

Buckwheat is finally back!

Investing in the revival of Varaždin buckwheat and its processing into food and non-food products based on strong cultural connections.

EAFRD-funded projects

Location: Varaždin, Croatia

Programming period: 2014-2020

Priority: P6 - Social inclusion and local development

Focus Area: Diversification & job creation

Measures: M06 - Farm & business development

Funding: Total budget: 205 540 (EUR)

EAFRD: 42 500 (EUR)

National/Regional: 7 500 (EUR)

Private/own: 155 540 (EUR)

Timeframe: 02/04/2019 - 11/04/2023

Project promoter: Povedulić family farm

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Summary

The project “The Buckwheat is finally back” was inspired by the history of Gornji Kućan, near Varaždin in Croatia. To revive and tap into agricultural traditions, Dario Povedulic, owner of a family farm, had the entrepreneurial vision of growing business by expanding into buckwheat processing, and developing a diverse range of products. The main product, as well as the by-product of buckwheat processing, have multiple uses as food and non-food items. For example, husks fill seats, floor cushions, and toys, and can be used as fuel, whereas the buckwheat grain is pressed into flakes to fill pillows and is used as a food ingredient in gluten-free diets and in traditional Croatian cooking.

To implement the concept, investment was needed to purchase the appropriate equipment. A farm building also required updating to house the machinery for processing, and to create space for production and selling the new products.

Project results

- New and innovative food and non-food buckwheat products are now produced and sold, leading to an increase in customers and revenue for the business.
- One job was created, increasing the number of women employed locally.
- Energy consumption and production costs have been reduced, due to the new equipment.
- The farm has registered as a producer of “Varaždinska buckwheat” seeds, which enables it to sell the seed as a listed domestic/domesticated variety.

Key lessons and recommendations

Good networking and meaningful connections with all relevant institutions, experts and the scientific community were key to the success of the project.



Context

In Gornji Kućan, which is now a suburb of the city of Varaždin, Croatia, the local population used to grow, trade, and even get paid in buckwheat; newspapers record this occurring dating back to 1870. Since its foundation in 2012, the local “Hajdina Association” commemorates every year the traditional cultivation of buckwheat, and the way of life this entailed.

As members of the association and as a buckwheat grower, the Povedulić family farm decided to gain a certification as the first Croatian autochthonous buckwheat grower. The family’s main aim was to bring the crop “back home” to the region where it was once sown and processed.

By removing the husk from the buckwheat grain, a number of products can be created. The family planned to produce buckwheat flakes as fillings for pillows, and use the husks to fill toys, floor seating cushions, and other seats. Husks can also be used as fuel. Additionally, the husk-free grains constitute a gluten-free food product and ingredient, beneficial for many population groups.

For this purpose, the farm needed to purchase relevant processing equipment, and a farm building needed to be updated to house the equipment, as well as for finishing, storing, producing and offering the new buckwheat food products to customers.

The family farm also envisaged using the building for educational workshops, and to register a tasting room where the buckwheat products could be tasted by visitors. Funds were needed to cover this investment, and an EAFRD application was made.

Objectives

The main objectives of the project were to complete the construction of a building and to purchase equipment for processing buckwheat grains (i.e. separating the husks from the grains). The new processing facility allowed the farm to expand its product range to include new food (gluten-free buckwheat) and non-food products (pillows / cushions / seats).

The increased production aimed to increase the number of jobs in rural areas, particularly for women.

The project also sought to expand the knowledge of local consumers about agricultural production, and to support educational activities for younger generations so that they would learn how natural products are made, where food comes from, and how it is processed.

An additional objective was to find ways of reducing energy consumption, and thereby GHG emissions and waste generated from the production processes on the farm.

Activities

Project activities included:

- Construction works: The construction work for completing the building commenced in 2019 but was much delayed due to the pandemic. COVID-19 not only caused a scarcity in construction materials, and an increase in prices, but also a shortage in manpower. A request was therefore made to extend the deadlines of the project. This was approved, and the construction work was finally completed by the end of 2021. The technical inspection and use permit were issued on January 31, 2022.



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- Equipment purchase: A machine for separating the husks from buckwheat grains was procured, ordered and reserved through an advance payment in June 2019. However, the company that manufactured the machine was based in Ukraine, and when the war was declared in February 2022, further heavy delays of the project became unavoidable. Another request to extend the deadline for the completion of the project was made and approved in May 2022. Regular contact with the equipment manufacturer was maintained, and finally, in March 2023, the machinery could be delivered. The processing of buckwheat and production of new products could begin (stuffed pillowcases of various dimensions for play, rest, sitting, etc.).
- Project administration: In April 2023, all necessary documentation on the completion of the project was submitted, and a final Payment Request was made.



Across all stages of the implementation of the project, the project beneficiary co-operated with a range of stakeholders, such as the local community (the Association of Hajdina, fellow citizens), the advisory service, public administration bodies (Varaždin County), the scientific community (the Faculty of Agriculture in Zagreb, the Experiment Station in Šaštinovac, the Secondary Agricultural School “Arboretum Opeka”), and the Ministry of Agriculture.

Main results

- New and innovative food and non-food buckwheat products are now produced and sold, leading to an increase in customers and revenue for the business.
- One job was created, increasing the number of women employed locally.
- Energy consumption and production costs have been reduced due to the new equipment, whereby the energy for processing the buckwheat (heating and soaking) originates from its own by-product (i.e. the separated husks). This reduces the energy costs for non-renewables and is a more efficient consumption of energy.
- More than forty young people and eight professors have visited the farm through organised educational visits from Croatian primary and secondary schools, as well as from ERASMUS+ projects.
- The production of the new products triggered income generation for other local businesses (a local artist working on illustrations for pillowcases).
- New collaborations were created with the “Hajdina Association”, involving the use of the newly processed buckwheat in their traditional buckwheat dish “Kučanski Koščičjak”, which is protected by a trademark. Additionally, the “Vidovec Municipality Women’s Association”, now uses processed buckwheat to promote traditional and local cuisine. The farm also created links with the “Association of Coeliacs of NW Croatia” and with the scientific community in the study “from sowing to buckwheat on the plate”.

- The farm has registered as a producer of “Varaždinska buckwheat” seeds, which enables it to sell the seeds as a listed domestic/domesticated variety. The farm plans to process the buckwheat of other farmers, using the equipment purchased under the project.

Key lessons and recommendations

- In collaboration with the local population, the project was instrumental in reviving the traditions of the region. During the implementation period, successful connections were established with the local community to jointly achieve a good, meaningful common goal.
- Although the project was challenged by major world events, pursuing the project’s vision and maintaining contact with the relevant authorities and manufacturing businesses was immensely important.
- During project implementation and during the entire period of waiting for the equipment to arrive, the family farm continued working, and managed to register and list the buckwheat variety.

Quote

“The Pcedulić family farm has all the characteristics of a successful farmer, who, looking at the market situation, realises that without investing in the modernisation of production, he is losing pace with EU competition.”

Pcedulić family farm

Additional information:

www.opgpcedulic.hr

