

PRESS RELEASE

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Seite | 1

Leibniz-Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF)

Study from Saxony shows:

Why some farmers make use of EU biodiversity funding – and others don't

This press release as PDF and pictures in print quality:

<https://www.zalf.de/en/aktuelles/Seiten/PB3/Studie-Sachsen-EU-Gelder-Umwelt-Naturschutz.aspx>

A new study published in *People and Nature* by the Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF) and the Landscape Conservation Association Northwest Saxony shows: Whether farmers participate in EU-funded measures for biodiversity conservation strongly depends on their personal contacts. The researchers interviewed 70 farms in Northwest Saxony – about one quarter of all farms in the region. The results indicate that financial incentives alone are not decisive. Instead, peer-to-peer exchange and advice from non-profit organizations play a central role. Farmers who feel supported within their networks and receive guidance from Non-profit organizations are much more likely to engage in biodiversity-friendly practices – shedding light on why existing programs have often had limited impact so far.

The European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) aims not only to secure affordable food but also to strengthen rural regions, mitigate climate change and protect biodiversity. To this end, it provides subsidies for practices such as flower strips, cover crops and diverse crop rotations. These measures are part of the so-called agri-environmental schemes (AES).

However, biodiversity continues to decline across Europe, for example in the case of insects that are essential for pollination. Understanding which factors influence farmers' participation in AES is therefore crucial. The study shows that not only financial incentives matter, but also who farmers talk to in their daily practice and from whom they receive advice. It highlights the importance of social exchange

among farmers and with advisory organizations – a factor that has often been overlooked in previous research.

Case study in Northwest Saxony

The study was conducted in the former district of Delitzsch in Northwest Saxony, an intensively farmed agricultural landscape dominated by arable cropping. Seventy farms were interviewed – about one quarter of all farms in the region. All participants are members of the Landscape Conservation Association Northwest Saxony, a non-profit association that promotes the preservation of diverse cultural landscapes and habitats for endangered plant and animal species. The researchers recorded with whom the farms regularly interact – whether with peers, associations, public offices or companies – and analyzed how these contacts influenced decisions on land management.

Seite | 2

Advice and peer support as key factors

The results show clear differences: Many farmers turn to large agribusiness companies for advice on production, while non-profit organizations and public offices are the main contacts for biodiversity-related questions. Farmers who seek advice from these organizations and feel supported by their peers are much more likely to participate in AES. Local peer support is particularly important: farmers are more inclined to join when their colleagues are already taking part.

“We were able to show that support through personal contacts is a decisive factor for participation,” says Dr. Maria Kernecker from ZALF. “If we can strengthen these exchange structures, more farms can be motivated to adopt conservation measures.”

The role of large and small farms

Large farms play a key role: they often combine experience in both intensive production and conservation measures and can act as role models when they share their knowledge. Smaller farms, by contrast, tend to orient themselves towards holdings of similar size rather than large neighbors – underlining again the importance of exchange between peer groups. Arable farms are less likely to participate in AES in contrast to mixed or grassland farms with meadows and pastures. This is because measures such as flower strips or diverse crop rotations are more difficult to integrate into arable farming systems and are perceived as potentially reducing yields. In addition, these farms often rely on advice from agribusiness companies, whose focus is more on production than on conservation.

Implications for policy and practice

The study concludes that large farms with experience in both production and conservation should be encouraged to share their knowledge with others. Non-profit organizations and public advisory services need to be strengthened so that they can provide integrated advice on both production and conservation. Finally,

the study highlights that peer-to-peer support among farmers is a decisive lever for increasing participation in biodiversity conservation programs.

Project partners:

- Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF)
- Landscape Conservation Association Northwest Saxony

Further information:

https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pan3.70183?medium=article&utm_source=researchgate.net

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Perennial fallow land boosts biodiversity in agricultural landscapes but poses financial challenges for farmers. Whether they take part in EU-funded nature and environmental protection schemes often depends on their networks. | The picture can be used for editorial purposes by stating the source: © Maria Kernecker / ZALF | Picture in printing quality: <http://www.zalf.de/en/aktuelles>

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About the Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF) in Muencheberg, member of the Leibniz Association:

Mission of ZALF is to deliver solutions for an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable agriculture –together with society.

As a contribution to overcoming global challenges such as climate change, food security, biodiversity conservation and resource scarcity, we develop and design crop systems, integrated in their landscape contexts that combine food security

with sustainability. Therefore, we process complex landscape data with a unique set of experimental methods, new technologies and models as well as socio-economic approaches.

ZALF research is integrated systems research: starting from processes in soils and plants to causal relationships on the field and landscape level up to global impacts and complex interactions between landscapes, society and economy. www.zalf.de