



Farming for Nature

Farmers acting as ambassadors for biodiversity and nature-friendly farming.

EAFRD-funded projects

Location: Upper Austria, Lower Austria, Tyrol, Vorarlberg, Salzburg, Carinthia, Austria

Programming period: 2014-2020

Priority: P4 – Ecosystems management

Focus Area: Biodiversity restoration, preservation & enhancement

Measures: M07 – Basic services & village renewal

Funding:	Total budget	226 192.55 (EUR)
	EAFRD	113 771.41 (EUR)
	National/Regional	112 421.14 (EUR)
	Private/Own funds	0 (EUR)

Timeframe: 2021 to 2023

Project promoter: Suske Consulting

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Summary

The mainstream approach to modern agriculture often focuses on the increased use of technology or using greater land area or larger farms that can feed more people. Agriculture that both provides an income for the farming family and promotes biodiversity is often presented as impossible. The aim of this project was to highlight the social benefits of innovative, sustainable approaches that can improve the diversity of our landscape and to raise public awareness of these approaches. This was done by promoting ‘ambassador’ farmers’ perspectives on biodiversity (along with their individual motivations for using this approach) to the general public and in particular to the farming community.

With short films, online and in-person events as well as promotion through social and traditional media, over 10 000 people were informed by the messages of the ambassador farmers.

Project results

- 10 490 views of short films and recordings on YouTube.
- 3 226 participants in the voting for the public’s favourite.
- 1 500 website views per month on average and 246 newsletter subscribers and over 60 articles in traditional and online media.
- 1 539 followers on Facebook and Instagram.
- 240 participants in the project’s events.
- Video material produced by the project used by the Rural Training Institute for training.
- Heightened public profile for the ‘biodiversity ambassador’ farmers.
- Extensive network of stakeholders (NGOs, representatives of agricultural authorities and nature conservation authorities, universities and higher education institutions) activated.
- Inclusion of young and female ambassador farmers providing positive role models for underrepresented groups showing that modern agriculture can be nature-friendly.



Key lessons and recommendations

- Exchange visits between different countries facilitate dialogue: in this project, a visit to Ireland promoted peer exchange on nature-friendly farming practices between Irish and Austrian farmers with good results. Expanding this exchange activity in the future is recommended.
- The enhanced public profile of the ambassador farmers led to greater social acceptance of their agroecological farming methods.
- Such projects require a broad support network of multipliers. Incorporating this element at the start of the project with stakeholder analysis and mapping is recommended.

Context

The project, Farming for Nature Austria, builds on experience from Ireland and was carried out in close cooperation with the Farming for Nature initiative in Ireland.

Ireland has been implementing result-oriented contract conservation measures for many years. Similar to Austria, the farms highlighted by the project are situated close to nature and often feature very innovative and interesting farming activities, which merit dissemination to a wider public.

A subsequent idea developed in Ireland in 2018: to promote the personal attitude of the farmer and thus highlight the innovative activities, a selected number of farmers were promoted as 'ambassadors for biodiversity'. Supported by a range of experts, these farmers make significant contributions to the formation of public opinion on agriculture and biodiversity. Suitable or eligible farmers are nominated by nominators throughout the country, pre-evaluated by a jury and showcased in a public vote. In Ireland this system of ambassadors has been working exceptionally well since 2018. There are already 90 ambassador farmers. The Irish project established contacts in Austria, Croatia and Lithuania at the end of 2020 to discuss using the approach elsewhere in Europe.

Objectives

The project aimed to communicate the personal attitudes and motivations of farmers with regard to biodiversity to the general public and in particular to the farming community. The objective was to increase social acceptance and raise awareness about innovative, sustainable approaches to improve landscape diversity.

As a result of this change in values, it is expected that the competence of farmers in the management of high nature value farmland will be increased and thus also the quality of the habitat in terms of nature conservation.



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Activities

The project was carried out in conjunction with similar projects in Ireland, Croatia and Lithuania. In 2023, a four-day exchange of experiences took place in Ireland with farmers, some members of the jury, government representatives and the project administration.

A website was set up to serve as a central point of contact for the project. Social media presences were created and maintained. About 50 people throughout Austria were recruited as nominators: people qualified in agrobiodiversity and in contact with many farmers. The nominations included a description of the farmers, their farm and a reason why this farm was nominated.

Each nominated farmer was researched and evaluated. Based on these evaluations, the project team prepared a pre-selection of ambassadors and submitted this proposal to the jury members. In 2021 and 2022, the jury selected at least eight shortlisted farmers from the pre-selected list. The shortlisted farmers were visited at their farms by the jury members.

Based on the farm visit and the discussions with the farmers, the jury selected five ambassadors per year to feature in short films. The aim was to authentically convey the attitude of the ambassadors regarding the preservation and promotion of biodiversity, to present interesting aspects of their farm and ultimately to motivate the viewers to take action. The short films were listed for a public vote on the project's website. The voting was advertised



via various media and lasted six weeks. The elected ambassadors and the winner of the public vote were then presented and awarded at an event.

All ambassadors received communication training in social media, including effective messaging. In addition to social media, traditional media outlets were also provided with the stories and farming practices of the ambassadors. As part of an online series of events on current topics, the ambassador farmers held 'kitchen table talks' in which short talks were given by the farmers, followed by a conversation between the participants and the farmers. The ambassadors also led several public farm walks.



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Main results

The main objective of the project was to introduce the wider farming community to the innovative approaches of the ambassador farmers. The direct benefit can be measured in the number of people reached by the project's activity. This includes: 10 490 views of short films and recordings on YouTube; 3 226 participants

in the public vote; 1 500 website views per month on average and 246 newsletter subscribers and over 60 articles in traditional and online media; 1 539 followers on Facebook and Instagram; and 240 participants in events.

The films produced as part of the project were used by the Rural Training Institute for further training purposes.

As a result of the project, the biodiversity ambassadors became known in regional and national media. Outside the project, there were repeated requests to individual ambassadors to speak in public on the topic of biodiversity-promoting agriculture.

Through the use of nominators, a large and diverse network of stakeholders (NGOs, representatives of agricultural authorities and nature conservation authorities, universities and higher education institutions) has been activated.

Three of the ambassador farmers are under 40 and one of them, Jakob Loidolt, is under 30. The young ambassador farmers are role models for young professional colleagues, showing that modern agriculture can also be carried out in harmony with nature. Four ambassador farmers are women, providing an incentive for women in agriculture, who are often more involved with biodiversity-promoting practices than male farmers.

Key lessons and recommendations

In order to promote peer exchange on nature-friendly farming practices, the project organised an exchange visit to Ireland for dialogue between Irish and Austrian farmers with good results. It is recommended that this exchange activity should be expanded in the future.

Initially, the innovative ideas of the ambassadors did not enhance their standing in the community. But, when the ambassadors became recognised biodiversity spokespersons and shared their opinion in regional, national and international contexts with their position supported by experts, local attitudes changed and scepticism turned into respect.

Involving a broad network from the start is therefore recommended. This means inviting participation from people who will later nominate the ambassadors, share their ideas and function as multipliers. Typical profiles here include farmers, foresters, chambers of commerce, experts, government authorities and media. Starting with stakeholder analysis and then consistently establishing and building contacts in the network is recommended.



Additional information:

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100076146124854>

Instagram:

https://www.instagram.com/farmingfornature_austria/

Youtube :

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsmJfNZWZh6kl3M7Ht-LmAw>