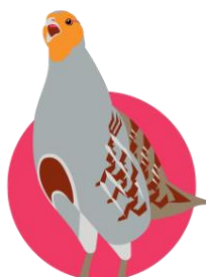




HOW TO IMPROVE AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEME UPTAKE AND PROVISION

National report the Netherlands



Interreg
North Sea Region
PARTRIDGE

European Regional Development Fund



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This report has been compiled by the PARTRIDGE project; an Interreg North Sea Region project running from mid-2016 to mid-2023, with twelve European partners in six participating countries (Belgium-Flanders, Denmark, England, the Netherlands, Germany-Lower Saxony, and Scotland). For more information about the project please visit northsearegion.eu/partridge.

A key element of PARTRIDGE is the need to improve the existing Agri-Environment Scheme (AES) systems and widen their uptake. As part of the PARTRIDGE project, a large online survey across the North Sea Region was carried out in spring 2021 on farmers' willingness to engage in AES. The survey's target group was arable farmers in areas where arable AES are available. This national report is in addition to the international report and provides more detail on specific outcomes from the Dutch respondents.

SURVEY DISSEMINATION

In the Netherlands, the survey was promoted through blogs, newsletter articles, press releases and social media posts, with the assistance of the largest farmers union *LTO Nederland*, the organization of farmers' collectives, *BoerenNatuur*, two national hunters associations, *Koninklijke Nederlandse Jagersvereniging* and *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Jacht en Grondbeheer*, and the two largest agricultural magazines *Boerderij* and *NieuweOogst*, with a combined estimated outreach of over 3 million readers.

RESPONDENTS CHARACTERISTICS

The total number of Dutch respondents was 517, out of 1703 for the international survey as a whole. Out of these 517 respondents, 398 forms were valid (i.e. correctly completed). Unfortunately, due to the wide dissemination of the survey, a relatively large proportion of the respondents were not in an area or situation that allowed them to participate in the Dutch AE scheme. Thus, out of 398 correct forms, only 159 respondents were able to participate in AES and only their results were included in the analysis for this report. Of these, 37.5% were farmer, 32.5% hunter and 19% both farmer and hunter, leaving 11% as neither.

The age distribution of the Dutch respondents was similar to that of the international respondents, i.e. 12% younger than 40 years, 19% between 40 and 49 years, 41% between 50 and 64 years and 18% of 65 years or above.

MOTIVATION

Dutch respondents list many motives for participating in AES, the top 3 being to help biodiversity, the sense of 'doing good' and to improve the image of agriculture. This last option only scores higher in Scotland. Shooting interests score relatively low, certainly compared to Denmark, England and Scotland.

AES OPTIONS

The AES-options farmers chose vary significantly between the different countries included in the survey. Dutch farmers are predominantly engaged in unharvested cereals and supplementary overwintering food (both just under 50%), followed by permanent wildflower cover and cultivated uncropped margin for rare arable flora (both around 25%). This greatly differs from other countries. In Belgium, England and Denmark floristically enhanced grass margins score around 80% (only around 15% in the Netherlands). Rotational wild bird cover and stubbles with cover crops were unpopular as well in the Netherlands, scoring high in most other countries.

Respondents are interested in taking up additional AES-options, generally in the same order of preferences as the options already in place, except for a clear preference for additional predator management measures. In all countries farmers would welcome lethal legal predator control, especially in Scotland and England (50%) followed by the Netherlands (30%). Planting habitat blocks to minimize predation risk scores lowest in the Netherlands and Belgium.

FLEXIBILITY

Farmers in all countries included in the survey would welcome more flexibility on controlling pernicious weeds and on changing the location of certain measures on their farm (i.e., the possibility to switch between fields when applying AES-options). More flexibility on applying manure ranks a clear third in the Netherlands and lower elsewhere.

Dutch respondents prefer more flexibility in the timing (fixed dates) for mowing and sowing of measures, respectively by 30% and 40% of the respondents. Compared to their colleagues in other countries, few farmers in the Netherlands would like more flexibility on the use of mown grass (14%) and the ability to use fertilizer on the measures (10%).

Almost 50% of the Dutch farmers, more than anywhere else, favor more flexibility with respect to designing their own seed mix. The cost of the seed mix ranks significantly lower in the Netherlands than in all other countries.

ADVICE

Advice on AES is seen as useful, in the Netherlands especially on option choice, practical management and financial implications. Compared to the other countries, Dutch farmers are considerably less interested in environmental advice. Advice on benefits to wildlife only score high in England and Scotland (around 75%) and much lower elsewhere (about 40% in the Netherlands). Most Dutch and Flemish farmers (resp. 65% and 70%) are not willing to pay for advice. This is a (considerably) higher percentage than in the other countries.

The system of farmers collectives being responsible for the implementation of AES is specific for the Netherlands. It is therefore not surprising that Dutch farmers prefer to get advice from their farmers collective, and not – as is the case in most other countries – from governmental advisors.



'Birds and bees should just be part of farming. I very much enjoy seeing them on my fields. That's why I plant new PARTRIDGE hedges and flower blocks on my land.'

Kobus Kolff, farmer and hunter Oude Doorn demo site, The Netherlands

REMUNERATION

The preference for annual, short, medium or long-term contracts is more evenly distributed in the Netherlands than in other countries. Compared to their colleagues elsewhere, a relatively large proportion (15%) of Dutch farmers is interested in long-term AES contracts. Dutch and English respondents prefer to have more options for predator management, more so than in the other countries.

Income forgone, effort required to establish and maintain the habitat and a monetary bonus are the main aspects farmers feel should be included in the calculation of the payment. Habitat quality is only mentioned by 5% of the farmers in the Netherlands and 7% in Belgium, compared to around 15% in the other countries.

OBSTACLES

A series of reasons are given by farmers for not taking up AES, the main being too many inspections, too much administration, a fear of unwanted nature designation, lack of flexibility in contracts and management options and low payments. Evidence showing that AES deliver more wildlife would persuade fewer than 40% of Dutch and Belgium farmers to take up AES compared to around 75% of the farmers elsewhere.

Farmers in all countries indicate they need advice when entering AES. In most countries, including the Netherlands, advice is needed on a wide range of issues, including option choice, practical management of measures, financial implications, legal aspects and how AES benefit wildlife (all mentioned by at least 60% of the respondents).

CONCLUSIONS

Participation in AES is generally considered as positive for biodiversity and for the image of agriculture by most Dutch respondents, and there is a general interest in taking up more AES options.

The Dutch government could increase the uptake of AES options by increasing the available budgets for AES and by improving the available advice to farmers on participation in the AES scheme, either directly or by supporting the agricultural collectives to provide this kind of advice.

Providing more simple AES options in short contracts will allow more farmers to step in into the AES system and become familiar with the management of AES options. It is the general experience that farmers, once in the AES system, become more confident and positive in participation and are willing to increase the uptake of more AES options.

