



# HOW TO IMPROVE AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEME UPTAKE AND PROVISION

## National report Flanders

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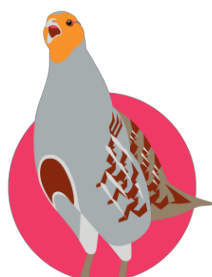
A large online survey of farmers across the North Sea Region was carried out as part of the PARTRIDGE project. A key element of PARTRIDGE is the need to improve the existing Agri-Environment scheme (AES) systems and widen their uptake by farmers throughout the North Sea area. The target group were arable farmers in areas where arable AE schemes was available. The survey was widely spread in Flanders through all Flemish partners: VLM directly emailed all farmers that could participate in schemes targeted for arable wildlife, Boerennatuur spread the survey through their weekly magazine, Hubertus Vereniging via their magazine, and Inagro through their weekly on-line newsletter. The full on-line survey consisted of 71 general and measure-specific questions, though respondents were not presented with all questions, only ones relevant to their situation. In Flanders 81 % of the 446 valid respondents were from a farmer and half of them considered farming as their main occupation, while 42 % of them had an AES for arable wildlife with VLM. 13 % of respondents were farmer-hunters. Below are the findings of the analysis of Flemish farmers/hunters that could encourage them to participate in AES.

### ADVICE

80% of the Flemish respondents wanted to have an advisor throughout the term of their AES agreement. They wanted to have advice on the option choice, on practical management of measures, financial implications, how the AE schemes benefit arable wildlife and on the legal aspects of AE schemes. Many Flemish farmers said that the personal relationship with the advisors was important so that advisors understand, and so that the farmer/advisor complement each other with one stating **“if we want advice, we can always call or email him/her.”** In Flanders 75% of respondents were not willing to pay for advice. 38% of farmers wanted to get advice once a year and similarly, 38% wanted to get advice when they requested it. However only a low number of respondents wanted to get advice only when they started AES and a few others wanted to get advice two or three times a year.

### OPTION CHOICE: DESIGN AND FLEXIBILITY

In general, most of the Flemish respondents wanted more flexibility, especially on pesticide use, mowing, sowing date, seed mixtures, AES location, contract length and types of options. The control of pernicious weeds, with the possibility to change AES location and a flexible mowing date, was a concern for most farmers. Due to climate change and changing weather conditions most farmers suggested that the sowing date should be more flexible, while also having the possibility to re-sow. 70 % of the respondents thought that it should be possible to have a derogation from the rules and to adjust sowing dates when the ground is affected by drought or unusually wet conditions and/or to solve invasive pest or serious weed issues.



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In Flanders most of the farmers wanted to have package deals (for example several options designed to help Grey Partridges) as AES options. They also wanted to have more AES options for insects such as pollinators, soil health, and soil biodiversity. They also wanted to have winter songbird feeding - payment for providing supplementary food (seeds) either spread on the ground or through feeders over winter. Farmers suggested that it should be possible to divide large fields with hedges combined with food crops and regular agriculture with field margins with hunting ban on those plots, which would be especially beneficial as far as partridges are concerned.

### **CONTRACT FLEXIBILITY**

Different Flemish farmers thought that flexibility of the location of options is necessary to better provide for wildlife, and in relation to the combination of natural enemies in certain crops. They didn't want boundaries to be the only areas targeted for arable fauna, they wanted to be able to sow flower mixtures and other AES crops everywhere. This will be of great benefit to the wildlife in that area.

60 % of the farmers thought that the length of contracts should be flexible with particular emphasis given on the duration of contract. However other opinions of farmers were also noticed, for example the nature of the contracting parties. 28% of farmers wanted to have annual contracts, 45% wanted shorter length contracts of less than 5 years and 15% of them wanted medium length contracts between five to ten years old. They also wanted an annual contract, purely and only to be able to provide flexibly if necessary.

### **PREDATION MANAGEMENT**

62% of the Flemish farmers thought that more predation management should be available e.g. fencing of bird nests or lethal control, while 13% of farmers thought that it was not necessary. However, 26% did not have any opinion on this. In Flanders farmers also thought that fencing for nest protection and an increase in the width of strips (to at least 20 meters) should be paid for through AE schemes.

### **LEGISLATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN**

Flemish farmers wanted fewer inspections or other means of control, more self-assessment instead of inspection, a greater possibility to join AE schemes in their own region, less administration, lower penalties, and no long-term legal restrictions when the AE schemes contract comes to an end. All these elements would convince more farmers to join AES. Also, if they could trust the government more, if land in AE schemes could count towards their greening requirement (or enhanced conditionalities), and if they were assured that the AES location would not receive an unwanted nature designation, then they would more likely be persuaded to take up AE options for arable farmland.

### **REMUNERATION**

Most of the farmers in Flanders suggested that the society (tax payers) should pay for AES, as well as partly from EU and National Government. A lot of Flemish farmers indicated that nature organizations should support and finance AE schemes. If everyone wants a better living environment, everyone must be willing to contribute. Some farmers also thought industry should contribute funds, with many suggesting that there should be a polluter pays principle.

Several aspects should be included in the calculation of the payment. In Flanders farmers thought income forgone and effort required to establish and maintain the habitat and monetary bonus should be included in the calculation of payment. However, they also thought habitat quality, type of farm, rent and result-based payments (how much nature the farmer delivers) should also be included in the payment calculation.

