many project partners. Instead, have a few bodies officially in charge of the project and bring the rest in as subcontractors or suchlike.

Whereas help between members of the group must be free, a consultancy fee ought to be charged if **technical assistance** requests are received from outside organisations (e.g. as a result of publicity through the website). Precise rules will then have to be made to ensure that the division of each such consultancy work between those members of the group technically able to deal with the particular task, is fair and correct. A part of the fees can be set aside to help finance the group network and its maintenance.