

## **Merit Based Income from Sustainable Land Management in Mountain Farming**

The history of European cultural landscapes demonstrates that many forms of agriculture benefit biodiversity and ecosystem services, support habitats conservation and improve environmental assets in general.

Due to trends of industrialization and urbanization in mountainous areas, high costs in primary production and low incomes from products, mountain farming in Europe is nowadays in a difficult situation. On the other hand mountain farms have intensified their production in certain areas in particular with keeping more animals, often achieved with imported concentrates. These trends cause a loss of ecosystem diversity with related services and also a general decline of rural areas in alpine regions. Cultural landscapes and cultural heritage disappear.



Hence regions and countries try to counteract this development by strengthening financial incentives for biodiversity conservation and landscape maintenance measures.

At the moment there is a change in the direct payment system in Switzerland and also EU member states are developing new agri-environmental schemes for the period 2014-2020. Pilot projects on outcome-orientated nature protection have been implemented in Switzerland and parts of Germany. This innovative system is handing over more responsibility to farmers for managing their land considering biodiversity and ecosystem services. The general idea is to agree with farmers on outcome and results in terms of quality/quantity of species and habitats, water, erosion or biodiversity. It is then up to farmers to manage their land in order to achieve the agreed outcomes.



The MERIT project will develop such innovative governance systems, procedures and tools for managing ecosystem services and public goods based on an analysis if merit based agro environmental programmes are more attractive for farmers than standard systems.

The project will focus on the potential to generate sustainable income for farmers having a high performance in land and ecosystem management. The aim is providing recommendations for enhancing vitality of mountain farming also regarding new sources for funding farms such as private food sector. It is also crucial to analyze during the project, how and in which way farmers can take over more responsibility for sustainable land management and management of ecosystem services.



The international project team consists of well established research organizations from Germany, Austria, France, Switzerland and Italy, additionally a Slovenian partner as observer. The team will exchange knowledge from previous experiences and projects as well as best practice examples and will develop an innovative system to reward mountain farms for their services to the public. Results will be gained through interdisciplinary research and through trans-disciplinary approach involving farmers, governments, stakeholders and NGOs.

MERIT is part of ERA-NET programme RURAGRI

The MERIT project is structured in following five Workpagages:

**WP1:**The overall objective of this WP is to make an inventory of existing agri-environmental programs, outcome oriented environmental measures and related educational programs as well as further initiatives in mountain regions of the involved countries. Relations to relevant ecosystems services and the provision of public goods will be evaluated.

**WP2:** One objective is, selection of five to eight pilot farms per country to evaluate the present income, motivation and qualification of farmers, involvement of women, knowledge about ecosystem services and ther land use and biodiversity management.

The other objective is, testing of innovative transferable merit based income systems on those pilot farms and analysis of economy and ecoloy effects on farm level.

**WP3:** The focus of this WP is to upscale the impact of innovative outcome orientated and merit based measures applied on farm level to a territorial/regional level. The upscaling process will be assessed with selected qualitative sustainability criteria on a regional scale.



**WP4:** In WP4 recommendations for implementing outcome oriented and merit based measures to governance structures will be evaluated. Administrative needs and farmers education to foster innovative management measures will be adapted.

**WP5:** In this WP the focus is to ensure effective communication with stakeholders policy makers and the public at all stages of the project. Trans-disciplinary exchange of knowledge between stakeholders, farmers and researchers will be established. It will also be ensured that research results are perpetuated beyond the lifetime of the project, and their impact in practice is extended.

**Partners:**

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IfIS - Institute for Rural Development Research (Germany)  
Eurac - European Academy of Bozen/Bolzano (Italy/South Tyrol)  
FiBL - Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (Switzerland)  
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