

Weidewonne – supporting shepherd-led landscape management for the preservation of steppe grasslands in Northern and Central Thuringia

Creating a holistic model that addresses ecological, economic, and social factors for the sustainability of sheep farming and the preservation of traditional landscapes.

EAFRD-funded projects

Location: Northern and Central Thuringia, Germany

Programming period: 2014-2020

Priority: P4 – Ecosystems management

Focus Area: Biodiversity restoration, preservation & enhancement

Measures: M07 – Basic services & village renewal

Funding:	Total budget	247 088 (EUR)
	RDP support	222 379 (EUR)
	Private	2 909 (EUR)
	Other sources	21 800 (EUR)

Timeframe: 01/11/2016 – 31/07/2020

Project promoter: Naturstiftung David

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Summary

Within the framework of this CAP funded project, the 'Weidewonne' quality assurance brand for lamb meat has been consolidated and expanded in Germany's Thuringian Basin as well as its peripheral areas. During the project, regional lamb meat was marketed throughout the year. The number of sheep farms and animals has been stabilised (within the network), which is a requirement for the long-term preservation of open land habitats. By the end of the project, a total of 16 sheep farms and ten butcher stores with 40 branches were direct and permanent partners of Weidewonne. In addition to meat marketing, the project provided comprehensive support to shepherd farms in the Thuringian Basin. The consultation ranged from questions of funding and business development to the clarification of farm succession and new stable buildings.

One of the focal points of the consultation is the mediation of the various initiatives of state government to support sheep farms. In addition, the project team contributed to the discussion about the further development of the funding programmes (GAP/KULAP).

Project results

- Within the network, the number of sheep farms and animals has been stabilised, which is a requirement for the long-term preservation of open land habitats.
- By the end of the project, a total of 16 sheep farms and ten butcher stores with 40 branches were direct contributors and/or partners of Weidewonne.
- In addition to meat marketing, the project provided comprehensive support to shepherds in the Thuringian Basin.



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Key lessons and recommendations

- Overall, the initiative's flexible structure and proven outcomes make it a valuable template for tackling comparable issues in different geographical settings. The project's emphasis on sustainable practices and local empowerment offers a scalable model for addressing similar conservation and agricultural issues elsewhere.
- The inclusive engagement of farmers, ecologists, and communities ensures relevance across varying ecosystems.

Context

Grazing with sheep and goats is currently recognised as an effective management regime for the steppe grasslands, an area of dry and semi-dry grasslands and orchards in Thuringia. However, in Thuringia, as in the whole of Germany, the number of shepherd farms, and thus also of sheep and goats, is in decline, standing in sharp contrast to the sheep and goat grazing numbers that are deemed necessary and desirable for nature conservation. There are several reasons for this including poor economic conditions of the work. However, subsidies are granted for landscape management (such as the Thuringian programme for the 'Promotion of Environmentally Friendly Agriculture, Conservation of Cultural Landscape, Nature Conservation and Landscape Management' (KULAP)) designed to cover the costs of day-to-day operations. Other income opportunities can be limited.

The traditional production commodity, lamb, now plays only a subordinate role in the income of shepherd farms specialising in landscape conservation. Wool is often only a waste product. Due to the decreasing number of sheep and goats, more and more areas are grazed by fewer and fewer animals. As a result, grazing is less intensive and the good condition of the area desired from a nature conservation point of view can often only be achieved by mechanical maintenance. In the case of KULAP support, the shepherd farms are responsible for this. However, the farms often lack the necessary technology and experience. It is therefore in the interest of nature conservation to promote and support shepherds' long-term capacity for managing important habitats and landscapes.

The Thuringian Ministry of the Environment promoted the development of the brand 'Weidewonne' for the marketing of lamb meat products from Thuringia. The brand is based on natural landscape management through grazing and support for Thuringian sheep farms.

Objectives

The main aims of this project were to further develop the 'Weidewonne' brand in order to:

- Support natural landscape maintenance and the preservation of open land habitats that are important for nature conservation.
- Prevent a further decline in the number of sheep farms and the number of sheep and goats by improving the economic situation of sheep farms.
- Strengthen small, regional marketing chains of regional lamb in Thuringian butcher shops and nationwide via an online shop.

Activities

Activities to further develop the Weidewonne brand included:

- Promoting the sales structure – both local-regional and supra-regionally (under special consideration of regional slaughtering) to expand distribution channels for the marketing of lamb by reactivating small regional marketing chains, and by the online marketing of Weidewonne lamb via the project's homepage.
- Public relations – Weidewonne presented itself at trade fairs and other public events (14 events). In addition, the brand was presented at many professional events, conferences and excursions. Furthermore, the project team contributed to the discussion on the further development of the support programmes (e.g. KULAP) for the 2023-2027 CAP.
- Developing an online shop – consumers are given the opportunity to order Weidewonne lamb packages at any time and have them delivered once a month.
- Providing advice and support for sheep farms on a wide range of issues, e.g. applications for funding programmes. More than 200 consultations were held with sheep farms addressing questions of subsidies, business development, farm succession, new barn construction issues and more.
- Organising of and participating in events to promote networking and engage with other projects.

Project legacy and aftercare:

- Conducting annual surveys of the project areas worked on in the EU steppe grassland project.
- Providing advice on the aftercare of grazing areas, if necessary.

The stakeholders involved were the Thuringian Ministry for the Environment, Energy and Nature Conservation, the Lower Nature Conservation Authority, the Natura 2000 Network, the Landscape Conservation Association, the Sheep Breeders Association, sheep farms, butchers and agricultural cooperatives.



Main results

- 16 sheep farms and ten butcher stores with 40 branches are direct and permanent partners of Weidewonne. Some 24 branches are supplied via an intermediary.
- Over 2 000 lambs were marketed by Weidewonne sheep farms.
- More than 250 customers throughout Germany ordered Weidewonne lamb packages via the online store.
- The number of farms and thus of sheep and goats in Thuringia has been stabilised within the network which is a requirement for the long-term preservation of open land habitats.

Key lessons and recommendations

- The challenges in practice proved to be much more complex again in the actual implementation (supporting farms by designing lamb marketing), which is why more focus was placed on advising shepherd farms on all manner of topics: from applying for subsidies to farm succession.
- Sheep farms can be supported holistically: both in economic issues as well as with issues of further education, farm succession and the recruitment of skilled workers. These aspects are decisive for the successful continuation of a sheep farm.

“With their flocks, shepherds are important partners for nature-oriented landscape management. The unique areas of our cultural landscape can only be preserved with them.”

Anja Siegesmund, Die Grünen

“The lambs we market are exclusively sourced from local shepherds who have joined the marketing association ‘Weidewonne’. Weidewonne has set the goal of supporting local shepherds in sales. The label may only be used if regional origin, grazing on areas relevant to nature conservation, and species appropriate husbandry and feeding are guaranteed.”

Simone Hartmann, TZG Ernstroda

Additional information:

www.weidewonne.de/

www.naturstiftung-david.de/

<https://vimeo.com/naturstiftung>



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