

# Farmland birds and agri-environment schemes in the New Member States

A Report for the RSPB



September 2006

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# **Farmland birds and agri-environment schemes in the New Member States**

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### Important

**Unless other sources are cited the information in this chapter is from a questionnaire survey of local experts in spring/summer 2006, when the proposals for the 2007-13 programmes were still being developed.**

CREX is an independent consultancy owned by Clunie Keenleyside and specialising in European agricultural, environmental and rural development policy. She has worked on a wide range of rural land management issues in the UK and other EU countries including Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and the Czech Republic. Before setting up her own business in 2002 she held senior advisory posts in the government countryside agencies in England and Wales.

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## Glossary

Annex 1 birds	Species which are the subject of special habitat conservation measures under Article 4.1 of the Birds Directive
Axis 1	EAFRD rural development support for improving the competitiveness of the agriculture and forestry sector
Axis 2	EAFRD rural development support for improving the environment and the countryside
Axis 3	EAFRD rural development support for improving the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy
Axis 4	EAFRD rural development support for Leader
BVG	Biologically valuable grasslands
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (Council Regulation 1698/2005)
IBA	Important Bird Area
LFA	Less Favoured Area
LU or LSU	Livestock unit
Natura 2000	European Union network of sites designated by Member States under the Birds Directive and Habitats Directive.
NMS	New Member State
PECBMS	Pan European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme, a partnership involving the European Bird Census Council, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, BirdLife International and Statistics Netherlands that aims to deliver policy relevant biodiversity indicators for Europe.
RDP	Rural Development Plan
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SOP	Sectoral Operational Programme
SPA	Special Protection Area designated under the Birds Directive
UAA	Utilised Agricultural Area
WFD	Water Framework Directive

## Commentary by BirdLife International

Central, Eastern and Southern Europe harbour an important biodiversity resource, the direct result of having retained large areas of High Nature Value (HNV) habitat, especially low-intensity farmland. In particular, the region is home to a disproportionate share of the EU's farmland birds, including the globally threatened Aquatic Warbler and Corncrake, and other species of conservation concern, such as the Roller, Lesser Grey Shrike and Great Bustard. Farmland birds are important, not just for their own sake, but for what they tell us about the health of the countryside. BirdLife International is striving to ensure the EU's New Member States (NMS) do not experience the same dramatic decline in these and other once-common farmland birds and other wildlife that the EU15 have witnessed over the last 20-30 years; agri-environment schemes are a key tool for achieving this.

This wealth of biodiversity is at risk, not only from agricultural intensification, but also from land abandonment, as the region continues to adapt its agricultural infrastructure and management in response to EU policies and historical events. The mixed, traditionally farmed landscape and HNV grasslands on which these species flourish is highly threatened, and more sustainable rural policies – particularly a reformed CAP – could help address this.

Although large areas have been designated for protection under the EU's Natura 2000 network, the region is now entering a phase that brings with it new environmental pressures. The NMS are in the midst of finalising their rural development programmes for 2007-2013, and we can assume that the focus and funding of these will reflect the region's desire to increase farm competitiveness and bolster rural economies. These countries should demonstrate that any such move is compatible with the protection of biodiversity. In particular, the proper design, targeting, implementation and monitoring of agri-environment schemes and other rural development measures is fundamental to supporting and making low-input farming commercially viable, vital for the conservation of farmland birds and other wildlife. Meeting this challenge also critically depends on ensuring sufficient funds for doing so.

Despite the requirement to spend a higher proportion of the rural development budget allocation on land management, the continued obligation to make agri-environment schemes available, and the EU strategic priority to integrate biodiversity and preservation of HNV farming systems, there are no guarantees that sufficient funds will be targeted to adequately conserve and enhance biodiversity resources. This problem is compounded by the fact that there is little guarantee that any existing agri-environment schemes will be improved, with funds directed at schemes likely to offer little benefit to birds. The few effective schemes that do exist will continue to suffer from a lack of uptake, primarily due to competing objectives and insufficient interest.

Agri-environment schemes have been criticised for their value for money and effectiveness in achieving biodiversity targets, particularly by the European Court of Auditors. Such schemes have been applied in Europe long enough to draw lessons from their design and implementation. Indeed, this report makes the case that well-designed agri-environment schemes are both possible and essential to meet EU commitments; and need proper funding as we move forward into the 2007-2013 programming period. The European Commission has a responsibility to ensure the new rural development programmes in the NMS adequately address the needs of biodiversity and employ EU funds in the most effective ways. For some time, BirdLife Partners have been working with Agriculture Departments throughout Europe to help develop schemes that address biodiversity decline, and to ensure they deliver on their objectives and demonstrate value for money. This progress must continue unabated.

A fundamental difference exists between the way the agricultural sector has developed across the EU15 and what we know to be the more desirable model for developing sustainable agriculture, and the NMS are not yet committed to making the policy mistakes of the EU15. The new rural development programmes should deliver a more sophisticated, integrated and sustainable policy framework resulting in environmental, social and economic benefits that reach far beyond the farm sector. This report suggests that this is not being

recognised: in the rhetoric around the role of the CAP in accession, or in the design of rural development programmes and, particularly, agri-environment schemes. Whilst some progress is being made, it reinforces BirdLife's argument for introducing a coherent funding package to meet the needs of HNV farming communities, the foundation of which is a tiered approach to agri-environment schemes, with general options helping common species and ecosystems, and specialist measures targeted at rare species. The report clearly shows that without properly designed and targeted agri-environment schemes, the delivery of specialist training and advice for farmers, and sufficient funds and competitive payments rates, many species will be pushed ever closer to the brink of extinction.

Evidence suggests that the recovery of farmland bird populations in the NMS is beginning to show a worrying reverse. The opportunity to stem this trend and safeguard the region's wildlife will be missed unless there are significant changes to the draft proposals of the NMS. This is a matter of concern, not just for the NMS, but for the EU as a whole, as conservation of farmland birds in the NMS will be critical to achieving EU objectives for Natura 2000 and halting biodiversity decline by 2010.

Marcus Gilleard  
Agriculture Policy Officer  
RSPB

# Executive Summary

## *Methodology*

This study reviews the contribution of existing and planned agri-environment schemes to the management of farmland habitats for birds in nine of the new Member States - Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia; commissioned by the RSPB and undertaken in the Summer of 2006, it is intended to contribute to the design and implementation of effective agri-environment measures in the 2007-13 rural development programmes.

The study attempts to answer four questions about the 2007-13 rural development programmes in these nine new Member States:

- *Are bird conservation priorities adequately addressed in the **objectives**, targeting and funding of the RDP?*
- *Is the **design** of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for bird conservation priorities?*
- *What are the barriers to **delivery** of appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures where they are needed for bird conservation priorities?*
- *What is the **contribution of other CAP policies** to the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for bird conservation*

The EAFRD measures for 2007-13 were still being developed during the course of the study. Published information was used where available, but the main sources of information were self-completion questionnaires used to collect two sets of data for each Member State during Summer 2006. The first questionnaire was completed by local ornithological experts involved in giving advice to government, the second by local experts familiar with both agri-environment policy and implementation, who came from a variety of backgrounds - research, consultancy and non-governmental organisations.

## *Background to the implementation of EU policy in the New Member States*

The social, institutional and political context for the new Member States' first RDPs in 2004, and the scale and nature of their rural development problems, were very different from those faced by the older Member States in 1992. The intensive large scale farming systems of the Soviet era had collapsed, leading to rural unemployment, increasing reliance on semi-subsistence farming and lack of investment in rural infrastructure and services. Traditional markets were no longer available and livestock numbers dropped dramatically. Major restructuring of agriculture followed, but these adjustments were not completed at the time of accession, and during the next programming period there will be new environmental pressures, as farm incomes rise and farmers are more able to invest in intensification. Adapting agricultural infrastructure and management to meet EU standards, particularly on water quality and food safety, is likely to threaten some of the more traditional high nature value farming systems.

Although agri-environment schemes remain compulsory for 2007-13 there is no guarantee that existing habitat management schemes for birds will be improved, or will even continue.

## *Significance of farmland bird populations of the nine New Member States*

Farmland birds are still in steep decline across Europe, and the new Member States hold a disproportionate share of the EU25 populations of many farmland birds. Although some of these populations began to recover in the early 1990s, when the intensity of farming dropped, this trend has changed as production intensifies - for example, between 2000 and 2003 the Farmland Bird Index declined by 21% in the Czech Republic, 13% in Poland and 3% in Latvia.

Of the twenty Annex 1 species identified by BirdLife International as suitable targets for agri-environment support, sixteen are already in unfavourable population status in Europe, and ten have a disproportionate share of their EU population within the new Member States.

Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are an international network of critical sites for the conservation of birds. The nine new Member States have a total of more than 3 million hectares of farmland in IBAs. Within a year of accession seven of the nine new Member States had designated almost all their IBAs as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the Birds Directive 79/409 but Cyprus and Poland intend to designate only about half of their proposed SPAs.

#### *Threats to farmland habitats for birds*

Abandonment and intensification are the two most significant threats to farmland bird habitats in the new Member States and are a result of the continuing adjustments to the huge economic and social impact on the farming sector of the political changes in the 1990s. Now the CAP and other EU policies are providing new opportunities and drivers for structural and land management changes, which will continue for some years to come.

In all Member States mixed traditional farming is at risk, initially from abandonment because the farms are small, labour intensive and unprofitable, but also increasingly from intensification as governments support restructuring of the industry and farmers take advantage of CAP direct aids and new markets. Investment in land, machinery and the use of agro-chemicals will increase, and traditionally managed high nature value farming systems are at risk of being 'consolidated', taken over by larger farms and managed more intensively. Abandonment of grasslands is a major threat in all nine Member States, mainly caused by the decline in numbers of livestock, low productivity of unimproved grasslands and lack of demand for poor quality hay produced from wet grasslands (formerly used for animal bedding). Intensification of production on arable land is perceived as a significant threat in most Member States, leading to increases in monocultures, use of fertilisers, pesticides and mechanisation and loss of the remaining natural vegetation between plots. Intensification of management (with increased use of pesticides) is also the main threat to perennial crops, together with the loss of the remaining natural vegetation; in Hungary traditional orchards are at risk of conversion to other uses.

#### *Farmland birds - policy context and drivers*

A robust EU policy framework now underpins the use of agri-environment measures for habitat management for birds, especially on areas of high nature value farmland. The specific emphasis in the Commission's guidelines on the preservation and development of high nature value farming systems, and on reversing biodiversity decline, is an important argument for giving high priority within Axis 2 to agri-environment measures for habitats used by farmland birds.

Agri-environment schemes will be the key to Member States achieving their Natura 2000 legal obligations to preserve, maintain or re-establish farmland habitats for birds, inside and outside SPAs (including special conservation measures for the habitats of Annex I birds). Under the Habitats Directive, Member States must encourage the management, in the wider countryside, of landscape features that are of major importance for wild fauna and flora, as a means of improving the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network.

The new EU Action Plan for biodiversity has specific actions relevant to Member States' design and delivery of agri-environment schemes for 2007-13. These cover EAFRD funding for all three Axes; specific measures for high nature value farmland; cross-compliance; environmental legislation; farmers' advisory, training and extension services for biodiversity management; review of LFA policy to make it more biodiversity friendly; and evaluation of the impact of EAFRD measure on biodiversity. If properly implemented, all of these actions are likely to benefit farmland birds.

The management of farmland bird habitats in the new Member States is likely to be a critical factor in meeting the requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives and delivering the EU's commitment to reversing biodiversity decline by 2010, because these nine countries

hold a disproportionate share of EU25 populations of many farmland birds. Farmland bird populations provide a useful indication of the quality and condition of farmland habitats and the Farmland Bird Index (FBI) is likely to be a key measure of the impact of Axis 2 measures on biodiversity.

Given the strength of these policy drivers we could expect one of first priorities for 2007-13 agri-environment schemes and other Axis 2 funding to be support for the restoration and management of high nature value farmland bird habitats where these still exist, followed by provision for the needs of birds in all types of farmland.

#### *Member States' proposals - objectives, targeting and funding of agri-environment schemes*

In 2004-06 only a small proportion of agri-environment funding and schemes were targeted at farmland birds, despite expertise in scheme design and experience of pilot projects in some of the new Member States. The majority of agri-environment funding in 2004-06 has been allocated to 'shallow' schemes, which are easy to implement and popular with farmers but provide relatively few benefits for birds. Respondents to the survey also pointed out that opportunities have been missed to 'build in' benefits for farmland birds to other agri-environment schemes, and to LFA payments (which had, in six Member States, a larger share of the RDP budget than agri-environment schemes).

Many of the national strategies and draft 2007-13 plans make reference to protecting Natura 2000 sites, and improving biodiversity in rural areas, but very few have specific objectives for farmland birds and where they do it is for key threatened species (such as the Corncrake) rather than for farmland birds in general.

Although all the Member States are likely to allocate more than one third of their EAFRD funding to Axis 2 (and the Czech Republic and Slovakia plan to allocate more than half) several respondents to our survey expressed concerns that not enough Axis 2 funding would be allocated to measures targeted at birds, even within IBAs and other high nature value areas. Budget allocations within the agri-environment programmes were not available at the time of writing, but in many Member States the emphasis on simple horizontal schemes may well continue in 2007-13.

#### *Member States' proposals - design of agri-environment schemes*

Design of agri-environment schemes includes setting management prescriptions, uptake targets and payment rates. Schemes need to be carefully designed to meet all the management needs of birds, and in IBAs and other high nature value areas management at landscape scale is likely to be required, involving most of the farmland in the area. In the wider countryside it may be sufficient to adopt low-input management on only a proportion of the farm (e.g. grass strips on intensive arable land).

It is clear from this study that efforts were made in the current RDPs in several (but not all) Member States to prioritise, design and implement agri-environment schemes for birds, with some notable successes but also significant failures and missed opportunities. Some of these problems were the result of lack of experience or resources, and the agri-environment schemes during 2004-06 have been, in some countries, effectively a pilot programme. There are striking differences among the Member States in their response to this experience. Some are refining and extending agri-environment measures for birds but others are proposing to abandon rather than improve the limited bird conservation measures now available.

Some of the most successful agri-environment schemes for birds have been designed by environmental experts and delivered with the expert assistance (sometimes unpaid) of staff in protected areas and environmental NGOs - for example the high nature value area schemes in Hungary, targeted at Great Bustard, Corncrake and other farmland birds.

Payment rates are critical to the success of every agri-environment scheme. Well-designed measures may fail completely if farmers perceive the payments as too low to cover their real costs; over-generous payment rates may draw funding away from other schemes, if applications are not screened for environmental benefit. Proposals for 2007-13 suggest that

Member States are gaining experience in setting payment rates but, if agri-environment measures targeted at birds are to be competitive with other measures, some flexibility will be required to allow adjustments in the early years when the profitability and costs of individual farms and whole sectors will be changing in response to new markets and to investment supported by other EU funds.

There is surprisingly little indication that Member States will use non-productive investments to support habitat management for farmland birds e.g. for removing invasive scrub from grassland, creating small ponds and scrapes, erecting fencing to control grazing in nesting areas and perching posts for raptors.

To assess the contribution of Axis 2 measures to the conservation of Annex 1 farmland birds and to the Göteborg biodiversity target for 2010, Member States will need both quantified targets for bird population changes and adequate monitoring arrangements. So far there is little evidence of Member States setting quantitative targets for the impact on farmland bird populations, and few seem to have plans for evaluating the impact of agri-environment schemes on biodiversity (except in Estonia where a biological evaluation programme is in place).

#### *Member States' proposals - delivery of agri-environment schemes*

A major cause of failure of 2004-06 agri-environment schemes in seven of the Member States has been lack of biodiversity expertise in farm advisory services, and there is a similar problem with paying agency staff in all Member States. This is likely to have a damaging multiplier effect on scheme promotion, provision of technical information, advice and training for farmers, control measures and farmers' attitudes. In Estonia and Hungary farmers are very supportive of agri-environment objectives but in other countries, including Cyprus, there is a prevalent view among farmers and advisers that agri-environment schemes are just another form of subsidy. There appears to be a correlation between farmers' wildlife knowledge and their use of environmentally friendly management, and in some Member States farmer training is a compulsory part of agri-environment contracts.

Lack of administrative capacity and experience has contributed to difficulties and delays in delivering agri-environment schemes in some Member States, and in one case payments to farmers have been repeatedly delayed because national co-financing was not available at the time payments were due.

Delivering Natura 2000 management plans in many IBAs may need a combination of Natura 2000 compensation payments (for habitat protection) and agri-environment payments (for additional habitat management). Where Natura 2000 regulations are not in place at the beginning of the 2007-13 programme, agri-environment schemes will initially have to cover both protective and management roles, requiring the flexibility to make adjustments between the two types of payment during the life of 2007-13 programmes.

In many areas the lack of grazing livestock continues to be a major problem for high nature value grassland management. Some of the more successful high nature value measures were implemented by absentee owners who were not dependent on the produce of the farm to make a living, but were willing to manage the land for agri-environment payments. Some farmers with livestock have been unable to join agri-environment schemes because they share grazing rights on extensively managed land.

#### *Member States' proposals - contribution of other CAP policies to delivery of agri-environment schemes*

The potential for GAEC cross-compliance either to complement or to work against the objectives of agri-environment schemes does not seem to have been recognised fully. Not all GFP conditions will be transferred to GAEC, although some would be of particular benefit to birds, such as mowing grassland from the middle outwards, and providing grass buffer strips along watercourses. The survey highlighted concerns about poor enforcement of GFP and about failures of cross-compliance to prevent conversion of high nature value permanent

pasture (including Natura 2000 sites) or to protect trees, bushes and other small landscape elements important to birds.

Despite the Commission's guidelines stressing the need for internal and external cohesion of EAFRD measures, our survey produced examples of both Axis 1 and Axis 2 measures that threaten the survival of bird habitats which are targeted by agri-environment schemes in the same programme.

It is clear from the response to our questionnaire survey and our analysis of the threats to farmland bird populations that reversing the decline in populations of Annex 1 and other farmland birds requires agri-environment schemes delivered as part of a coherent programme of EAFRD rural development support from all three Axes targeted specifically a high nature value farming systems, with objectives, schemes and delivery mechanisms fully integrated. This level of integration will be a major challenge for Member States, and it is not clear if any of them even see it as a priority.

#### *Conclusions and recommendations*

The four key elements of a coherent programme of EAFRD support for habitat management for farmland birds, across all three Axes, are:

- **Securing long term use of the land for farming:** abandonment and change to non-agricultural use are the main threats. High nature value farmland can be protected by regulation, controls on conversion of permanent pasture and by screening applications for afforestation support.
- **Protecting the spatial structure of the farmed landscape:** farmland birds and other groups of highly mobile animals frequently depend on a combination of habitats and structural features within the landscape, often at a scale larger than that of individual plots or farm units. Even if agri-environment measures are available for individual elements of the mosaic, these alone are unlikely to offer sufficient protection at the landscape scale important to birds, and should be supported by regulations and GAEC cross-compliance.
- **Supporting low-input extensive farming systems:** optimum farmland habitat management for birds will often require supporting extensive low-input systems which are rapidly becoming uneconomic and are now (or will soon be) threatened by intensification or abandonment. Agri-environment measures can make a significant contribution but it will also be necessary to integrate them with other measures from all three Axes, in a special programme targeted at the specific economic, environmental, and social needs of each of these farming systems. For example:
  - **Axis 1:** improving working conditions and profitability of high nature value farms through carefully designed support for semi-subsistence farming and investment; providing biodiversity advice, information and training for farmers; adding value to products of high nature value farms; fostering co-operation between producers and processors to develop new products, processes and technologies; supporting processing and marketing; setting up producer groups and food quality schemes; and helping farmers meet food standards. It is essential that all such support is designed to ensure that none of the biodiversity benefits of the particular high nature value farming system are lost.
  - **Axis 2:** paying farmers for management of benefit to birds, not covered by agri-environment habitat schemes, by using Natura 2000 or LFA compensation payments to protect semi-natural farmland habitats from damage and intensification; using non-productive investments to clear scrub from grasslands, create small wetlands and provide nesting and perching sites; supporting indigenous breeds of grazing livestock and local varieties of crops; and encouraging organic (biological) farming.
  - **Axis 3:** preparing management plans for high nature value farmland and investing in maintaining, restoring and upgrading these areas; promoting environmental awareness; helping farming communities to benefit economically from high nature value farming systems with support for micro-enterprises, training and information; developing 'green' tourism, recreational infrastructure, access to natural areas and

small-scale accommodation within high nature value farming areas; and preparing and implementing local development strategies for the use of Axis 3 measures to support farming communities in high nature value areas.

- **Leader** could be used to combine innovative measures from the other three Axes to support farming communities in high nature value areas and to help them share experience through co-operation with other high nature value farming communities.
- **Introducing 'bird-friendly' agricultural management:** significant benefits may be achieved by changes to 'in-field management' to provide food or cover for the birds (and their prey) or to improve breeding success, particularly of ground nesting birds such as the Crakes. These changes are well suited to agri-environment management payments and non-productive investments, but it is essential that farmers understand the purpose and objectives of the payments.

If the decline in populations of key farmland birds is to be reversed, and the high nature value habitats on which they depend are to be properly managed for biodiversity, many of the nine Member States will have to make significant changes to their current proposals for the design, funding and delivery of agri-environment and other EAFRD measures in the 2007-13 period. This is a matter of concern not just for the individual Member States but for the EU as a whole - conservation of farmland birds in the new Member States will be critical to achieving EU objectives on Natura 2000 and biodiversity decline because these nine Member States hold such large proportions of declining Annex 1 farmland birds and high nature value habitats, relative to their area of agricultural land.

The following recommendations are based on the above analysis of the framework of support we believe will be required in the new Member States for the 2007-13 period, and on the specific problems identified in our questionnaire surveys.

**RECOMMENDATION 1: high nature value farmland should be protected from abandonment and from conversion to non-agricultural uses. Permanent pastures of high nature value should be protected from conversion to arable land.**

**RECOMMENDATION 2: all farmland in IBAs, and other high nature value farmland should be given highest priority for agri-environment schemes and non-productive investments targeted at restoration and re-instatement of appropriate habitat management for birds and other biodiversity.**

**RECOMMENDATION 3: on all farmland small landscape features and non-farmed semi-natural habitats should be protected from damage or removal, through regulation or cross-compliance; restoration and replacement of these features should be supported by agri-environment and non-productive investments where appropriate.**

**RECOMMENDATION 4: high nature value farming areas, where the farm structure and land-use patterns are an essential component of the biodiversity, should be identified and targeted by a combination of Axis 1 and 2 measures specifically designed to support the structure and pattern of land use.**

**RECOMMENDATION 5: surviving low-input extensive farming systems which provide habitats used by Annex 1 and other farmland birds should be seen as an environmental asset to be supported by well-designed agri-environment schemes with attractive payment rates - not seen as an economic problem to be solved by intensification. Targeted and coherent packages of measures from Axes 1, 2, and 3 will be needed to address the economic and social problems of high nature value farming systems and to promote their environmental sustainability.**

**RECOMMENDATION 6: investment aid and other Axis 1 and Axis 3 measures for existing low-input farming systems should be directed not at agricultural intensification but at adding value to existing levels of production, improving quality, accessing new markets, finding modern alternatives to labour-intensive forms of habitat management and helping farming communities to access the economic**

benefits of biodiversity management - for example through accreditation schemes and green tourism.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** agri-environment schemes targeted at meeting birds' requirements by reducing the intensity of management on intensively managed land should be designed to meet known requirements of farmland species, and should offer payment rates which take account of the real costs to the farmer.

**RECOMMENDATION 8:** agri-environment schemes targeted at birds should be accompanied by an explanation for farmers of the purpose, target species and environmental benefits of the scheme.

**RECOMMENDATION 9:** the EAFRD National Strategies should identify the priorities for farmland bird conservation in each Member State and make clear commitments to supporting land management for farmland birds within IBAs and elsewhere; to supporting and developing high nature value farming systems; to protecting and encouraging the management of landscape features and to ensuring that there is synergy (and no conflict) between these objectives and the activities supported by other measures in Axis 1, 2 and 3.

**RECOMMENDATION 10:** budget allocations between Axes and within Axis 2, and area uptake targets for individual agri-environment schemes, should more closely reflect the biodiversity value of agri-environment schemes, the total area of existing high nature value bird habitats in need of management and the population status of key Annex 1 birds.

**RECOMMENDATION 11:** as part of the design and delivery of agri-environment schemes, Member States should set quantified targets for population change of key bird species during the 2007-13 programme, including intermediate targets up to 2010, at different geographical scales (e.g. farm holding, high nature value area, Member State).

**RECOMMENDATION 12:** from the beginning of the 2007-13 period Natura 2000 sites and other high nature value farmland should have priority for agri-environment schemes targeted at management of these areas for biodiversity, including birds; as Natura 2000 compensation payments are implemented, the flexibility available to Member States should be used to ensure that there are no gaps in this coverage (either geographically or in time).

**RECOMMENDATION 13:** LFA payments and their attached conditions should be structured in a way that supports and encourages high nature value management for the benefit of birds, and discourages intensification where this would damage biodiversity.

**RECOMMENDATION 14:** all entry level and horizontal agri-environment schemes should have basic bird conservation measures as part of the scheme design - for example, retention and management of small landscape features on organic farms; use of nectar and seed producing plants and favourable mowing regimes for grass buffer strips; selection of seed mixes favoured by birds for winter cover crops.

**RECOMMENDATION 15:** where agri-environment schemes are targeted at the needs of specific birds or groups of birds, expert environmental advice should be sought and followed by all involved - scheme designers, advisory staff, farmers and paying agency staff; failure in any one of these four links may jeopardise the effectiveness of the whole scheme.

**RECOMMENDATION 16:** some flexibility should be allowed to delivery staff to adjust management requirements to the needs of particular species or to regional differences in farming systems, climate and habitats.

**RECOMMENDATION 17:** greater priority should be given to using non-productive investments to support agri-environment schemes for habitat management for birds (for example to create ponds or small wetland areas, to provide nest boxes and perching poles).

**RECOMMENDATION 18:** support should be provided for re-introduction of grazing on abandoned high nature value land in a way that assists farmers to acquire livestock when they have none.

**RECOMMENDATION 19:** payment rates for high nature value farming systems should reflect the real costs of farming land that would otherwise be abandoned, rather than simply taking account of income foregone.

**RECOMMENDATION 20:** in seven of the nine Member States studied, significant and urgent effort and investment by Ministries of Agriculture is needed to improve the biodiversity expertise of farm advisers. The national parks and other protected areas often provide good models of agri-environment delivery. These institutions, together with environment ministries, academics and NGOs should be considered as potential sources of contract trainers for advisory services and paying agencies.

**RECOMMENDATION 21:** in all nine Member States, similar urgency and effort is needed to improve the biodiversity expertise of paying agency control staff.

**RECOMMENDATION 22:** where farmers and their representatives are not supportive of agri-environment objectives, efforts should be made to gain this support by explaining why the management of farmland for biodiversity is a priority for EU funding and how their businesses can benefit both directly and indirectly.

**RECOMMENDATION 23:** priority should be given to providing adequate staff and other resources (e.g. digital maps of high nature value habitats) required for delivery of agri-environment schemes.

**RECOMMENDATION 24:** arrangements for co-operation should be established between agricultural advisory/delivery staff and government environmental experts (who may be based locally), to ensure effective and accurate delivery of targeted agri-environment habitat management schemes.

**RECOMMENDATION 25:** agri-environment support should be provided for the management of high nature value grasslands which are common grazing areas used by farmers who do not own the land.

**RECOMMENDATION 26:** agri-environment, Natura 2000 and LFA payments should be available to any land occupier who can meet the management requirements for high nature value farmland, whether or not the land is used for agricultural production; this would include tenants, owner occupiers who live elsewhere and owners of shared grazing or cropping rights.

**RECOMMENDATION 27:** effective bird conservation measures (including those now in GFP) should be included in GAEC requirements from 2007, for example the retention of small landscape features and ponds, and the use of bird friendly mowing techniques for grassland.

**RECOMMENDATION 28:** where land is in an agri-environment contract that has specific habitat management requirements these should automatically take precedence over standard GAEC habitat management requirements (if there is a conflict between the two), without penalties being applied.

**RECOMMENDATION 29:** the control of GAEC requirements, especially habitat protection measures, should be improved where necessary to ensure that cross-compliance provides an effective baseline for agri-environment schemes.

**RECOMMENDATION 30: national rules on the maintenance of permanent grassland should be revised, where necessary, to provide effective protection for all high nature value grassland; these rules should be properly enforced.**

**RECOMMENDATION 31: EAFRD funds should not be used to support activities that will destroy or degrade existing farmland habitats for birds or other high nature value farmland.**

**RECOMMENDATION 32: administrative safeguards should be put in place to ensure that such damage is avoided, particularly in the case of support for improvements to drainage, other investments in modernising agricultural holdings, land consolidation schemes, afforestation of farmland and support for energy crops.**

**RECOMMENDATION 33: to ensure the protection and development of high nature value farming systems Member States should support agri-environment measures in these areas with coherent packages of EAFRD funding from the other three Axes targeted at the specific economic and social problems and needs of high nature value farming communities.**

**RECOMMENDATION 34: high priority should be given to designing and setting up national evaluation programmes capable of measuring the impact of individual agri-environment schemes on the achievement of quantified targets for population change of key bird species (see recommendation 11 above) and capable of providing information to guide the adjustment of these schemes and their delivery systems where necessary.**

# 1 Introduction to the study

## 1.1 Objectives

This study is a review of the contribution of existing and planned agri-environment schemes to the management of farmland habitats for birds in nine of the new Member States - Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (Malta was excluded because of the limited extent of farmland important for threatened birds). The study has been commissioned by the RSPB and is intended to contribute to the design and implementation of effective agri-environment measures under rural development programmes during the 2007-13 period.

BirdLife International and RSPB have selected twenty species of farmland birds, on the basis of their distribution and needs across the new Member States, and have argued that they should to be targeted by agri-environment schemes (and other measures) in the 2007-13 rural development programmes. These birds depend on agricultural land as their primary breeding and/or feeding areas, and more than three million hectares of farmland in these nine Member States have been selected as Important Bird Areas (IBAs)<sup>1</sup> because of their value to these and other species, all of which are protected under Annex 1 of the Birds Directive. Most of the twenty are of 'unfavourable population status' in Europe and six are also threatened globally; although the new Member States have little more than one fifth of the agricultural land in the EU<sup>2</sup> they are home to a very much larger proportion of many of these target species - more than 90% of the EU25 population in the case of the Corncrake, Aquatic Warbler, Imperial Eagle and Lesser Spotted Eagle (see Table 1). Agri-environment schemes will also be an important conservation measure for many other species of farmland birds whose populations are in serious decline across the EU.

These Annex 1 and other farmland birds are associated with low intensity farming systems which survived (or replaced) the intensively managed collective and state farms, and many of them are not confined to Natura 2000 protected sites but depend on much wider areas of ordinary farmland now facing major changes, as agricultural structures and farm management systems adjust to the opportunities and demands of EU membership. Achieving favourable population status for these important birds depends on effective management of farmland for their benefit - this will be a major challenge for agri-environment schemes in 2007-13.

The study, undertaken in the Summer of 2006, attempts to answer four questions about the new 2007-13 rural development programmes in the nine new Member States:

*Are bird conservation priorities adequately addressed in the **objectives, targeting and funding** of the RDP?*

*Is the **design** of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for bird conservation priorities?*

*What are the barriers to **delivery** of appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures where they are needed for bird conservation priorities?*

*What is the **contribution of other CAP policies** to the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for bird conservation?*

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<sup>1</sup> The Important Bird Areas (IBA) Programme of BirdLife International is a worldwide initiative aimed at identifying and protecting a network of critical sites for the conservation of the world's birds. These sites have been carefully identified on the basis of scientific criteria for the bird numbers and species that they hold. The BirdLife inventories of Important Bird Areas have been recognized four times by the European Court of Justice as the list of sites that should be classified as Special Protection Areas under the Birds Directive in the absence of other scientific evidence. BirdLife published the second revision of IBAs in Europe in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Utilised Agricultural Area, source: European Commission DGAgri *Agriculture in the EU Statistical and Economic Information 2005*

## **1.2 Methodology**

A significant part of the information needed to answer these and the more detailed questions in the brief has not been published and the proposed EAFRD measures 2007-13 were still being developed during the course of the study. The review has been a desk study using published information (where available) and up to date information (Summer 2006) gathered by local experts familiar with bird conservation and agri-environment schemes in each of the new Member States. A systematic approach was used, with structured questionnaires and guidance notes to collect two sets of data for each of the nine Member States. The first set of data was collected from local ornithological experts involved in giving advice to government on conservation of farmland birds and their habitats. The second set of data came from local agri-environment experts familiar with both policy and implementation of agri-environment schemes in the Member State, who came from a variety of backgrounds - academics, independent consultants and non-governmental organisations.

## **1.3 Structure of this report**

First we briefly describe the background to implementation of agri-environment policy in the nine new Member States and the significance of farmland birds in these countries (in Sections 2 and 3), then look at the threats to habitats used by farmland birds under different farming systems, and the opportunities to improve biodiversity management for birds (in Section 4). The policy context and drivers for using agri-environment schemes to support habitat management for farmland birds is discussed in Section 5. There is an overview of the 2007-13 agri-environment proposals for all nine Member States in Section 6, followed by a more detailed analysis for each of the Member States in Sections 7 to 15, supported by data in the Annexes. Finally, Section 16 presents our conclusions and recommendations.

## **2 Background to implementation of EU policy in the New Member States**

### **2.1 Farm structures and institutional and political priorities**

The social, institutional and political context for implementing the first RDPs in 2004 in the new Member States, and the scale and nature of the rural development problems they faced, were very different from those in the older Member States in 1992 when agri-environment schemes first became compulsory. The new Member States had seen the collapse of the intensive large scale farming systems of the Soviet era which led in some areas to large scale rural unemployment, increasing reliance on semi-subsistence farming and lack of investment in rural infrastructure and services. Traditional markets were no longer available and livestock numbers dropped dramatically during the 1990s, leading to the deterioration of large areas of grazed semi-natural habitats and abandonment of the more marginal land. In many countries the use of agricultural inputs decreased markedly at the same time, because most farmers could not afford them, and there was also a lack of capital investment, for example in manure handling and machinery.

The lengthy process of land restitution had not been fully completed in 2004 and many of the new owners of small areas of farmland lived in towns and cities. There were other less obvious effects of 45 years of state agriculture, which have had an impact on the design and delivery of agri-environment schemes. For example in Estonia a generation of farmers were unfamiliar with the use of crop rotations or mixed farming systems and the agricultural universities had trained farm advisers in either animal production or crop husbandry but not both. Elsewhere, mixed traditional farming systems have survived to a much greater extent (for example in southern and eastern parts of Poland and in Slovenia), to the benefit of both biodiversity and farmland birds, but young farmers understandably have little interest in working small scattered plots by hand, using farming systems unlikely to meet EU animal welfare and food hygiene regulations and unable to market enough produce to make a living.

The scale and nature of these social, economic and agricultural problems has meant that there is, in many countries, considerable political pressure to divert agri-environment funding to other priorities or to use it in a way which brings secondary economic benefits - for example to improve soil quality or support organic farming. The drive to improve the agricultural economy is also seen in the priorities of the advisory and delivery services (which give little emphasis to biodiversity) and of course, not surprisingly, in the response of farmers who choose those agri-environment measures which provide reasonable levels of payment but require relatively little change to the intensity of their farming methods or improve productivity (e.g. winter cover crops ploughed in as green manure).

In the next programming period there will be new pressures on the farmed environment and on the priorities for rural development programmes. Farmers will be more able to invest in intensification, and farm incomes in the new Member States are forecast to rise by 42% between 2005 and 2013<sup>3</sup>. There is now considerable pressure to adapt agricultural infrastructure and management to meet EU standards, particularly on water quality and food safety, which will threaten some of the more traditional farming systems of high nature value. Other factors affecting the environmental impact of agri-environment schemes include high levels of rural unemployment, lack of investment in rural infrastructure, fragmentation of holdings, short-term tenure, the economic problems of small subsistence farms (which are often of high biodiversity value) and difficulties in meeting new animal welfare requirements and the baseline standards for agri-environment schemes.

The EAFRD budget was significantly reduced from the Commission's original proposal, as a result of the December 2005 agreement on the EU's Financial Perspectives for 2007-13; it is possible that by 2013 the Pillar 2 budget ceiling will be as much as 12% below the

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2006) *Prospects for Agricultural Markets and Income in the European Union 2006-13*

comparable figure for 2006<sup>4</sup>. There will continue to be competition for these limited funds from other EAFRD axes particularly in new Member States seeking to improve infrastructure and agricultural competitiveness using Axis 1 measures. There will also be competition from other measures within Axis 2, as the new Member States seek to raise food standards, protect soils and water resources and capitalise on easily administered schemes targeted at climate change, such as afforestation and energy crops.

Although agri-environment schemes remain compulsory for 2007-13 and there is a requirement to spend at least 25% of EAFRD co-financing on Axis 2, there is no guarantee that existing agri-environment schemes for habitat management will even continue, or will be improved to meet the needs of farmland birds - despite the fact that populations of farmland birds and reversal of biodiversity decline are indicators for Axis 2 in the next programming period<sup>5</sup>.

## **2.2 Experience of agri-environment schemes before 2004**

Only a few Member States had their own national agri-environment schemes prior to EU accession, but a Dutch-funded project in 1997-2000 brought together partners from nine of the NMS to help to build capacity among policy staff and NGOs in the development of agri-environment schemes, leading to a number of pilot projects in the early 1990s using EU funds from PHARE or SAPARD, or funding from national sources. Other technical assistance projects helped staff from the agricultural authorities to learn from the 15 years' experience (and mistakes) of EU15 countries in developing delivering and evaluating agri-environment schemes. In most of the new Member States there was therefore a core of experienced staff relatively well prepared to design agri-environment schemes for the RDP. Despite this preparation, delays in the implementation of SAPARD agri-environment measures meant that the practical lessons learnt from implementing these on the ground were not available in time for the implementation of the full-scale RDP measures from 2004 onwards.

## **2.3 Natura 2000 and the EAFRD 2007-13 rural development plans**

Within a year of accession seven of the ten new Member States had designated almost all their Important Bird Areas (IBAs) as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the Birds Directive 79/409, covering on average 15% of their land surface. (Cyprus, Malta and Poland have proposed to designate only about half of their proposed SPAs). This rate of progress is impressive, and much better than in the EU15 Member States where, by 2004, only 44% of IBAs had been designated as SPAs and only four countries (Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) had more or less completed their network of SPAs, 25 years after the adoption of the Directive<sup>6</sup>. The extent of designation of SPAs in the new Member States means that it should be easy to target species-specific agri-environment schemes both at protected sites within the Natura 2000 network and at non-designated land which offers opportunities to reinforce the Natura 2000 network (see 5.2 below for details of this requirement).

The Birds Directive requires Member States to preserve, maintain or re-establish habitats for Annex 1 birds both inside and outside SPAs<sup>7</sup>. Although EAFRD has specific measures for compensation payments on SPAs and other Natura 2000 land these measures cannot be used until national legislation is in place detailing all land management restrictions placed on farmers. In Poland and Cyprus the management of much of the Natura 2000 farmland will have to be supported instead by agri-environment schemes until designations are completed - and this will also be the case, at least initially, in several other Member States where the designation process is more or less complete but the national legislative framework does not yet include management plans or prescriptions<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Agra Europe (2006) issue 2195 February 17 2006, *EU tables final budget plans for 2007-13*

<sup>5</sup> Draft of implementing Regulation for the application of Regulation 1698/2005, Annex VIII - list of common baseline, output, result and impact indicators.

<sup>6</sup> Birdlife international press release 10-05-2005 *Key bird sites better protected in new EU Member States*  
[http://www.birdlife.org/news/pr/2005/05/iba\\_launch.html](http://www.birdlife.org/news/pr/2005/05/iba_launch.html)

<sup>7</sup> Article 3 of Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds

<sup>8</sup> Communication from DGAgri Directorate E1.2 to WWF Bulgaria, dated 18.7.2006

## 3 Significance of farmland bird populations in the New Member States

### 3.1 Farmland birds

The nine new Member States considered in this study have large populations of farmland birds of both national and European significance, including the majority of the EU25 population of globally threatened species such as Aquatic Warbler, Corncrake, Great Snipe and Imperial Eagle, and of other Annex 1 species in unfavourable population status such as White Stork, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Red-footed Falcon, White Stork and Roller. Table 1 shows, for each of the nine new Member States, the proportions of the EU25 populations of the Annex 1 farmland birds targeted by BirdLife International for agri-environment support.

A total of 77 species of birds depend on farmland for food, shelter and nesting sites but farmland birds are still in steep decline across Europe, a trend not shared by bird assemblages of other habitats<sup>9</sup>. Farmland bird populations declined on average by more than a third between 1980 and 2002, across eleven of the EU25 countries for which data were available<sup>10</sup>.

Although some populations farmland birds in the new Member States began to recover in the early 1990s, when the intensity of farming dropped following independence, this trend has changed as production intensifies - for example, between 2000 and 2003 the farmland bird index declined by 21% in the Czech Republic, 13% in Poland and 3% in Latvia<sup>11</sup>.

### 3.2 Farmland habitats used by birds

The broad types of agricultural habitats used by birds in IBAs in the nine new Member States is shown in Table 2, but their importance for birds is not restricted to designated areas. For many protected species, such as the White Stork, and for more common farmland birds the majority of the population is found outside designated areas. It is the management of farmed habitats both within IBAs and in the wider countryside that will determine the population trends of the 19 bird species which make up the Farmland Bird Index.

More information on farmland birds and the habitats they use can be found Sections 7 to 15 below on individual Member States, and in Annex 4.

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<sup>9</sup> Donald PF, Sanderson F.J., Burfield I.J. and van Bommel FPJ. (2006) *Further evidence of continent-wide impacts of agricultural intensification on European farmland birds, 1990–2000* in *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment* 116 (2006) 189–196

<sup>10</sup> European Environment Agency (2006) *Progress towards halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010* Report No 5/2006. Copenhagen.

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat

[http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?\\_pageid=1996,39140985&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL&screen=de tailref&language=en&product=STRIND\\_ENVIRO&root=STRIND\\_ENVIRO/enviro/en073](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1996,39140985&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL&screen=de tailref&language=en&product=STRIND_ENVIRO&root=STRIND_ENVIRO/enviro/en073)

**Table 1 Relative proportions of important Annex 1 farmland birds, area of farmland and share of EAFRD funding 2007-13 for nine new Member States**

	9 New MS	CY	CZ	EE	HU	LT	LU	PL	SK	SI
Farmland % of EU25 in 2005 <sup>12</sup>	21	<1	2	<1	4	1	2	10	1	<1
EAFRD funding % of EU25 2007-13 <sup>13</sup>	33.8	0.2	3.6	0.9	4.9	1.3	2.2	17	2.5	1.2
<b>Farmland birds % of EU25 population<sup>14</sup></b>										
<i>Annex 1 - global conservation concern and unfavourable population status in Europe</i>										
Aquatic Warbler	100				15	<1	8	77		
Corncrake	92		1	15	1	24	21	28	1	<1
Great Bustard	5		<1		5				<1	
Great Snipe	60			19		8	8	25		
Imperial Eagle	98	1	1		58				38	
Pygmy Cormorant	9				9				<1	
<i>Annex 1 - unfavourable population status in Europe</i>										
Collared Pratincole	1				1					
Lesser Grey Shrike	48				39		<1	<1	8	<1
Lesser Spotted Eagle	97			6	1	47	12	21	10	<1
Night Heron	16		2		11			2	1	<1
Purple Heron	15		<1		14			<1	<1	
Red-footed Falcon	94			<1	89				5	
Roller	55	42		1	8	<1	2	2	<1	<1
Squacco Heron	14				14				<1	
Stone Curlew	2	1			<1				<1	
White Stork	73		1	3	5	9	12	41	1	<1
<i>Annex 1 - secure status in Europe</i>										
Barnacle Goose	2			2						
Griffon Vulture	<1	<1								
Montagu's Harrier	18		<1	1	1	1	2	13	<1	
Spotted Crake	73		<1	25	5	6	10	25	1	<1

<sup>12</sup> As Utilised Agricultural Area. Source: European Commission DGAgri *Agriculture in the EU Statistical and Economic Information 2005*

<sup>13</sup> Includes receipts from compulsory modulation, 2007 onwards. Source *Rural Europe* September 2006 Issue 42.

<sup>14</sup> Source: BirdLife International (2004) *Birds in Europe: population estimates, trends, and conservation status* Cambridge, UK: (BirdLife Conservation Series No.12)

**Table 2 Farmland habitats in Important Bird Areas in nine Member States**

	<b>Total estimated area of farmland<sup>a</sup> within key IBAs<sup>15</sup></b> (1000 hectares)	<b>Total UAA<sup>16</sup></b> (1000 hectares)	<b>Main habitat types in IBAs</b>
<b>Cyprus</b>	27	158	mixed traditional farming, steppe and pseudo-steppe, perennial crops, arable, abandoned cropland
<b>Czech Republic</b>	102	3 631	unimproved permanent dry grassland, improved dry grassland, abandoned grassland, wet grassland, perennial crops
<b>Estonia</b>	73	770	wet grassland unimproved permanent dry grassland, mixed traditional farming, arable
<b>Hungary</b>	711	5 862	arable, unimproved permanent dry grassland, wet grassland, steppe and pseudo-steppe habitats, mixed traditional farming
<b>Latvia</b>	123	1 642	unimproved permanent dry grassland; wet grassland, arable
<b>Lithuania</b>	139	2 604	mixed traditional farming, wet grassland, abandoned grassland, unimproved permanent dry grassland, improved dry grassland
<b>Poland</b>	1 566	16 301	mixed traditional farming, wet grasslands, abandoned grassland and other agricultural areas
<b>Slovakia</b>	329	1 935	unimproved permanent dry grassland, mixed traditional farming, arable, wet grassland
<b>Slovenia</b>	318 <sup>b</sup>	491	mixed traditional farming, unimproved permanent dry grassland, perennial crops, wet grassland, arable, improved dry grassland
<b>Notes on the data:</b>			
a. the agricultural land in IBAs will not necessarily all be classified as UAA, for example because common grazing land and abandoned farmland are both likely to be excluded from the UAA calculations;			
b. for Slovenia the figure given is the total area of the IBAs important for farmland birds, not the total area of farmland within these IBAs.			

<sup>15</sup> source: data gathered in 2006 from ornithologists in each Member State

<sup>16</sup> source: 2004 data from *Agriculture in the EU; Statistical and Economic Information 2005* DGAgri.

## 4 Threats to farmland habitats and opportunities to improve management for biodiversity

This section first examines the two major threats to bird habitats of IBAs and the wider countryside in the new Member States - abandonment and intensification - then looks at five broad types of farmland habitats important for Annex 1 and other birds - arable, mixed traditional farming, wet grassland, dry grasslands and steppes, and perennial crops. For each the threats are summarised, the preferred management outlined and the use of agri-environment measures and other rural development measures discussed briefly. Finally it looks at opportunities to improve the management of farmland for birds generally. s

### 4.1 Abandonment and intensification

Abandonment and intensification are the two most significant threats to farmland bird habitats in the new Member States and are a result of the continuing adjustments to the huge economic and social impact on the farming sector of the political changes in the 1990s. These adjustments were not completed at the time of accession (for example transfers of land, out migration, foreign investment). Now CAP direct aids and other policies are providing new opportunities and drivers for structural and land management changes, which will continue for some years to come.

#### *Intensification*

The term intensification covers a range of structural and management changes all aimed at increasing the productivity of the land and the farmed unit. Intensification is a threat to all habitat types used by birds, and some aspects of intensification may be predictable, but until it actually happens it is difficult to know the location and severity of the impacts on particular habitats and birds. Different farming systems and farmers will intensify production in different ways but it may involve increasing stocking rates, field size and the use of machinery and chemicals; changes in the areas of different crops and times of sowing and harvesting; the spread of monocultures; changes in drainage and the loss of small, non-farmed habitats such as uncultivated field margins, ponds and hedgerows.

It has been shown that newly joining Member States tend to support higher bird population densities than countries that have been subject to the CAP for longer<sup>18</sup>, and there is a considerable amount of evidence indicating that intensification is the direct cause of decline in many farmland bird populations in Western Europe. This includes correlations between the decline in birds and the timing and location of intensification; and experimental evidence of the response of birds to different types of farming. It has also been demonstrated that reversing intensification can lead to an increase in farmland bird populations where these had previously declined.

#### *Abandonment*

Abandonment of existing farmed habitats can lead to the complete loss of biodiversity rich grasslands, open arable habitats and valued cultural landscapes as management ceases and natural recolonisation by trees and shrubs turns the land into forest. The European Environment Agency identified four main causes of abandonment:

- cessation of management due to low, or even negative, profitability;
- insufficient grazing livestock in pastoral areas to maintain grasslands;

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<sup>18</sup> Sanderson F J, Donald P F, Burfield I J (2006) *Farmland birds in Europe: from policy change to population decline and back again*. In: Bota, G., Camprodon, J., Man˜osa, S., Morales, M.B. (Eds.), *Ecology and Conservation of Steppe-land Birds*. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain, pp. 209–234.

<sup>19</sup> Donald P F, Sanderson F J, Burfield I J and van Bommel F P J (2006) *Further evidence of continent-wide impacts of agricultural intensification on European farmland birds, 1990–2000* in *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment* 116 (2006) 189–196

- cessation of management of grasslands and arable land that was purchased for speculative reasons after privatisation of collective or state farms;
- abandonment of farmland due to financial and legal uncertainty or lack of capital for investment.<sup>20</sup>

## 4.2 Mixed traditional farming

Farm size and structure vary enormously within most of the new Member States where small, semi-subsistence farms survived alongside the large scale collective and state farms. But in Poland, Slovenia and Cyprus small private farms have always predominated, and they survive in the mountainous parts of other countries too. The typical mix of crops and livestock varies with soils and climate but almost everywhere mixed traditional farming is characterised by small scale production (often uneconomic and/or for home consumption), part-time working, small fields and a complex mosaic of crops, grassland, natural vegetation, unused land, and woodland or scrub. In eastern and southern Poland the arable plots are small and often very narrow and individual farmers may have several scattered plots. In Cyprus, perennial crops and cereals are grown in small fields, often with dry-stone walls, and remnants of scrub, grazed by sheep and goats.

### Habitat management for Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*

Lesser Spotted Eagle is a forest-dweller that prefers patchy woodland alternating with wet meadows, pastures, river valleys, marshes and peat bogs. It does not favour sparsely forested, intensively cultivated areas, or tall crops (e.g. maize or sunflowers which make it difficult to search for prey). It usually nests in tall forest near a glade or woodland margin, and the cutting of large and old trees reduces available nesting sites. In the lowlands vertical structures are important for feeding (e.g. trees, posts, hay stacks) and birds also make use of accessible wetlands and short grasslands for seeking prey on foot. Food is principally small mammals, amphibians, small to medium-sized birds, and sometimes reptiles and large insects. The loss of a mosaic landscape leads to lower availability of prey.

### **Mixed traditional farmland habitats for birds - threats and preferred management**

In all Member States mixed traditional farming is at risk, initially from abandonment because the farms are small, labour intensive and unprofitable, but increasingly also from intensification as governments support restructuring of the industry and farmers take advantage of CAP direct aids and new markets. As investment in land, machinery and the use of agro-chemicals increases, traditionally managed high nature value farming systems are at risk of being 'consolidated', taken over by larger farms and managed more intensively. In Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Cyprus the abandonment of mixed traditional farming is a threat likely to be followed by natural reversion to scrub and woodland or, in Poland, possibly by afforestation.

Management requirements for birds are aimed at maintaining the varied, mosaic structure of the landscape and the farming practices which provide cover, food and nest sites for a range of species including Eagles, Falcons, Shrikes, the rapidly declining Roller (which feeds on insects and may benefit where field size remains quite small to guarantee a variety of habitats near their nests) and many, more common, farmland birds. (See Annex 3 for a list of birds associated with mixed traditional farmland).

There are **two groups** of management requirements that will **both need to be implemented** if these important habitats are to survive:

- **at landscape scale, maintaining the spatial structure of the habitats:** achieved through preventing conversion of high nature value grassland to arable; keeping the pattern of small fields; retaining field margins, ditches, stone walls, hedgerows, patches of scrub and woodland and other natural vegetation and small landscape features;

<sup>20</sup> European Environment Agency (2004) *Agriculture and the environment in the EU accession countries*. Environmental issues report 37. Copenhagen.

maintaining traditional orchards; and retaining old, dying and dead trees and, on the forest edge, living trees with holes (nest sites).

- **at farm scale, maintaining low intensity mixed farming:** achieved through mixed organic farming; traditional perennial crops, local varieties and breeds, mixed crops; extensive grassland management<sup>21</sup> and reduced pesticide use, especially in viticulture.

All these management requirements may be resisted by farmers who would prefer either to abandon the land or to improve their income by taking advantage of modern farming methods, equipment, breeds and crops. Achieving long term management for biodiversity is likely to require not just carefully targeted agri-environment schemes but a fully integrated package of measures from all three axes of the EAFRD to support high nature value mixed traditional farms (this is discussed in more detail in Section 6.4 and Table 5 below).

### 4.3 Permanent unimproved grasslands and steppes

Wet grassland is found in eight of the new Member States studied (not Cyprus) and is particularly important in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Many wet grasslands are near rivers, lakes or the coast and are periodically flooded. Traditionally they were used for seasonal grazing by cattle and late mowing (if the weather allowed), with the hay used as bedding. Permanent dry grasslands (including steppe habitats) occur in all nine Member States, and are particularly important in Hungary, Slovenia and Cyprus where they were grazed traditionally. In Cyprus steppe and pseudo steppe habitats are used for extensive cereal production and grazing.

#### Habitat management for Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*

The Collared Pratincole breeds in colonies on steppe, semi-desert, fallow land with sparse or grazed vegetation, and in late sown crops on flat, firm, open soil or gravels free of obstructions or trees, shrubs, or tall herbage of any kind. Suitable habitats include steppe soils where vegetation may be controlled by grazing of cattle and sheep (which also encourage proliferation of insects.) Food is principally insects, especially beetles, locusts, grasshoppers and crickets, usually caught in flight. Collared Pratincole colonies occupy only a few traditionally used fields, which could be the focus of agri-environment measures designed to avoid cultivation of arable land, (including rotational fallow) during the breeding season. Postponing mechanical cultivation and pesticide use by two weeks, or carrying out cultivation before breeding starts, may be sufficient. Small pools on these fields should not be drained.

#### ***Permanent grassland and steppe habitats for birds - threats and preferred management***

Abandonment of grasslands is a major threat. The main reasons are declining numbers of grazing livestock, low productivity and the poor quality of hay from wet grasslands (which is no longer in demand for livestock bedding). Once abandoned, grasslands are likely to be recolonised by scrub and woodland or used for afforestation (possibly with EAFRD support). On wet grasslands early mowing is a threat to breeding Corncrake and other ground nesting species and some grasslands are at risk of being drained and more intensively managed (with higher stocking rates, increased fertiliser use, reseeding and earlier mowing). In several Member States HNV unimproved grasslands are at risk of conversion to arable land because cross-compliance requirements are apply nationally, not at the level of individual farms<sup>22</sup>. Drainage of wet grasslands is a particular threat in Lithuania, and in Latvia, where historically all IBAs were affected by drainage but many of these systems fell into disrepair, allowing the wetland habitats to recover. Now maintenance of long-neglected drains is starting to intensify

<sup>21</sup> grazing at a low LSU/hectare, using temporary fencing if necessary; cutting at least every one or two years to prevent scrub encroachment; mowing from the centre outwards, manually or mechanically at low speed; late mowing, not before 1 August in core areas for *Crex crex* and *Porzana porzana*, and not before 15 July outside core areas

<sup>22</sup> cross-compliance requirements attached to the Pillar 1 direct payments (Single Area Payment Scheme and Single Payment Scheme) require EU10 Member States to ensure that land which was under permanent pasture on 1 May 2004 is maintained under permanent pasture. Member States can choose to apply this requirement regionally or nationally rather than at farm or parcel level, provided they prevent any significant decrease in the total permanent pasture area of the Member State. Source: Regulation 1782/2003 Article 5.

and some new drains are being constructed, threatening to destroy both long established wetland habitats and those that have developed over the past 15-20 years.

Dry grasslands and steppes are particularly important for Imperial Eagle, Roller, Corncrake, White Stork and, in Hungary, the Great Bustard. They also provide important hunting grounds for several raptors. Wet grasslands are very important for Corncrake, White Stork, Great Snipe, Spotted Crake, Aquatic warbler and Montagu's Harrier. (See Annex 3 for a list of birds associated with grasslands and steppes).

The aim of management is to maintain these open grassland habitats by using them as low-input pastures and meadows where agricultural activity and grazing is delayed until late in the season; on wet grasslands mowing may not be required every year, but it is important to maintain (or restore) the hydrological regime associated with wet grassland.

Management requirements fall into three groups but the best practice and choice of measures will depend very much on which birds are living in the area:

- **Low intensity management of permanent grassland:** this includes no conversion to arable or reseeded, no artificial fertilisers, herbicides or pesticides; controlling invasive plants and the spread of scrub, and developing a diverse grass structure, with areas of short grass; mowing once every one or two years; extensive grazing at <1 LSU/hectare; grazing of marginal areas; maintenance of pastures with trees; use of traditional breeds; retain small woodlands, scrub, lines of trees, old, solitary dying and dead trees and, within 10m of the forest edge, living trees with holes. For wet grasslands it is also important that there is no new drainage and no restoration of long-neglected drains.
- **Reducing the effect of farming activities on birds by:** mowing from the centre outwards, at low speed; leaving 10% of the area as unmown strips for cover in Spring; removing mown material, not stacking it; hand mowing, using small machines, mowing small parcels; requiring permission for burning grassland; no mowing or other agricultural activity before August in areas used by Great Bustard, Corncrake and other ground nesting birds (15 July elsewhere); delaying grazing until August or, if this is not possible, fencing off the most important areas for birds until then. Additionally on dry grasslands and steppes: spreading mowing over a long period; restricting the use of harrows; leaving cereal stubble 8-15 cm high; no poisoning of crows; requiring permission for burning grassland; no night working; limiting agricultural activities and public access in protection zones around nests (150m for Great bustard, 50m for Montagu's Harrier<sup>23</sup>, 500m for other raptors).
- **Investing in habitat improvement by:** providing artificial nests and nest boxes for Saker, Roller and White Stork, creating small ponds for White Stork, restoring mown meadows.

#### **Habitat management for Corncrake *Crex crex***

The Corncrake is now found mainly in agriculturally managed permanent grasslands with the highest numbers in floodplain meadows where fields are liable to flooding, and where mowing starts later in the season. Food is varied, mainly carabid beetles and earthworms. Preferred vegetation is tall (at least 20-30 cm) and provides enough cover for the birds to remain concealed. If cover is poor when birds arrive in spring, stands of old vegetation left from the previous year, tall herbs, marsh vegetation or small bushes may provide early cover. The breeding season lasts from early May well into September, with flightless chicks that are at risk both from early mowing and from concentric mowing patterns which force the young birds into a decreasing area of long grass where they will eventually be killed. Drainage of wetlands and wet meadows may result in loss of Corncrake habitat, especially if associated with conversion into arable or intensification of the management of the remaining grassland - high fertiliser levels may encourage vegetation too dense for Corncrake. Conversely, land abandonment may also mean loss of suitable habitat through lack of grazing and small-scale haymaking. The area of suitable tall (>20 cm) vegetation in areas managed for Corncrakes should not fall below 10% of the total area of tall grass and herbage at any time between late April and late August.

<sup>23</sup> This is a legal requirement in SPAs in Slovakia and new restrictions will be introduced in Natura 2000 management plans in Slovenia

#### 4.4 Arable land

Arable farming is important for birds in all the new Member States, and is particularly significant in the great plains of Hungary, where it is a major habitat in every IBA. In other Member States arable land is less significant in terms of total area or proportion of farmland habitats within IBAs but in the wider countryside arable land is still important for many birds (particularly raptors), and provides a source of food at times of the year when other food may be scarce. The range of arable habitats varies widely, from relatively intensive production of cereals, fodder crops, root crops and potatoes, sometimes in large fields, to arable crops grown more traditionally in rotation with fallow and grassland in mosaics, which retain remnants of natural vegetation between the fields. (See Annex 3 for a list of birds associated with arable land).

##### **Habitat management for Great bustard *Otis tarda***

Great Bustards are generally faithful to particular nesting sites and if lost from a breeding area are unlikely to return, so it is particularly important to safeguard existing habitats. They require open, undisturbed habitat with medium height vegetation (<1 m) that is tall enough to provide cover, but allows the female to look around. These birds benefit from crop variety and their preferred food changes seasonally, from green parts of crops and weeds in winter and spring, to insects in summer and seeds in the autumn. They use grasslands, first year fallow, older fallow, extensive arable fields for breeding, and rape, kale and alfalfa for wintering. Their food supply will be limited if the area of leguminous crops/alfalfa/oilseed rape is reduced, and high levels of pesticide and fertilizer are used. It is particularly important to avoid disturbance at the leks (breeding display grounds) and at wintering places.

##### **Arable farmland habitats for birds - threats and preferred management**

In all Member States mixed traditional farming is at risk, initially from abandonment because the farms are small, labour intensive and unprofitable, but also increasingly from intensification as governments support restructuring of the industry and farmers take advantage of CAP direct aids and new markets. Investment in land, machinery and the use of agro-chemicals will increase, and traditionally managed high nature value farming systems are at risk of being 'consolidated', taken over by larger farms and managed more intensively. In Poland, Slovakia and Cyprus the abandonment of mixed traditional farming is also a threat, likely to be followed by natural reversion to scrub and woodland or, in Poland, possibly by afforestation.

Intensification of arable production is perceived as a significant threat in all Member States, leading to increases in monocultures, the use of fertilisers, pesticides and mechanisation and loss of the remaining natural vegetation between plots. In Estonia arable land is likely to be lost through abandonment of smaller farms, followed by gradual re-colonisation with trees and bushes. Afforestation is a current threat to arable habitats in Hungary and Latvia there is a risk of losing natural river channels and bankside habitats through re-instating maintenance work on drainage systems that have been neglected for 10-20 years.

Arable land provides nesting sites for Great Bustard and Collared Pratincole and food such as small mammals, insects and seeds for many birds, including Imperial Eagle and Red-footed Falcon. Several species have very specific requirements (e.g. Great Bustard, see box above) but requirements for many of the birds using arable land are concerned with improving the availability of food and increasing the variety of both food sources and habitat structure; these requirements fall into three groups:

- **maintaining high nature value extensive management** where it still exists or reducing the intensity of management by: adopting organic or low-input arable farming; including fallow in the rotation; retaining stubble for as long as possible (ideally over winter); and protecting field margins and other small landscape features and managing them without chemicals;
- **reducing the direct effect of farming activities on birds** by: prohibiting stubble burning and night working; delaying spraying and harvest until after mid July; and limiting

agricultural activities and access in protection zones around nests (150m for Great Bustard, 50m<sup>24</sup> for Montagu's Harrier, 500m for other raptors);

- **improving the availability of habitats, food supplies and nesting sites by:** conservation agriculture<sup>25</sup>, leaving a proportion of cereals unharvested (as food for birds and their prey); using a variety of crops in the rotation, including spring crops such as pulses; managing grassland in the rotation for the benefit of ground nesting birds (see below); creating floristically diverse grassy field margins and strips 3-5m wide within fields; retaining small landscape features<sup>26</sup>; creating small ponds (for White Stork, which feeds on amphibians); providing perching poles for raptors, and artificial nests and nest boxes for Saker, Red-footed Falcon, Roller and White Stork.

#### 4.5 Perennial crops

In Cyprus plot sizes are relatively small and remnants of natural vegetation remain; vineyards, olive groves, carob plantations and orchards are often intensively managed (sometimes by companies) with heavy chemical applications and no grazing. In regions of Hungary where farming is dominated by vineyards and orchards, most are intensively managed, but in some areas there are still traditional extensive orchards, especially near the Tisza River.

##### ***Perennial crop habitats for birds - threats and preferred management***

Intensification of management with increased use of pesticides, and loss of the remaining natural vegetation are the main threats, but in Hungary traditional orchards are also at risk of conversion to other uses.

##### **Habitat management for Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus***

The Griffon Vulture inhabits a wide range of open habitats with few or no trees, in plains, mountains or upland plateaus. It breeds on cliffs, mainly in mountains but also along coasts - it is quite tolerant of human presence and may nest close to habitation. It is largely dependent on domestic livestock carrion and is affected by changes in farming practices, the decline of extensive livestock farming and reduced availability of livestock carrion. Afforestation may reduce the availability of open foraging areas.

In Cyprus perennial crops are particularly important for Griffon Vulture, Stone Curlew, and Lesser Grey Shrike on migration. (See Annex 3 for a list of birds associated with perennial crops).

The aim of management for the benefit of birds is to:

- **support traditional methods of cultivation**, where these still exist, with advice and investment support for growers and assistance with developing, processing, labelling and marketing products from traditional orchards, vineyards and olive groves in Natura 2000 areas; and
- **improve feeding opportunities for birds** by reducing fertilisers and biocide application; encouraging maintenance and planting of natural scrub around plots (Cyprus); using traditional cultivation methods; and growing local varieties of fruit.

Perennial crops are similar to mixed traditional farming in that agri-environment support will need to be accompanied by support from Axis 1 and Axis 3 to ensure the economic survival of traditional production methods which are important for birds.

<sup>24</sup> This is a legal requirement in SPAs in Slovakia and new restrictions will be introduced in Natura 2000 management plans in Slovenia

<sup>25</sup> Conservation agriculture, which has been trialled in Hungary and the UK, incorporates wild bird cover, crop rotations and non-inversion tillage - these elements can also be beneficial separately.

<sup>26</sup> For example small woodlands, scrub, lines of trees, and solitary, old dying and dead trees, hedges, ditches stone heaps, wet depressions

#### 4.6 Managing the farmed countryside for the benefit of farmland birds generally

Managing farmland to improve opportunities for birds generally involves many of the same measures as those identified above for existing habitats. Where the measures are aimed at intensively managed farmland significant improvements can be achieved by reducing the overall intensity of management, protecting existing habitats and features and applying targeted agri-environment management to relatively small proportions of the land, for example:

- **lowering the intensity of management** by reducing fertilisers and plant protection products and stocking rates, and by organic farming;
- **protecting** existing semi-natural grassland habitats by prohibiting afforestation, drainage of wet grassland and conversion to arable and retaining small landscape elements such as isolated trees, wet depressions, patches of semi-natural vegetation, ditches, windbreaks etc;
- **creating new habitats** on intensive farmland - grass strips of nectar producing flowers and food plants in arable fields, beetle banks, ponds, wet grassland, nest boxes, perching poles;
- **adopting bird-friendly crop management** - mowing grass 'inside outwards', later harvesting, mowing and grazing date in important nesting areas, winter green cover with suitable species, winter stubble, managed fallow, non-cultivated patches in cereal fields, no poisoning of crows.

Table 3 below summarises the current and potential threats to farmland birds by habitat type and Member State - more detail can be found in Sections 7 to 15 on individual Member States.

**Table 3 Threats to agricultural habitats used by Annex 1 birds**

(source: questionnaire survey of expert ornithologists, in each Member State)

Habitat	CY	CZ	EE	HU	LA	LI	PO	SK	SV
<b>All Farmland Habitats</b>									
loss of small landscape elements	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
<b>Arable</b>									
abandonment and scrub			•		•				
afforestation				•	•				
intensification	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
higher levels of fertilisers and pesticides				•	•	•		•	•
restoration of neglected drainage systems					•	•			
removal of remnants of natural vegetation	•			•			•	•	
winter cereals, with loss of over wintered stubble		•				•			
fewer crop types, use of monocultures, energy crops				•		•		•	•
unsuitable mowing techniques								•	
burning old growth								•	
<b>Mixed Traditional Farming</b>									
abandonment	•			•			•	•	
land purchase & consolidation, lost scale & pattern of mixed habitats	•		•	•	•		•	•	•
removal of remnants of natural vegetation	•						•		
intensification			•	•	•	•	•	•	•
higher levels of fertilisers and pesticides	•					•	•	•	•
afforestation							•		
few markets for produce of mixed traditional farming				•					
creation of monocultures						•			•
mowing too early						•			
<b>Wet Grassland</b>									
abandonment and scrub		•	•	•	•	•	•		•
afforestation				•	•	•	•		
drainage		•			•	•	•	•	
conversion to arable						•			•
intensification		•			•		•	•	•
mowing too early, using inappropriate methods					•	•		•	•
burning old growth	•							•	
flooding		•				•			
negative attitudes (to management by absent owners)						•			
<b>Dry Grassland And Steppe</b>									
abandonment and scrub	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
intensification	•	•					•	•	
conversion to arable		•		•			•		
earlier mowing or grazing	•	•						•	
overgrazing	•	•						•	
afforestation	•			•			•		
decline in grazing livestock, cost of buying livestock				•					
no markets for hay or animals				•					
<b>Perennial Crops</b>									
intensification	•	•		•					
higher levels of fertilisers and pesticides	•								
loss of remnants of natural vegetation	•								
lack of markets for traditional products				•					
reduction in area of traditionally managed orchards				•					•

## 5 Farmland birds - policy context and drivers

This section examines the policy context and drivers for Member States using agri-environment measures to:

- meet their legal obligations under the Birds Directive to protect and conserve wild birds and their habitats; and
- reverse the decline in farmland birds, which is a key indicator for achieving the EU target of halting biodiversity decline by 2010.

It then considers the extent to which agri-environment measures depend for their effectiveness on support from other measures and policies.

### 5.1 Commission Strategic Guidelines for the EAFRD

It is clear that the EU policy framework underpinning agri-environment measures for habitat management for birds, especially on areas of high nature value farmland, is much more robust for the 2007-13 EAFRD programmes than it was for the 2004-06 period. However, this does not provide any guarantee that Member States will allocate higher priority or additional funds to bird-specific agri-environment measures.

The next generation of agri-environment schemes in 2007-13 will follow a more strategic approach to the use of EU funding under EAFRD. Member States are required to prepare a national rural development strategy (the reference framework for the 2007-13 programmes) in compliance with the Commission's Strategic Guidelines, including the requirement that:

**'... the resources devoted to Axis 2 should contribute to three EU-level priority areas: biodiversity and the preservation and development of high nature value farming and forestry systems and traditional agricultural landscapes; water; and climate change. The measures available under Axis 2 should be used to integrate these environmental objectives and contribute to the implementation of the agricultural and forestry Natura 2000 network, to the Göteborg commitment to reverse biodiversity decline by 2010, to the objectives... for Community action in the field of water policy, and to the Kyoto Protocol targets for climate change mitigation<sup>27</sup>. (our emphasis)**

The specific emphasis on preservation and development of high nature value farming and systems and reversing biodiversity decline is an important argument for prioritising agri-environment measures targeted at habitats used by farmland birds. High nature value farming systems are based on traditional patterns of land ownership, farm management and cropping systems which are important bird habitats in all Member States and are one of the most complex challenges for rural development programmes because they are threatened by so many different pressures.

### 5.2 Natura 2000

The legal obligations of habitat management for Natura 2000 are sometimes assumed to be restricted to designated sites but this is certainly not the case for birds, including many farmland species whose populations are found in the wider countryside and not confined to SPAs.

Under the Birds Directive Member States must take measures to preserve, maintain or re-establish habitats for birds. This includes creating SPAs, managing habitats (inside and outside SPAs), re-establishing destroyed biotopes and creating biotopes. Special conservation measures have to be taken for the habitats of Annex I birds to ensure their survival and reproduction. Of the twenty species highlighted in this study as suitable for targeted agri-environment schemes sixteen are already in unfavourable population status in

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<sup>27</sup> COUNCIL DECISION of 20 February 2006 on *Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007 to 2013)* (2006/144/EC)

Europe, and it is worth noting that Member States do not have to wait until species decline before taking action under the Birds Directive<sup>28</sup>.

There are two other, less well known, provisions in the Natura 2000 legislation that apply to management of habitats for birds in the wider countryside. Outside protection areas, Member States must:

- strive to avoid pollution or deterioration of habitats<sup>29</sup>; and
- must encourage the management, in the wider countryside, of landscape features which are of major importance for wild fauna and flora such as rivers and their banks, traditional field boundaries, ponds or small woods, in order to improve the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network<sup>30</sup>.

These legal requirements reinforce the argument that, in implementing the Commission's guidelines, rural development plans should both safeguard habitats and landscape features from destruction (for example by drainage, afforestation and land consolidation) and prioritise EAFRD support for their management using agri-environment and Natura 2000 payments.

### 5.3 Göteborg commitment to reverse biodiversity decline by 2010

In 2001, the European Council made a commitment to 'halt the decline of biodiversity by 2010', and in May 2006 the European Commission released its Communication *Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 — and beyond*, accompanied by an *EU Action Plan to 2010 and Beyond* detailing specific actions for implementation at Community or Member State level, or both<sup>31</sup>. The Action Plan does not supersede the existing Biodiversity Action Plans, but is intended to complement them.

Sections of the *Action Plan* relevant to the delivery of agri-environment schemes for 2007-13, shown in Table 4 below, cover action by Member States on funding, specific measures for high nature value farmland at risk of intensification or abandonment (or already abandoned), cross-compliance, environmental legislation, advisory, training and extension services for biodiversity management, review of LFA policy (to make it more biodiversity friendly) and evaluation of the impact of EAFRD measures on biodiversity. If properly implemented, all of these actions are likely to benefit farmland birds.

**Table 4 Relevant actions from *EU Action Plan to 2010 and beyond* (our emphasis)**

	Action	at EU level	at Member State level
A2.1.1	<b>Allocate, at MS initiative</b> , within each national/regional Rural Development (RD) Programme, <b>adequate Community and MS cofinancing</b> to measures available under all <b>three axes</b> of the RD Regulation which are <b>directly or indirectly supportive of nature and biodiversity</b>	Assess MS RD Programmes and seek amendments where appropriate.	<b>Ensure adequate MS funds to make up any shortfall in funds provided by EC co-financing</b>
A2.1.2	Apply Rural Development (RD) measures in the next programming period [2007-2013] to <b>optimise long-term benefits for biodiversity - in particular for Natura 2000 areas and for other 'high nature value' farm and forest areas</b>	Provide guidance on application of RD measures, including on identification of high-nature-value farmland, forests and woodlands	Ensure CAP National Strategy Plans and <b>National and Regional RDPs reflect this need</b>
A2.1.3	Define criteria and <b>identify [2006-07] high-nature-value farmland</b> and forest areas (including the Natura 2000 network) threatened	Evaluate extent to which Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) National Strategy	Define criteria in order to capture all farm and forest land of high value for biodiversity,

<sup>28</sup> According to the judgement of the European Court of Justice against Spain (case C-355/90) obligations of the Birds Directive exist before any reduction is observed in the number of birds or any risk of a protected species becoming extinct has materialised.

<sup>29</sup> Article 3 and 4 of *COUNCIL DIRECTIVE 79/409 on the conservation of wild birds (EEC)*

<sup>30</sup> Article 10 of *COUNCIL DIRECTIVE 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora*

<sup>31</sup> COM (2006) 216 final and SEC(2006) 621 Commission Staff Working Document: *Annexes to the Communication from the Commission halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 — and beyond; sustaining ecosystem services for human well-being* {COM(2006)216 final} Technical Annex

	<b>Action</b>	<b>at EU level</b>	<b>at Member State level</b>
	with loss of biodiversity (with <b>particular attention to extensive farming and forest/woodland systems at risk of intensification or abandonment, or already abandoned), and design and implement measures to maintain and/or restore conservation status</b> [2007 onwards]	Plans and National RDPs reflect this need - encourage adjustments where necessary	<b>identify high nature value areas, develop measures to address threats</b>
A2.1.4	Ensure effective <b>implementation of cross-compliance</b> (which provides a baseline for most of the measures of Axis 2 of the Rural Development Regulation) <b>in ways that benefit biodiversity</b> [2007-2013].	Evaluate extent to which CAP National Strategy Plans and National RD Programmes reflect this need - encourage adjustments where necessary	Ensure CAP National Strategy Plans and <b>National and Regional RDPs reflect this need</b>
A2.1.5	Ensure that MS Rural Development Plans (RDPs) <b>comply with environmental legislation and in particular with the nature directives</b> so as to prevent and minimise any potential damages to biodiversity [2007- 2013].	Assess whether proposed CAP National Strategy Plans may result in breach of environmental legislation, seek adjustments where necessary	Ensure <b>national plans comply</b>
A2.1.6	Broaden <b>extension services, farm advisory systems and training actions to farmers, landowners and farm workers to strengthen biodiversity-related implementation</b> in the next rural development programming [2007 onwards], including support from the LEADER Axis.	Evaluate extent to which CAP National Strategy Plans and National RDPs reflect this need - encourage adjustments where necessary	Ensure CAP National Strategy Plans and National and <b>Regional RD Programmes reflect this need</b>
A2.1.7	Ensure future ' <b>less favoured area' (LFA)</b> regime [from 2010] under Axis 2 <b>enhances its contribution to biodiversity and to 'high nature value' farm and forest areas.</b>	Assess contribution of LFAs to biodiversity, means to enhance this contribution - and reflect this in 2008 report and proposals	Support <b>LFA regime which is more favourable to biodiversity</b> , implement new regime
A2.1.8	Implement the common monitoring and evaluation framework and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive requirements where applicable for rural development programmes, including the definition of indicators in a way that <b>impact of measures on biodiversity is assessed</b> [2006 onwards].	Evaluate the extent to which MS have used the mandatory indicators and the appropriateness and adequacy of their additional programme specific indicators	Use mandatory indicators, and draw up additional <b>programme-specific indicators</b> as needed
A10.1.1	<b>ACTION:</b> Subject to funding being found from existing financial resources, establish an EU mechanism for <b>independent, authoritative research-based advice to inform implementation and further policy development.</b>	Develop concept in consultation with key stakeholders, confirm funding availability, put mechanism in place.	Engage in mechanism

#### 5.4 Farmland birds as indicators for 2007-13 Rural Development Plans

Farmland bird populations provide a useful indication of the general state of farmland habitats, since the diversity and abundance of plant and insect species on farmland directly affects the availability of food for birds. In addition, small landscape features such as hedgerows, uncultivated field margins, small woodlands and patches of scrub are important for many species of birds.

The Commission has proposed that one of the common impact indicators for the 2007-13 RDPS should be 'reversing biodiversity decline' and the Farmland Bird Index<sup>32</sup> will be a key

<sup>32</sup> The Farmland Bird Index (FBI) is an aggregate index of population estimates from a selected group of breeding bird species that depend on agricultural land for nesting and/or feeding. The data collected by national or regional bird monitoring schemes is collated to produce the EU-level FBI by the co-ordinator for the Pan European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme (PECBMS), a joint initiative of the European Bird Census Council and BirdLife International.

measure of this, as it is one of the few data sets for groups of species which will be available in all Member States.

## 6 Implementing 2007-13 agri-environment schemes for the benefit of birds in nine new Member States

This section takes the four questions posed by the study as a basis for considering how Member States will need to design and implement their 2007-13 rural development programmes to deliver EU environmental policies and targets for farmland birds and discusses the progress made by the nine new Member States. The four questions were:

- are bird conservation priorities adequately addressed in the **objectives, targeting and funding** of the RDP?
- is the **design** of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for bird conservation priorities?
- what are the barriers to **delivery** of appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures where they are needed for bird conservation priorities?
- what is the **contribution of other CAP policies** to the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for bird conservation

**Please note: this section presents an overview for the nine Member States - key points for each Member State can be found in the relevant Sections 7 to 15 below.**

### 6.1 Objectives, targets and funding for agri-environment schemes for birds

#### *Objectives*

Compared to their total area of farmland the new Member States hold a disproportionate share of the EU25 populations of many farmland birds, including nine threatened Annex 1 species. As a consequence the management of farmland bird habitats in the new Member States is likely to be a critical factor in meeting the legal requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives and delivering the EU's commitment to reversing biodiversity decline by 2010. The long-term decline of farmland birds in Europe has been associated with more intensive farming in EU15<sup>33</sup>, and populations of farmland birds are now declining in some of the new Member States as the farming sector recovers from the economic collapse of the 1990s and takes advantage of EU membership. Without positive action the loss of extensively managed farmland bird habitats is likely to continue, as a direct result of improvements in competitiveness, farm incomes and animal welfare and food hygiene standards. Very specific targeted action will be required, both in IBAs and the wider countryside, to reverse these trends, with clear objectives and realistic targets based on sound evidence.

Many of the national strategies and draft 2007-13 plans for the nine new Member States do make reference to protecting Natura 2000 sites, and improving biodiversity and the state of habitats and species in rural areas. Very few have specific objectives for farmland birds and where they do it is for key threatened species (such as the Corncrake) rather than for farmland birds in general. This is perhaps surprising when the Farmland Bird Index will be used by the Commission to assess the impact of Axis 2 measures, and perhaps could be used by Member States themselves in support of Axis 2 budgets when they need to argue their case for EAFRD funding in future.

High nature value traditional farming systems are of particular value to birds, and their preservation and development has been identified by the Commission as a priority for Axis 2 funding. One of first priorities for agri-environment schemes and funding should therefore be to support the management of high nature value bird habitats where these still exist, and to restore them where they have recently been abandoned (both inside and outside SPAs). Well designed and supported Natura 2000 and agri-environment measures are essential, but on

<sup>33</sup> Donald, P.F., Green, R.E., Heath, M.F., 2001. *Agricultural intensification and the collapse of Europe's farmland bird populations*. Proc. R. Soc. London. B 268, 25–29.

their own may not be able to support a whole farming system and the often complex land use and social structure on which it depends, if economic pressures and other rural development measures are pulling in the opposite direction. It is clear from the response to our questionnaire survey that if traditional farming systems are to survive and develop it will be essential to:

- protect characteristic habitats and landscape structures from Axis 1 or Axis 2 supported actions which threaten to destroy them (e.g. improving the competitiveness of farms, restructuring into larger units, growing energy crops, removing non-farmed landscape features, afforestation).
- support the whole farming system with a specially designed combination of regulation, cross-compliance, agri-environment payments, non-productive investments and agri-environment advice and information for farmers who may not understand why they should retain old-fashioned farm structures when everyone else is modernising;
- help farmers to improve their working conditions and profitability (without damaging habitats) through a carefully targeted package of support from the other two axes for high nature value farming systems. For example: semi-subsistence farm support; advice and investment support to meet EU environmental, hygiene and safety standards so that they can continue to keep livestock (perhaps beef rather than dairy); purchase of small scale machinery; assistance with developing, processing, labelling and marketing products from traditional mixed farming in high nature value areas; and setting up co-operatives, micro-businesses and tourism enterprises. (More examples of possible packages of EAFRD measures for different farming systems are shown in Table 5 at the end of Section 6.)

This targeted rural development support for high nature value farming will require coherent, integrated objectives, schemes and delivery mechanisms across all three axes. This level of integration, particularly of schemes and delivery mechanisms, will be a challenge for Member States and it is not clear if it is even a priority. On the contrary, despite the Commission's guidelines stressing the need for internal and external cohesion of EAFRD measures our survey produced worrying examples of both Axis 1 and Axis 2 measures which directly threaten bird habitats targeted by agri-environment schemes in the same programme.

### ***Targets and indicators for the impact of agri-environment schemes on birds***

Rural development measures should have clear objectives, accompanied by indicators and targets which can be used to monitor and evaluate their impact - this is particularly important for complex measures such as agri-environment, but there are very few examples of proper biological monitoring of the outcomes of agri-environment schemes. In the absence of any specific targets for changes in populations of farmland birds by 2013 (and interim targets for 2010) it is difficult to see how the Commission will be able to assess what contribution individual Member States' planned Axis 2 spending will make to achieving favourable population status for Annex 1 farmland birds or meeting the Göteborg target in 2010<sup>34</sup>. So far there is little evidence of quantitative impact targets being set by Member States, either for key Annex 1 species or farmland birds in general.

Few details are available for Member States' proposals for evaluating the 2007-13 agri-environment schemes, and many of the nine Member States have not yet chosen indicators or prepared an evaluation methodology. However Estonia provides a rare example of an agri-environment evaluation scheme using a range of biodiversity impact indicators, which is already being implemented and will be developed for 2007-13 period (see Annex 2 for details).

### ***Funding***

In 2004-06 only a small proportion of agri-environment funding and schemes were targeted at farmland birds, despite relevant expertise in scheme design and experience of pilot projects in some of the new Member States. Achieving EU objectives for farmland birds and Natura 2000

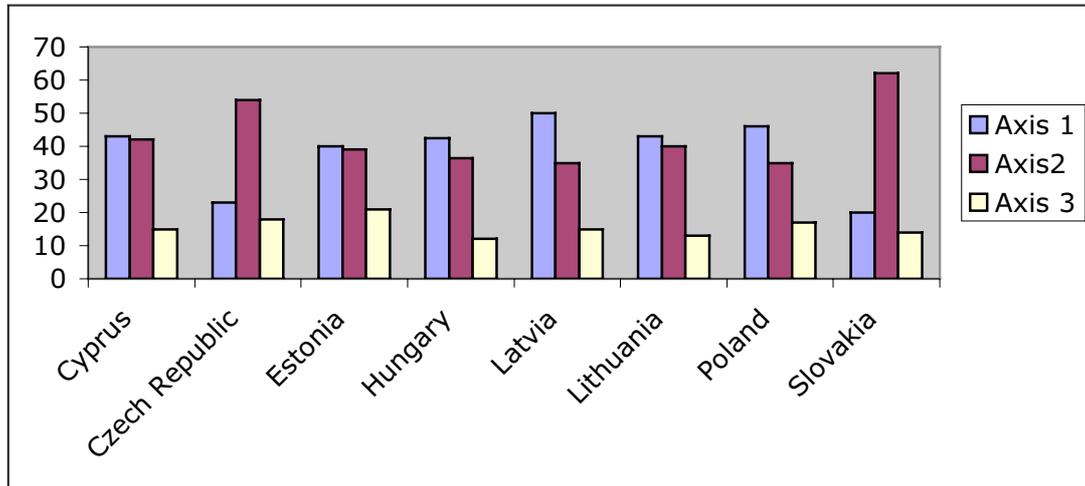
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<sup>34</sup> Quantified targets could be set for population change in targeted species, at varying geographical scales (farm, high nature value site, Member State) over different intervals of time including an interim target specifically for 2010, in the context of the Göteborg and the Mid Term Evaluation of the rural development programmes.

will, in many Member States, require a significant increase in funding for agri-environment schemes targeted at birds both in high nature value areas and the wider countryside.

Competition for funding between agri-environment and other EAFRD measures is likely to be a limiting factor for agri-environment schemes in 2007-13 despite the 25% minimum for Axis 2. Figure 1 below compares the proportions of the EAFRD budget expected to be allocated to the three axes in each Member State.

**Figure 1 Provisional allocations of EAFRD budget for 2007-13**



Source: questionnaire survey for this report (no data was available for Slovenia)

Several respondents to our survey commented on 2007-13 funding allocations and expressed concerns that:

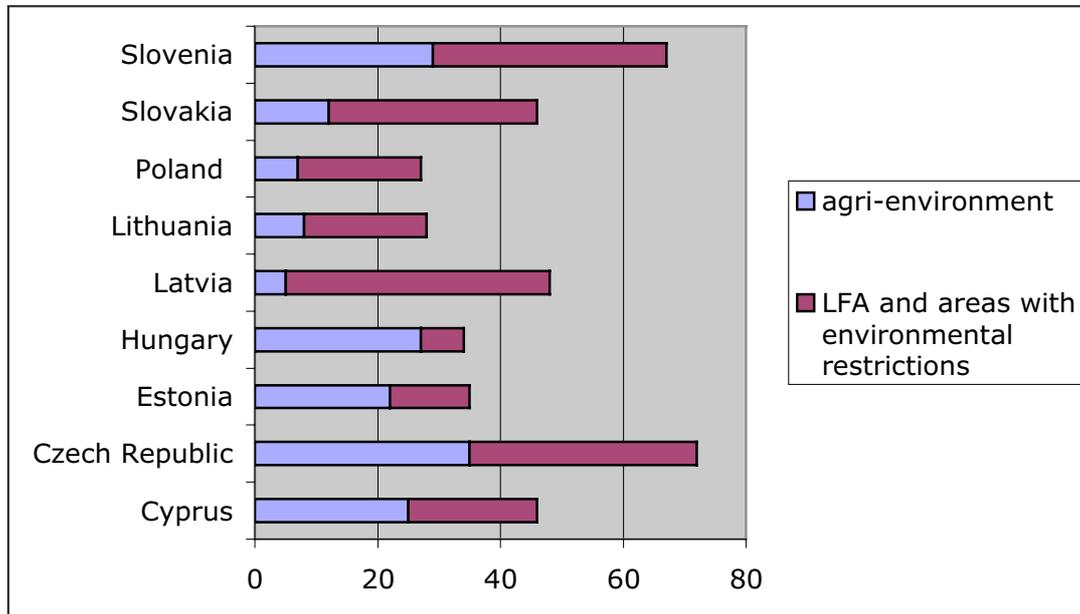
- not enough Axis 2 funding would be allocated to measures targeted at birds, even in IBAs and other high nature value areas;
- the majority of agri-environment funding (and uptake area) in 2004-06 was allocated to schemes that are easy to implement and popular with farmers but unlikely to benefit habitat management for birds;
- this emphasis on simple horizontal schemes might continue in 2007-13; and
- in some cases Ministries are responding to poor uptake of targeted schemes in 2004-06 by proposing to delete these from the 2007-13 programme, rather than address the causes of poor uptake.

Respondents also pointed out that opportunities have been missed to 'build in' benefits for farmland birds when designing agri-environment schemes (and other Axis 2 measures) targeted at different objectives such as pollution control. LFA support is an example of the latter point. It has been a significant element of the 2004-06 plans (see Figure 2) and may have helped to prevent abandonment of high nature value farmland but, in several Member States, opportunities have been missed to attach simple conditions that would benefit birds and other biodiversity. Changing the baseline for LFA payments from GFP to GAEC may in some cases further reduce its environmental effectiveness. It seems likely that LFAs will continue to take a significant proportion of the Axis 2 budget in many Member States, despite the Commission's intention to review the policy and the clear signal in the *EU Action Plan to 2010 and Beyond* that, from 2010, LFA payments should be making a bigger contribution to biodiversity and high nature value farming systems.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Table 4 point A2.1.7

**Figure 2 Relative percentages of EAGGF funding allocated to LFA and agri-environment in each Member State for 2004-06 period**

(source: DG Agriculture, Member State profiles of Rural Development Plans 2004-06. These are funding allocations - actual expenditure may differ)



## 6.2 Design of agri-environment schemes and measures to benefit birds

Design of agri-environment schemes covers setting not only management prescriptions, but also uptake targets and payment rates.

### *Management prescriptions*

Prescriptions need to be carefully designed to meet all the management needs of birds, which can be complex. For some birds these needs are highly specific and well documented (e.g. nesting sites for the Great Bustard) but in general management requirements for birds cover:

- **food supply**, which may be provided directly by the crop and its weeds for seed and grain feeders and grazers. Because birds are often near the top of the food chain their food supply may be other animals - invertebrates, amphibians or small mammals which depend on areas of semi-natural vegetation or landscape features such as trees and ponds. Some birds require a variety of food supplies, as may be found in mixed traditional farmland.
- **nesting areas** which may be in small landscape features or in the crop - for example, Corncrake nests in wet grassland and has flightless chicks for whom mowing dates and methods are critical for survival.
- **shelter and cover**, which may be provided by having a diversity of habitats and structures within reach, such as uncropped land, patches of semi-natural vegetation, isolated trees and other landscape features

Many of these requirements can be provided by low intensity management of farmland and by adapting day-to-day activities to the birds' needs. In the wider countryside it may be sufficient to provide this on only a proportion of the farm (e.g. grass strips on arable land) but in IBAs and other high nature value areas management at landscape scale is likely to be required, involving most of the farmland in the area.

There were several measures targeted at Annex 1 birds and high nature value areas and in the 2004-06 programmes, particularly in those Member States with experience of national agri-environment schemes before accession. Not all these schemes were successful - in

some cases this was due to problems with payment rates and delivery (see below) but in others the prescriptions were not ideal for the birds, or caused problems for the farmers. The difficulties in implementing grassland measures for Corncrakes (ideal mowing dates for the birds are too late to produce good quality hay for the farmer) illustrate the problems and costs of combining ideal management for birds with productive, mechanised farming. Some high nature value measures were implemented most successfully by absentee owners who were not dependent on the produce of the farm to make a living, but were willing to manage the land for agri-environment payments.

In the wider countryside there were relatively few horizontal measures targeted at farmland birds, and the opportunity was sometimes missed to make slight changes to agri-environment measures designed for other objectives, so that they would also benefit birds. For example:

- adding a requirement to an organic farming to maintain small landscape features of benefit to birds, such as patches of semi-natural vegetation, wet depressions, isolated trees (including dead trees), lines of trees, hedges.
- altering the seed mixes and mowing regimes for the pollution control strips of grass sown along the edge of arable fields to provide food and shelter for birds and their prey.

#### ***Non-productive investments (Article 41)***

There is surprisingly little evidence of Member States planning to use non-productive investments to support habitat management for farmland birds, despite the fact that this measure can provide farmers with funding at the start of a five year agreement, for habitat improvements such as the construction of small ponds and scrapes, fencing to control grazing in nesting areas and perching posts for raptors.

Lack of sheep and cattle grazing is a major problem for management of high nature value grassland at risk of abandonment. Where the capital costs of re-introducing livestock are too high for many small farmers they cannot join agri-environment schemes (e.g. in Hungary). In these cases there would be great benefit if the costs of re-introducing livestock (perhaps of indigenous breeds) were eligible for Axis 2 non-productive investment or agri-environment support, or Axis 1 farm investment support. (Although these costs could, in theory, be covered by Natura 2000 compensation it is unlikely that a Member State would make it a legal requirement for farmers to keep livestock).

#### ***Targeting agri-environment measures***

Targeting can include not just defining the geographical coverage of a scheme but also the use of advisory and extension services to promote effective uptake, and the setting of payment rates and management prescriptions to meet regional or local needs. Where measures are designed for Annex 1 species confined to particular areas targeting should be relatively easy. There are several examples of this type of zonal scheme operating both inside and outside SPAs. On the other hand, geographical targeting of measures that benefit more widespread Annex 1 species and other birds has in some cases been too restrictive. There were several examples of agri-environment measures of value to birds which appear to have failed simply because they were ignored by advisers who promoted other, more easily implemented, schemes.

The relationship between Natura 2000 compensation payments and agri-environment schemes will be complicated, particularly in the early years of the 2007-13 programme. The Commission has made it clear that Article 38 compensation payments cannot be paid until the Natura 2000 management requirements at farm level are mandatory under national legislation, which is not yet in place in all Member States<sup>36</sup>. In giving the management of Natura 2000 sites and species the priority required in the Commission's Guidelines, Member States can use the flexibility of the EAFRD Regulation to make adjustments to their support mechanisms during the life of the programme, both to reflect the introduction of Natura 2000 legislation and to meet the changing requirements of habitat management. The view of some NGOs that Natura 2000 compensation payments are a flexible tool to implement SPA

<sup>36</sup> Communication from DGAgri Directorate E1.2 to WWF Bulgaria, dated 18.7.2006

management plans at farm level does not seem to be shared by Member States, who seem to regard them as having a mainly protective role, safeguarding habitats from harmful change. Thus agri-environment schemes will continue to have an important role in supporting the positive management and improvement of Natura 2000 farmland habitats - and where designation is not complete or Natura 2000 regulations are not in place at the beginning of the 2007-13 programme, agri-environment schemes will initially have to cover both protective and management roles.

### **Payment rates**

Setting the appropriate payment rate is critical to the success of every agri-environment measure, and the best-designed measures may fail completely if the payments rates are not perceived by the farmers to cover their real costs. At the other extreme too-generous payment rates can draw funding away from other schemes, particularly if the requirements are undemanding and applicants are not selected according to expected environmental benefit. Occasionally this leads to more direct environmental damage than simply starving other schemes of funding - for example a generous payment rate for organic orchards in Poland had the unwanted perverse effect of encouraging farmers to destroy high nature value grassland in the process of planting new organic orchards. In other countries schemes for soil conservation (inter-cropping for example) have proved so popular that additional funding has been allocated to them while more demanding measures, of greater benefit to birds, have been largely ignored. These distortions are not unusual in the early stages of agri-environment implementation, especially where Member States have not piloted the measures, but they do illustrate the powerful and unexpected effects that payment rates can have on carefully thought out objectives.

The new Member States will have a particularly difficult task in setting payments rates for 2007-13 because 'the goal posts will move' as the profitability and costs of individual farms and whole sectors change in response to new markets and to investment supported by Axis 1, regional, social and cohesion funds. Proposals for 2007-13 suggest that Member States are gaining experience in setting payment rates but if agri-environment measures targeted at birds are to be competitive with other agri-environment measures some flexibility will be required to allow adjustments in the early years. Setting payment rates will be more complicated on farms eligible for both Natura 2000 compensation and agri-environment schemes.

Few of the Member States have used differential payment rates as a means of targeting individual agri-environment schemes, but in some Member States payment rates in Natura 2000 areas are higher than elsewhere, or farmers are given easier access to competitive schemes. This approach could usefully be extended to other high nature value and traditional farming areas. Another way of targeting smaller farms is to make payment rates degressive as the size of the parcel or farm increases (as proposed in Poland).

### **The significance of GAEC**

From 2007 GAEC will be the baseline environmental requirement to be observed on the whole farm by farmers receiving Pillar 1 area payments and also by farmers receiving Axis 2 support for agri-environment, forest-environment, Natura 2000, afforestation of farmland and animal welfare (GAEC replaces 'Good Farming Practice' used for the 2004-06 period).

Member States are required to define GAEC to '*ensure a minimum level of maintenance and avoid the deterioration of habitats*' with standards for '*minimum livestock stocking rates or/and appropriate regimes, protection of permanent pasture, retention of landscape features, avoiding the encroachment of unwanted vegetation on agricultural land*<sup>37</sup> .

The potential for GAEC either to complement or to work against the objectives of agri-environment schemes does not seem to have been recognised fully, bearing in mind that this cross-compliance measure will have much greater leverage than GFP because it applies to direct support payments as well as to agri-environment and LFA payments.

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<sup>37</sup> Article 51 of Regulation 1698/2005 and Annex IV of Regulation 1782/2003

Two particular concerns about the definition of GAEC were highlighted in this survey:

- preventing the conversion of permanent pasture in high nature value areas (including NATURA 2000 sites); and
- protecting trees, bushes and other small landscape elements of farmland which can be particularly important for birds.

In several new Member States, there have been cases where trees and bushes have been removed by farmers to ensure that all their arable land qualifies for direct payment - but if protecting these features is made a requirement of GAEC, the land these features occupy will qualify for direct aid payments<sup>38</sup>. This condition might be more effective in practice if farmers also had an incentive to go beyond simply not damaging landscape features, and were rewarded by agri-environment payments for actively managing them for biodiversity.

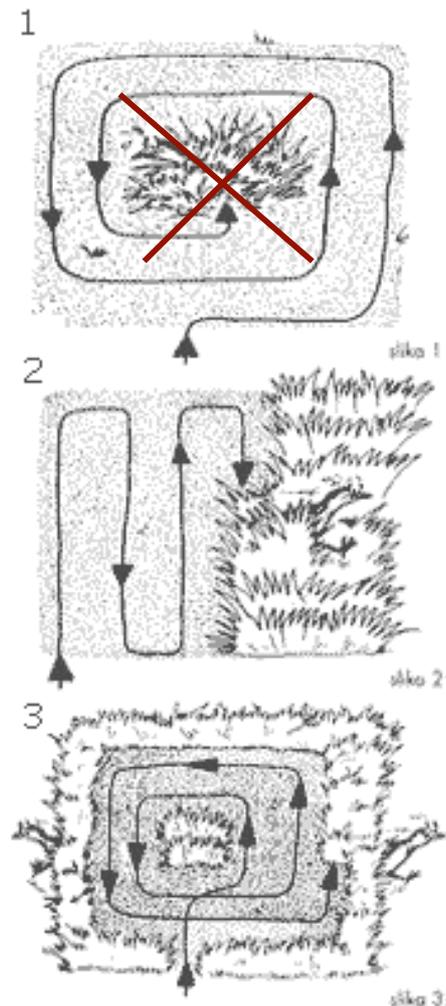
Respondents have also pointed out that some existing GFP requirements of benefit to birds may not be transferred to GAEC - if this happens it will increase the cost (or reduce the benefits) of agri-environment schemes, which will have to start paying for management which had been a baseline requirement in 2004-06. Specific suggestions for transferring existing GFP conditions to GAEC, can be found in Sections 7 to 15 and include:

- all mowing of grassland to be done using 'middle outwards' or similar bird friendly methods (see Figure 3 below);
- prohibition of converting high nature value grassland to arable land; and
- grass buffer strips along water courses.

**Figure 3 Mowing techniques favourable for Corncrake and other birds**

Method 1 is not recommended because it traps flightless chicks hiding in the long grass.

Methods 2 and 3 allow them to escape unharmed



(source of illustrations: Marjan Vaupoti DOPPS-BirdLife Slovenia)

<sup>38</sup> Commission Regulation 796/2004 Article 30 (3)

The extent and quality of enforcement of both GFP and GAEC has caused problems. In some cases requirements beneficial to birds are simply not enforced, or paying agency staff are unable to enforce them properly because they lack the environmental skills (for example to identify invasive plants). Elsewhere farmers are discouraged from joining agri-environment schemes because they fear losing their direct payments if the agri-environment management requirements conflict with those of GAEC (for example on grazing and mowing) and it has not been made clear that exceptions can be made for land in agri-environment schemes. It will be important that these derogations are in place for the 2007-13 schemes.

### **6.3 Delivering agri-environment measures of benefit to birds**

#### ***Advisory and paying agency staff***

The lack of administrative and technical experience and failure of delivery systems has been a problem in introducing agri-environment schemes in the new Member States (as it has been for some of the more experienced EU15 countries). In the case of Hungary payments to farmers have been severely delayed and there is concern that if this continues the goodwill and enthusiasm of the farmers will be lost.

Of greatest concern, in many of the Member States, is the lack of environmental expertise among agri-environment advisers, which appears to have been an important factor in the failure of some of the more demanding agri-environment measures, including those targeted at birds. An urgent need to have more biodiversity training for both advisory and paying agency staff was identified by respondents to the survey. The environmental competence of advisers is critical to the success of agri-environment programmes - they explain the purpose and intended outcomes of the programme to the farming community, match prescriptions to areas of the farm, explain the management requirements to the farmer and help farmers understand how to adapt their day-to-day farming and deal with the 'knock-on' effects of agri-environment schemes. It seems that in many Member States effective, knowledgeable advice on agri-environment schemes is only available from staff in National Parks, protected areas and NGOs, often working informally and unpaid. Given the relative costs and benefits of biodiversity training for staff (compared to the costs of five years of badly delivered agri-environment schemes on thousands of hectares of farmland) there is a strong case for making biodiversity training of staff the highest priority for the 2007-13 programme. Although there may be few biodiversity experts in the agricultural institutions, more formal use could be made of the environmental expertise in protected areas, NGOs and research institutes, for example, by contracting them as farm advisers or to provide training programmes for delivery staff and farmers.

The skills of paying agency staff were identified by respondents as another limiting factor in delivery. Standards of control (checking that farmers have carried out the management paid for) have already been heavily criticised by the European Court of Auditors who found that EU15 Member States had failed to observe properly the requirement in the RDR Implementing Regulation to pay for reduced inputs only where these could be measured<sup>39</sup>. The Court recommended that the Commission should consider how the principle of 'payable if measurable' should be put into practice for the 2007-13 Plans, taking into account both the risk of non-compliance and the potential benefits of the expenditure<sup>40</sup>. If this principle is also to be observed for agri-environment management targeted at birds it is essential that paying agency staff have a clear understanding of habitat management requirements, and are able to explain to a farmer how to put right any failures of compliance.

#### ***Farmers' attitudes***

Farmers' attitudes to wildlife conservation on their farms can be a significant factor in the implementation of agri-environment measures. Some new Member States have made considerable efforts to provide information and advice to farmers at the beginning of agri-

<sup>39</sup> Article 18(3) of Regulation (EC) No 817/2004: 'Payments may be based on limitations on the use of fertilisers, plant protection products or other inputs only if such limitations are technically and economically measurable.

<sup>40</sup> European Court of Auditors(2005) *Special Report No 3/2005 concerning rural development - the verification of agri-environment expenditure* Official Journal of the European Union 2005/C 279/01

environment programmes, and in several countries environmental training is compulsory for farmers entering agri-environment schemes. This effort seems to have helped the high rates of uptake in the Czech Republic and Estonia - in contrast to Poland where farmer training does not cover agri-environment management, advisers lack environmental skills and the uptake of agri-environment schemes has been very low. In Cyprus negative attitudes to wildlife conservation have contributed to delays in designating Natura 2000 farmland sites.

A recent interview survey of farmers in Finland and Estonia shows that those farmers who were more interested in and knowledgeable about wildlife were more likely to use environmentally friendly measures<sup>41</sup>, and indicates that sufficient demonstration and advisory work is invaluable in putting conservation management into practice.

### ***Land and property rights***

There have been some problems with uptake of agri-environment measures, particularly for high nature value areas, caused by issues over property rights, including:

- owners seeking to claim payments at the expense of the tenants who farm the land;
- local livestock farmers, who cannot afford to comply with the late mowing requirements of grassland management for Corncrake because the payments do not cover the loss of winter feed, are resentful of owners of farmland who live and work elsewhere taking advantage of LFA and agri-environment payments. In Latvia these 'sofa farmers' are making a significant contribution to the conservation of habitats which would otherwise be abandoned, but there is a risk that they may be excluded from some Axis 2 payments as a result of pressure from farmers' organisations;
- many traditional farming systems have important bird habitats managed by farmers who do not own the land but have shared rights to its use - for example wet grasslands in Poland, orchards in Hungary. Excluding these farmers from agri-environment schemes because they do not have full tenure for five years will put high nature value habitats at risk of abandonment.

## **6.4 Impact of other EAFRD measures on the success of agri-environment schemes**

The effects of budget allocations on agri-environment schemes targeted at birds are discussed above, but other rural development measures can also have significant effects, some posing a threat to bird habitats, others offering an opportunity to support both the economic and environmental sustainability of high nature value farming systems.

Potential threats to farmland birds from Axis 1 and Axis 2 include:

- afforestation of valuable grassland bird habitats on farmland is a significant threat in several Member States. The proposed use of Axis 2 funds in this way contradicts the Commission's Guidelines;
- threats to important bird habitats from the use of Axis 1 funding to support the repair and reinstatement of long-disused land drainage systems on wet grasslands used by birds in Latvia;
- the lack of environmental criteria for the allocation of Axis 1 support in measures such as farm investment, restructuring and semi-subsistence farms, especially on high nature value land; this is a concern in several Member States.

There are many opportunities to use other rural development measures in a positive way to support agri-environment management for the benefit of birds, including:

- Axis 1 support for purchasing small machines to replace hand mowing; to develop, process and market produce from high nature value areas; to set up co-operatives; and for environmentally beneficial investment to improve the farm income;

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<sup>41</sup> Herzon I and Mikk M (in press) *Farmers' perceptions of biodiversity and their willingness to enhance it through agri-environment schemes: a comparative study from Estonia and Finland*

- Axis 3 support for micro-enterprises, farm tourism and the preparation and implementation of Natura 2000 management plans
- Axis 4 support for facilitators and public private partnerships to develop innovative solutions to the social and economic problems of traditional farming systems.

The wide range of opportunities to integrate support from all four axes of the EAFRD is illustrated in Table 5. Coherent delivery of different types of support for biodiversity would be of particular benefit to farmers in Natura 2000 and other high nature value areas, but it is not clear to what extent (if at all) Member States plan to use EAFRD support in this way.

**Table 5 EAFRD measures which could be combined with agri-environment payments, to support farming systems favourable to conservation of Annex 1 and other farmland birds** (numbers refer to Articles of the EAFRD Regulation 1698/2005)

<b>On All Farmland</b>	
<p><b>Axis 1</b> Setting up services to provide advice on habitat management and GAEC compliance (25) and assisting farmers to use these services (24(1)a)</p>	
<b>On Areas Identified As High Nature Value Farmland Or Important Bird Areas, And Designated Natura 2000 Sites</b>	
<p><b>Axis 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biodiversity training and information for farmers (21)</li> </ul> <p><b>Axis 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natura 2000 (38) or LFA (37) compensation payments for requirements to protect semi-natural farmland habitats from damage and intensification</li> <li>• Organic (biological) farming (39)</li> <li>• Non-productive investments to create nesting sites, erect perching poles, plant native shrubs, create small ponds and other features to improve the habitat for birds (41)</li> </ul> <p><b>Axis 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On Natura 2000 sites and other high nature value farmland <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• preparing protection and management plans; environmental awareness activities; and investment for maintaining, restoring and upgrading these areas (57)</li> <li>• creating and developing micro-enterprises which enable farming communities to benefit economically from high nature value farming systems, and training and information for people working in rural businesses (52)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Developing and marketing 'green' tourism activities, recreational infrastructure, small-scale accommodation and access to natural areas within high nature value farming areas (55)</li> <li>• Preparing and implementing local development strategies through public-private partnerships to support farming communities in high nature value areas (59 for strategies using only Axis 3 measures)</li> </ul> <p><b>Axis 4</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combining measures from all three Axes in Leader programmes to support farming communities in high nature value areas (62-64)</li> <li>• Co-operation between Leader groups in different areas (within in Member State and indifferent Member States) to share innovation and experience of using EAFRD to support high nature value farming (65)</li> </ul>	
<b>On Specific Farmland Habitats</b>	
<b>Habitat type and preferred farming system for conservation of farmland birds</b>	<b>Measures</b>
<p><b>Mixed traditional farming</b> The management requirements fall into two groups but it is important to note that <b>both groups</b> must be implemented if these important habitats are to survive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>maintaining low intensity mixed farming through:</b> mixed organic farming; traditional perennial crops, local varieties and breeds, mixed crops; extensive grassland management and reduced pesticide use, especially in viticulture.</li> </ul>	<p><b>From all three axes as above for high nature value farmland plus:</b></p> <p><b>Axis 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in machinery, buildings and infrastructure to improve efficiency of traditional or low-input methods of production without reducing any of the environmental benefits (26 and 30)</li> <li>• Promoting co-operation between producers and processors (29)</li> </ul>

Habitat type and preferred farming system for conservation of farmland birds	Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>maintaining the spatial structure of the habitats by: preventing conversion of grassland to arable; keeping the pattern of small fields; retaining field margins, ditches, stone walls, hedgerows, patches of scrub and woodland and other natural vegetation and small landscape features; maintaining traditional orchards; and retaining old, dying and dead trees and, on the forest edge, living trees with holes (nest sites).</li> </ul>	<p>and investing in development of new products, processes and technologies for adding value to products of traditional or low-input farming (28)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investing in processing and marketing products of traditional or low-input farming (28)</li> <li>Supporting restructuring of semi-subsistence farms in a way which retains the environmental benefits of the current farming system (34)</li> <li>Setting up producer groups (35), setting up and promoting food quality schemes (32 and 33) and helping farmers meet food standards (31) for products of traditional or low-input farming without reducing any of the environmental benefits of these systems</li> </ul>
<p><b>Permanent grassland and steppe habitats</b></p> <p>The aim of management is to maintain open grassland habitats as low-input pastures and meadows where agricultural activity and grazing is delayed until late in the season; on wet grasslands mowing may not be required every year, but the hydrological regime should be maintained or restored. Best practice and choice of measures will depend on which birds are living in the area, but include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Low intensity management of permanent grassland</b> with no conversion to arable or reseeded, no artificial fertilisers, herbicides or pesticides; controlling invasive plants and spread of scrub, and developing a diverse grass structure, with areas of short grass; mowing once every one or two years; extensive grazing &lt;1 LSU/hectare; grazing of marginal areas; maintenance of pastures with trees; use of traditional breeds; retaining small woodlands, scrub, lines of trees, old, solitary dying and dead trees and, within 10m of the forest edge, living trees with holes. For wet grasslands it is also important that there is no new drainage and no restoration of long-neglected drains.</li> <li><b>Reducing the effect of farming activities on birds</b> by: mowing from the centre outwards, at low speed; leaving 10% of the area as unmown strips for cover in Spring; removing mown material, not stacking it; hand mowing, using small machines, mowing small parcels; requiring permission for burning grassland; no mowing or other agricultural activity before August in areas used by Great Bustard, Corncrake and other ground nesting birds (15 July elsewhere); delaying grazing until August or, if not possible, fencing off the most important areas for birds until then. Additionally on dry grasslands and steppes: spreading mowing over a long period; restricting use of harrows; leaving cereal stubble 8-15 cm high; no poisoning of crows; no night working; limiting agricultural activities and public access in protection zones around nests (150m for Great Bustard, 50m for Montagu's Harrier, 500m for other raptors).</li> </ul>	<p><b>From all three axes as above for high nature value farmland plus:</b></p> <p><b>Axis 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investment in lightweight small machinery for mowing wet grasslands (26)</li> <li>Promoting co-operation between producers and processors (29) and investing in development of new products, processes and technologies for adding value to mown grass which currently has no market (28)</li> <li>Investment in equipment and infrastructure needed to reintroduce livestock in areas where extensive grazing would bring environmental benefits (26 and 30)</li> </ul> <p><b>Axis 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of indigenous breeds of grazing livestock (conservation of genetic resources (39 (5))</li> <li>Non-productive investments to clear scrub from abandoned grassland and create small wet areas and ponds (41)</li> </ul>

Habitat type and preferred farming system for conservation of farmland birds	Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Investing in habitat improvement</b> by: providing artificial nests and nest boxes for Saker, Roller and White Stork, creating small ponds for White Stork, restoring mown meadows.</li> </ul> <p><b>Arable</b> The aim of management is to maintain high nature value extensive management where it still exists, and elsewhere to reduce the intensity of management, by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Adopting organic or low-input arable farming;</b> including fallow in the rotation; retaining stubble for as long as possible (ideally over winter); protecting field margins and other small landscape features and managing them without chemicals.</li> <li>• <b>Reducing the direct effect of farming activities on birds</b> by: prohibiting stubble burning and night working; delaying spraying and harvest until after mid July; and limiting agricultural activities and access in protection zones around nests (see grasslands above for details)</li> <li>• <b>Improving the availability of habitats, food supplies and nesting sites</b> by: leaving a proportion of cereals unharvested (as food for birds and their prey); creating beetle banks in fields; using a variety of crops in the rotation, including pulses; managing grassland in the rotation for the benefit of ground nesting birds (see below); creating grassy field margins and grassy strips 3-5m wide in fields; retaining small landscape features creating small ponds (for White Stork, which feeds on amphibians); providing perching poles for raptors, and artificial nests and nest boxes for Saker, Red-footed Falcon, Roller and White Stork.</li> </ul>	<p><b>As above for high nature value farmland where appropriate plus:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of local varieties of crops (conservation of genetic resources (39 (5)))</li> </ul>
<p><b>Perennial crops</b> The aim of management is to <b>maintain and promote high nature value extensive management</b> using traditional methods of cultivation, reduced fertilisers and biocides, and local varieties of fruit.</p>	<p><b>As above for high nature value farmland where appropriate plus:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of local varieties of fruit (conservation of genetic resources (39 (5)))</li> </ul>

## 7 Cyprus

### Key points for Cyprus 2007-13

Much of the farmland in Cyprus is managed as largely traditional, low intensity mixed farming with small fields and areas of semi-natural vegetation, resulting in a diverse agricultural landscape. These habitats support significant populations of several Annex 1 farmland birds in unfavourable population status in Europe, and the global population of two birds endemic to Cyprus.

Intensification of production threatens bird habitats in the more productive farmland areas, with increased use of pesticides affecting insect feeders. Abandonment is more of a problem in marginal areas, often followed by development and permanent loss of the habitat.

Farms in Cyprus are small, mostly part-time and no longer economically viable on market income alone. This makes agri-environment payments an attractive source of additional income, but farmers in Cyprus see agri-environment support as merely another form of subsidy and not as a means of dealing with serious environmental problems.

*Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan?*

50% of the UAA is classified as high nature value land but only 1% of this has been proposed for Natura 2000 designation, as a direct result of local opposition which led to all privately owned land (including most farmland) being taken out of the designation proposals. Agri-environment schemes, targeted at the biodiversity management of all high nature value land, would be the most effective way of implementing the EU requirement to use Axis 2 funds to contribute to biodiversity and protect and develop high nature value farming. It is not clear if this is to be a priority for Axis 2 funding in Cyprus.

To meet the EU 2007-13 Guidelines on protecting and developing high nature value farming systems, the first priority for agri-environment funding in all Member States should be to secure long-term conservation management of existing high nature value farmland habitats used by Annex 1 birds and other protected species. In Cyprus the proposed share of the EAFRD budget for agri-environment in 2007-13 is less than the proportion spent on agri-environment in 2004-06 and significantly less than the total required to deliver agri-environment support for high nature value farming from 2007, particularly when Natura 2000 payments are unlikely to be available for farmland. It seems likely that little, if any, of this reduced budget will be spent on measures targeted at management of high nature value habitats for birds, and that existing schemes of benefit to birds may be dropped and priority given to schemes seen by farmers as more relevant to their interests.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Biodiversity experts are concerned that parts of two existing agri-environment schemes, of benefit to birds, may be dropped from the 2007-13 programme simply because uptake has been relatively low. It is important for Annex 1 birds that these schemes should be continued and some improvements made. The scheme '*meeting agri-environmental standards for potatoes, citrus, wine grapes and cereals*' could be significantly improved by changing the management requirements and, in the case of potatoes, increasing the payment rates. In the second scheme '*conservation of the natural value of the agricultural environment and the traditional landscape with emphasis on the Less Favoured Areas*', the measures for planting and maintenance of traditional fruit trees and bushes, and maintenance of stone walls have already benefited birds, but biodiversity experts would like to see a much improved uptake of these measures.

Additional targeted schemes are needed to support management of high nature value farmland for birds but, apart from the *organic farming scheme*, the only other 2007-13 scheme relevant to birds was a BirdLife Cyprus proposal for *wildlife set-aside in cereal growing areas*, but this too seems to have been rejected by the Ministry of Agriculture. This scheme would have been very good for farmland birds (provided expert advice is followed on design of the management requirements) and had the support of environmental experts.

BirdLife Cyprus suggested two other new agri-environment measures for wildlife on farmland, for *conservation field margins* and *extensive grazing*, but despite support from officials in Government Departments these appear to have been rejected by the Ministry of Agriculture.

*What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Effective implementation of the more demanding agri-environment schemes that are needed to protect Annex 1 birds and other important habitats and species will depend not just on adequate funding but also on:

- a major effort to change farmers' attitudes towards agri-environment schemes, so that they understand and support the objectives and importance of environmental management;
- training of advisers in environmental management techniques so that they can provide technical advice and support to farmers, particularly for the more demanding schemes;
- evaluation of the impact of agri-environment schemes on farmland birds and their habitats, and feedback of the results into scheme design and implementation.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Failure to implement some of the well-defined GFP requirements for habitat management, (which should have been followed by all farmers in the LFA, covering almost 60% of farmland in Cyprus) means that birds and their habitats are still being damaged by activities such as burning and overgrazing.

To safeguard existing habitats for Annex 1 birds, GAEC cross-compliance requirements for 2007-13 should include basic protection of semi-natural habitats and landscape features from damage or destruction, and should be implemented effectively. Some elements of the traditional crop management scheme are more appropriate for GAEC cross-compliance than for agri-environment support, and if this agri-environment scheme is not continued in 2007-13 it will be particularly important that these elements are transferred to GAEC.

Safeguards are needed, both in the design of schemes and in the assessment of individual applications, to ensure that Axis 1 support for farm modernisation and land consolidation does not damage biodiversity or destroy the small habitats and features so important for birds.

## 7.1 Agriculture in Cyprus

Farmland occupies a smaller proportion of the total land area in Cyprus than in other new Member States, and the farms are smaller and mostly part-time - average farm size is 3.5 ha, 14.5% of the territory is agricultural land (UAA).

Part-time farming is very important in Cyprus - in 2002 only 29% of all operators of agricultural holdings had agriculture as their exclusive source of income, and part-time farmers are generally younger and better educated than full-time farmers. The holding size of part-time farms for which the main source of income is agriculture is twice that of full-time farms<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> European Commission (2002) *Agricultural Situation in the Candidate Countries: Country Report on Cyprus* Directorate-General for Agriculture

Much farmland in Cyprus is still wildlife-rich compared to Western Europe – the result of a diverse agricultural landscape and the predominance in many areas (especially uplands) of mixed farming with small fields, usually surrounded by remnants of natural vegetation and/or dry-stone walls.

A recent study<sup>43</sup> has shown that bird diversity and abundance in agricultural habitats in Cyprus both increase where there are more trees and scrub present and where use of pesticides and herbicides is limited. The close association of areas of natural vegetation with cropped areas seems to offer particularly suitable feeding, nesting and resting habitat for many priority bird species.

Using CAP funds to support low-intensity farming would be an effective way to preserve this rich farmland biodiversity, especially as much traditional non-intensive farming in Cyprus (e.g. vines, tree crops) is no longer economically viable without additional sources of income. Agri-environment payments compensate farmers for the additional benefits produced by their farming systems, which are not fully recognized or paid for by the market.

## 7.2 Annex 1 farmland birds in Cyprus

Many bird species of priority conservation concern for the EU are found in Cyprus farmland, including the endemic Cyprus warbler and Cyprus wheatear. Cyprus holds significant proportions of the total EU25 populations of Roller (16-25%), Masked shrike (85%), Long-legged buzzard, Black-headed Bunting, Calandra Lark, Black Francolin, and Chukar. Other Annex 1 farmland species used for the designation of IBAs in Cyprus include Griffon Vulture, Stone curlew and Bonelli's Eagle. Please see Annex 4 for more details of important farmland birds and their habitats in Cyprus.

Of the 16 IBAs in Cyprus, five are predominantly farmland and open scrub (*Phrygana* grazing land) with an estimated total of 27251 ha of farmland habitats. Three of these five areas (Akamas, Kilada Diarizou and Paphos Plain) together have 78% of the total area of farmland habitats within IBAs, but have not been proposed for Natura 2000 designation. This is a direct result of the strong opposition from local communities to Natura 2000 designation, which led to almost all privately owned land (including most farmland) being taken out of the designation proposals. More than 50% of the UAA in Cyprus is classified as High Nature Value farmland but only around 1% of this land is currently proposed for Natura 2000 designation<sup>44</sup>.

Although these large areas of high nature value farmland within IBAs may not yet have the protection and benefits of SPA designation, it appears that the Cyprus government already has a legal obligation under EU environmental law to avoid the deterioration or pollution of these IBA farmland habitats<sup>45</sup>. If it is to fulfil this obligation on privately owned high nature value farmland, the government will have to allocate higher priority and levels of funding to agri-environment measures specifically targeted at the threats to these habitats, in line with the Commission's strategic guidelines on use of Axis 2 funds.

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<sup>43</sup> Hellicar, M.A. (2004). *The Importance of Low Intensity Farming for Birds in Cyprus*. Report on the findings of the bi-communal 'Birds and Farming in Cyprus' project managed by the Cyprus Environmental Studies Centre (ESC).

<sup>44</sup> At the time of writing about 85% of the area currently designated as pSCI and SPA is state forest, another 10% is government, or common, land, while only 5% is private land (BirdLife Cyprus pers.comm.)

<sup>45</sup> The European Court of Justice (Basse Corbière Judgement C374/98) has concluded that unclassified SPAs, pending their formal classification, are subject to the stricter protection regime defined in the first sentence of Article 4 (4) of the Birds Directive '**Member States shall take appropriate steps to avoid pollution or deterioration of habitats or any disturbances affecting the birds, in so far as these would be significant having regard to the objectives of this Article**' (our emphasis)

### **7.3 Threats to existing farmland habitats for Annex 1 and other farmland birds in Cyprus**

#### ***Mixed traditional farming***

Mixed traditional farms have vines, almonds, cereals, olives, citrus, carobs and remnants of scrub (usually grazed by sheep and goats) and small fields, often with dry-stone walls. Abandoned plots are not uncommon on steeper slopes and marginal land. Farming is often a part-time activity, with grazing part of the system. The main threats to these habitats are:

- excessive pesticide use;
- abandonment (but the effect of current levels of abandonment on Cyprus birds is not entirely clear).

In future the trend towards abandonment will probably continue because the cost of farm labour is a growing problem. There may also be moves to create larger fields and new terraces (with bulldozers), as plots are re-allocated under government schemes to create larger, unified blocks of land for each grower. This could lead to more use of monocultures and to the removal of remnants of natural scrub vegetation.

#### ***Perennial crops***

Larger, irrigated vineyards, olive and citrus plantations are usually in intensive production with heavy chemical applications and no grazing. Due to the terrain, plot sizes are still much smaller than in Western Europe and remnants of natural vegetation often survive between fields. The main threats to these habitats are excessive chemical inputs, the relatively simplified (monoculture) structure of the habitat and, in future, continued intensification with removal of remnants of natural vegetation.

#### ***Arable land***

Arable land includes areas of relatively intensive cereal, peanut, alfalfa and vegetable production, with remnants of natural vegetation between the fields. Grazing with sheep and goats is often part of the system. The main threats to these habitats are intensification of production and removal of remnants of natural vegetation.

#### ***Steppe and pseudo-steppe***

These habitats are low intensity cereal fields, and areas of grassland on the higher, sloping, marginal land, with grazing by sheep and goats. The main threats to these habitats are current problems with overgrazing, planting of trees on open *Phrygana* and scrub habitats (in some cases with the support of the Forestry Department) and, in future, a tendency to increase inputs in cereal production and to abandon extensive grazing practices.

#### ***Abandoned cropland***

Abandoned land with vines, carob and olive groves is being encroached upon by scrub. Much of the land now abandoned is owned by Turkish Cypriots who are refugees in the occupied, northern, half of Cyprus and it is unlikely that this land will come back into production unless there is a political settlement. The main threat to these abandoned habitats is scrub encroachment (a study is currently under-way on the effect of abandonment on priority bird species in Cyprus<sup>46</sup>).

#### ***Pastureland, especially near water courses***

In remote areas semi-natural grasslands near watersides, often designated as IBAs, are at risk from the activities of farmers who find it easy to create pastureland by burning established plants.

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<sup>46</sup> BirdLife Cyprus pers.comm.

## 7.4 Opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds

In addition to the need to address the threats to existing Annex 1 bird habitats outlined above, there is a significant case for the creation of new habitats for farmland birds generally. The following table identifies the types of farmland management, preferred locations, opportunities to improve bird habitats and the birds that would benefit.

Farm type	Opportunities to create habitats or adopt bird-friendly management practices	This would improve breeding or feeding areas for:
<b>More intensively farmed areas, mainly in the lowlands</b>	<p>potato growing - three-year rotational fallow;</p> <p>citrus/vines ploughed instead of using herbicides;</p> <p>cereals - crop rotation;</p> <p>all arable land - no ploughing of green manure crops or for weed control in spring/early summer.</p>	<p><b>Annex 1:</b> Red-footed Falcon (migrant), Stone Curlew, Roller, Calandra Lark, Cyprus Wheatear and Lesser Grey Shrike (migrant).</p> <p><b>Other important species:</b> Chukar, Black Francolin, Turtle-dove, Crested Lark and Black-headed Bunting.</p>
<b>Cereal growing areas and scrub and <i>Phrygana</i> areas, mainly in the lowlands</b>	<p>grazing of cropland by sheep and goats after harvest helps to create a pseudo-steppe habitat;</p> <p>grazing is also important for maintenance of scrub and <i>phrygana</i> habitats;</p> <p>grazing is still widespread, but support is needed to maintain extensive grazing and should have conditions attached, to ensure that flocks are small enough to prevent over-grazing.</p>	<p><b>Annex 1:</b> Griffon Vulture, Long-Legged Buzzard, Red-Footed Falcon (migrant), Pallid Harrier (migrant), Bonelli's Eagle, Stone Curlew, Roller, Calandra Lark, Cyprus Wheatear, Cyprus Warbler, Lesser Grey Shrike (migrant) and Cretzschmar's Bunting</p> <p><b>Other important species:</b> Chukar, Goldfinch and Crested Lark.</p>
<b>Uplands: low intensity carob and almond groves, vineyards with drystone walls</b>	<p>maintenance of traditional trees (carobs/almonds);</p> <p>maintenance of traditional bushes;</p> <p>clearing of scrub from abandoned farmland;</p> <p>maintenance of dry-stone walls.</p>	<p>Carob and almond groves and drystone walls are of value to:</p> <p><b>Annex 1:</b> Long-Legged Buzzard, Bonelli's Eagle, Roller, Cyprus Wheatear, Cyprus Warbler, Masked Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Red-backed Shrike and Cretzschmar's Bunting</p> <p><b>Other important species:</b> Chukar, Cyprus Scops Owl, Turtle-dove, Olivaceous Warbler, Crested Lark and Cretzschmar's Bunting.</p>

## 7.5 National Strategy and budget allocations for 2007-13

The proposed allocation of EAFRD funding (at the time data was collected for this report) was: 43% to Axis 1, 42% to Axis 2 (with 21% to agri-environment and 17% to Water Framework Directive Schemes, Natura 2000 and LFA), and 15% to Axis 3.

This proposed share of the EAFRD budget for agri-environment in 2007-13 is less than the proportion spent on agri-environment in 2004-06 and significantly less than the total required to deliver agri-environment support for high nature value farming from 2007, particularly when Natura 2000 payments are unlikely to be available for farmland bird habitats.

In the absence of Natura 2000 protection for the large areas of high nature value farmland in Cyprus (including 27251 ha within IBAs) it will be particularly important that adequate funds are allocated to agri-environment measures which will ensure the protection and development of low-intensity management on this land, which is threatened by abandonment and intensification. It is not clear if this will be a priority for agri-environment funding, and specific concerns raised by the experts contributing to this study include:

- lack of support for Natura 2000 designation among the farming community means that priority is not being given to agri-environment schemes targeted at high nature value management in these areas;
- beneficial measures such as those for low-intensity crop production and maintenance of stone walls may be dropped, or their payment rates will not be adjusted to cover costs;
- new measures proposed by BirdLife Cyprus will not be adopted;
- agri-environment funds will continue to be used to pay for management which should be a requirement of GAEC.

These issues are discussed in more detail below.

## 7.6 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13

There are two current horizontal agri-environment measures of direct relevance to birds, which may not be continued in 2007-13. If these measures are dropped and additional measures proposed by BirdLife Cyprus are not adopted there will be no support available to manage farmland for the conservation of important populations of Annex 1 farmland birds.

The prescriptions, payments rates and response of farmers to these in the 2004-06 period are described below, together with comments on each of the measures indicating how they could be adapted to be of much greater benefit to birds.

### ***Meeting agri-environmental standards for potatoes, citrus, wine grapes and cereals (Action 2.2.1 in the 2004-06 programme)***

In the current programme this measure takes 14.6% of the total agri-environment expenditure. This crop extensification measure applies to all farming types throughout the farmed area and, if continued and amended as suggested below, is likely to benefit both Annex 1 and other farmland birds<sup>47</sup>.

There are separate requirements for different crops, but these have not been equally successful. For **cereals** the requirements include a 2 or 3-year crop rotation (using specific *Leguminosae* plants or fallowing at least in the third year); if fallowing, the farmer must plough twice a year (once late in autumn or early in Winter and once early in Spring); green manure can be used voluntarily. For **potatoes** the requirements include a three-year rotational fallow system (one year potatoes, one year other annual cultivation and one year obligatory fallowing and application of green manure); and integrated farming (correct use of water and fertilisers and combined use of natural and chemical pesticides).

#### *Comments on this measure*

The payment rates are in some cases too low. For cereals the rate of up to €230/ha per year for a 2 or 3 year crop rotation is sufficient, but for potatoes €700/ha per year for a 3-year crop rotation does not cover loss of possible earnings of €1631/ha, and for integrated farming €400/ha does not cover a possible loss of €660/ha. The measure does reduce chemical inputs and leads to less intensive management, but it would be of much greater benefit to birds if the management requirements were improved by, for example:

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<sup>47</sup> e.g. Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*, Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedichnemus*, Roller *Coracias garrulus*, Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*, Cyprus Wheatear *Oenanthe cyprica*, Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*, Chukar *Alectoris chukar*, Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*, Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur*, Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* and Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*.

- timing ploughing of green manure (and for weed control) to avoid the bird breeding season - ploughing should be prohibited in spring and early summer;
- to optimise the value of fallow land for birds, about 50% of each fallow field (in alternate strips) should be ploughed in autumn while the other 50% of the field should be ploughed in late winter. This would create a mosaic of vegetated and open areas providing both nesting areas and autumn/winter feeding areas;
- ploughing should be non-inversion tillage (conservation ploughing);
- a strip around the periphery of each fallow field should be ploughed in both autumn and late winter to minimize the spread of weeds;
- weeds should never be controlled by spraying or fire;
- green manure crops should be cut and ploughed in by the end of February at the latest to allow ground-nesting birds to use the fields after this date.

The scheme for **citrus** crops requires ploughing instead of using herbicide to control weeds in spring and summer; the rate of €300/ha per year (or €600/ha if the ploughing is done twice) does cover loss of earnings. For **integrated farming** (correct use of water and fertilisers and combined use of natural and chemical pesticides) the maximum payment of €300/ha does not cover loss of possible earnings of €1150/ha. The scheme for **wine grapes** requires ploughing instead of using herbicide to control weeds; ploughing is to be done from February to March, after pruning.

The measure as a whole is beneficial for birds because it reduces chemical inputs but it could be improved if ploughing to control weeds was not carried out during the breeding season (March to July) and, to minimize soil erosion, if all ploughing was contour ploughing and strips of unploughed land were left on steeper slopes.

***Conservation of the natural value of the agricultural environment and the traditional landscape with emphasis on the Less Favoured Areas (Action 2.3.1 in the 2004-06 programme)***

In the current programme this measure takes 5.3% of the total agri-environment expenditure and applies to all farmland, with priority given to LFAs (60% of the total farmland area that is under the control of Cyprus Republic). It would be of benefit Annex 1 and other farmland birds<sup>48</sup> if the options for traditional tree crops and stonewalls were continued. Where traditional extensive management survives, the changes required to farm management are not very significant, but on many abandoned areas management would have to be reinstated, and payment rates should reflect this. Management requirements include:

- maintenance of traditional varieties/species of almonds, carobs etc in environmentally friendly ways (including ploughing, weeding and arboriculture). The payment rate is €700/ha per year for tree planting/maintenance provided that the number of trees is more than 100/ha (except for olive-trees);
- planting and/or maintenance of traditional bushes (roses/aromatics including *Rosa damaskina* and natural flora such as hawthorns and oaks). The payment rate is €350/ha per year for bush planting/maintenance, annual removal of 'undesirable' vegetation from abandoned land and other measures relevant to fire prevention (which involves ploughing and maintaining a 3m-wide firebreak). The payment rate is €350/ha per year for bush planting/maintenance and fire control actions;
- building and maintenance of dry-stone walls in environmentally friendly ways. The payment rate is €1150/ha for dry-stone wall repair.

*Comments on this measure*

The maintenance of traditional varieties of fruit trees and of native bushes will benefit birds by maintaining and extending their preferred habitat and nesting sites. The stonewall measure is very beneficial for some farmland species like Cyprus Warbler because it provides additional

<sup>48</sup> including **Annex1**: Long-Legged Buzzard *Hieraaetus fasciatus*, Roller *Coracias garrulus*, Cyprus Wheatear *Oenanthe cypriaca*, Cyprus Warbler *Sylvia melanothorax*, Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*, Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia*; **other important species**: Chukar *Alectoris chukar*, Cyprus Scops Owl *Otus scops cyprius*, Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur*, Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida*, Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*, Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* and Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*.

nesting sites, and this measure was enthusiastically received by farmers (in fact the original budget had to be re-assigned to accommodate more applicants). It is not clear what impact the fire control measure will have on birds, and there is a need to examine the impacts of this measure on farmland birds and on biodiversity conservation generally. This is probably a largely beneficial scheme, although the impact of scrub encroachment for priority bird species in Cyprus is unclear. To maximise benefits to birds and value for money:

- priority for this scheme should be given to marginal areas, farmland 'target areas' and to farmland within NATURA 2000 sites and Important Bird Areas;
- the scheme should focus on providing payments for environmentally friendly maintenance of carobs, almonds and other traditional trees, all of which are of high wildlife value;
- payments should continue to be given for retaining traditional bushes (e.g. aromatics and *Rosa damaskina*) but not for maintaining remnants of natural vegetation within farmland, which should instead become mandatory under GAEC rules (see section 7.12). Control of invasive vegetation and ploughing to create firebreaks should also become a GAEC obligation and not be subsidised under this scheme;
- support for repair of dry-stone walls should continue;
- biodiversity indicators should be introduced and used for assessing the scheme.

There are several additional measures of potential benefit to farmland birds, which have not been accepted by the agricultural authorities. These are described below.

### **7.7 Additional agri-environment measures which would benefit Annex 1 and other farmland birds**

BirdLife Cyprus has proposed three new agri-environment schemes designed for the benefit of birds, but which would also have significant benefits for other characteristic native plants and animals of farmland. The Ministry of Agriculture appears to have rejected these proposals despite support from government officials. The proposed schemes are:

- wildlife set-aside within fields used for cereals, potatoes and market vegetables;
- conservation field margins;
- extensive grazing.

The objectives, benefits, zoning and management requirements for each of the three schemes are described below.

#### ***Wildlife set-aside within fields used for cereals, potatoes and market vegetables***

*Priority zones and types of farming:* Cereal and potato (or market vegetable) growing areas, with priority given to farmers in intensive growing areas, NATURA 2000 sites and the Akamas, Xeros, Diarizos, Pafos Plain and Panagia IBAs.

*Purpose:* within these intensively farmed areas the aim would be to withdraw between 10% and 25% of the farmer's total arable land from production for at least five (and preferably seven) years and manage it to create semi-natural grassland, as a refuge for wildflowers, insects, mammals and birds. The land would continue to qualify for SAP/SFP direct payments as part of an agri-environment scheme.

*Priority bird species likely to benefit from this scheme:* Bonelli's Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Pallid Harrier, Red-footed Falcon, Chukar, Black Francolin, Stone Curlew, Cyprus Scops Owl, Roller, Calandra Lark, Cyprus Wheatear, Lesser Grey Shrike, Masked Shrike and Cretzschmar's Bunting.

*Management requirements:* farmers should take one field, or part of one or more fields, out of production for a minimum of seven years. The total area withdrawn from production in this way should be between 10% and 25% of the farm area. Uncropped field boundaries and verges should not be included when calculating the area to be managed as wildlife set-aside, although these areas could be entered under the proposed scheme for conservation field margins (see below). If only part of a field is withdrawn from production under the scheme,

then the set-aside area should be created on the margins or through the centre of the field, but should always be a non-fragmented, single block of land. The area withdrawn should be managed as follows:

- no chemical applications, ploughing, cultivation or sowing of crops;
- the only management should be mowing (strimming) or grazing (by sheep and goats) once a year, between August and January. If mowing is used, then the field or area should be mown in stages, at different times, to create a mosaic of grassy and cut areas;
- on more fertile land, mown cuttings should be collected and removed, whereas on poorer soils the cuttings should be left;
- any invasive non-native vegetation (such as *Acacias* or *Eucalyptus*) should be removed from the area as soon as detected;
- a 'sterile' strip 1 metre wide should be maintained around the perimeter of the area, to prevent the spread of weeds into crops and for fire prevention. This 'sterile strip' should be kept free of vegetation by being ploughed over two or three times a year, but not during the bird breeding season (March to July).

*Payment levels* should cover compensation for loss of production and the cost of strimming (including the purchase of the necessary strimmer equipment, if needed).

### **Conservation field margins**

*Priority zones and types of farming:* cereal and potato (or market vegetable) growing areas, with priority given to organic farmers and farmers in intensive growing areas, NATURA 2000 sites and the Akamas, Xeros, Diarizos, Pafos Plain and Panagia IBAs.

*Purpose:* to create new areas of chemical-free natural vegetation, including trees and shrubs around and within fields in intensively farmed areas to meet the needs of farmland birds for more varied habitats and reduced levels of pesticides and herbicides.

*Priority bird species likely to benefit:* 13 priority bird species would benefit by increasing the availability of their food (seeds, insects and mammals): Bonelli's Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Red-footed Falcon, Chukar, Black Francolin, Cyprus Scops Owl, Roller, Cyprus Wheatear, Cyprus Warbler, Lesser Grey Shrike, Masked Shrike, Black-headed Bunting, and Cretzschmar's Bunting.

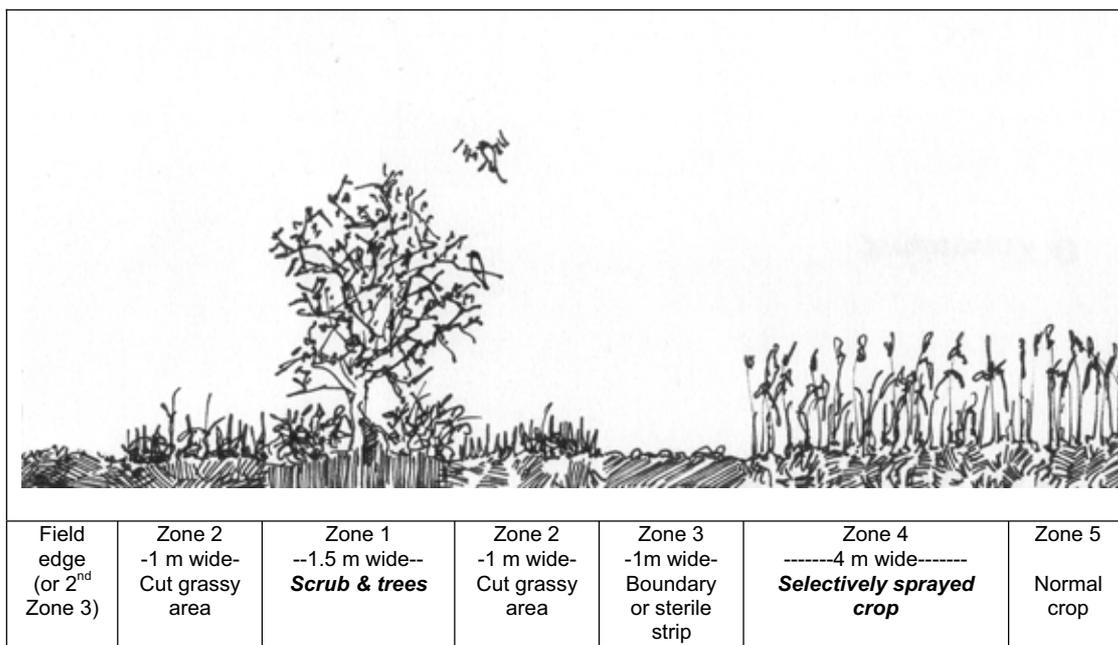
*Management requirements:* GAEC cross-compliance rules should require farmers to retain and manage sympathetically any existing remnants of natural vegetation within their land (see Figure 4 below). This scheme goes beyond that to create new areas of valuable natural habitat within the holding. The following management requirements should apply for at least five (and preferably seven) years to allow time for the field margin scrub and trees to establish and grow and thus provide benefits for wildlife:

- the farmer, assisted by an agriculture department advisor, should map out on a 1:5,000 scale map all areas of remnant natural vegetation (verges, scrub patches, isolated trees, etc) on his land. This map will form the basis for creating new conservation field margins and allow payment levels to be accurately calculated, as 'establishment' and 'loss of earnings' payments should only be given for new areas of conservation field margins;
- to create a new conservation field margin by removing a 4.5-metre wide strip of land from cultivation, planting it up and managing it as illustrated in Figure 4 below; new conservation field margins are most conveniently created on field peripheries, but may alternatively (or additionally) be created across the middle of larger fields. and can adjoin areas of existing remnant natural vegetation, scrub and/or trees;
- the minimum length of any given parcel of conservation field margin must be 10 metres (maximum length will be dictated by field size); minimum total length of conservation field margins on any farm plot managed under the scheme must be 40 metres and proportion of any participating farmer's land managed as conservation field margins must be between 5% and 25%, including areas of pre-existing natural vegetation;
- where a new field margin incorporates existing areas of marginal or other woody vegetation these should not be cut back in order to 'shape' the new field margin. Instead, the shape of the new field margin should be adapted to fit in with existing vegetation;

- where conservation field margins include existing drainage ditches on field boundaries, clearing of vegetation around these ditches should not take place between March and July.

Payment rates should cover establishment (planting), management costs and loss of earnings due to lost production potential. Participants in this scheme should also be encouraged to participate in - and be given priority when applying for - other agri-environment schemes including the current schemes for natural/traditional landscapes; agri-environmental standards for cereal/potato/viticulture and citrus; organic farming; and the proposed scheme for wildlife set-aside (described above).

**Figure 4 Cross-section of conservation field margin layout<sup>49</sup>**



### **Extensive grazing**

*Purpose:* to support the traditional extensive free-range grazing by sheep and goats needed to maintain open habitats which are at risk of abandonment because of the high labour costs and low productivity of this method of production.

*Priority zones:* the scheme should be made available to all shepherds grazing goats and sheep in the traditional manner, but priority should be given to shepherds in:

- IBAs: Xeros Valley, Diarizos Valley, Pafos Plain and Akamas. Additionally, shepherds in the Cape Aspro-Pissouri area should be given priority when applying for this scheme, as this area is very important for the Griffon Vulture; and
- target areas of high biodiversity grazing land that are not completely covered by the NATURA 2000 network. The grazing areas can be broadly defined as all areas of *Sarcopoterium spionusum phrygana* (habitat code 5420 in Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive).

*Priority bird species likely to benefit:* those that favour the open habitats created by traditional, extensive grazing and browsing by goats and sheep, such as Griffon Vulture, Bonelli's Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Pallid Harrier, Red-footed Falcon, Chukar, Stone Curlew, Roller, Calandra Lark, Cyprus Wheatear and Lesser Grey Shrike.

*Management requirements:*

<sup>49</sup> based on Hill D.A., Andrews J., Sotherton N.W. & Hawkins J. in Sutherland W.J. & Hill D.A. (1995). *Managing Habitats for Conservation*. Cambridge University Press.

- keeping small flocks of sheep and goats with no more than 100 animals per flock (fewer if the land available for grazing is limited) on a defined, free-range grazing area;
- grazing and browsing must always be supervised by a shepherd, to ensure that no parts of the area are undergrazed or overgrazed;
- no pasture improvement, removal of rocks, cultivation, seeding or fertilization;
- participation in the anticipated '*National Vulture Rescue Plan*'<sup>50</sup> by providing goat and sheep carcasses for vulture feeding stations;
- a requirement not to use fire as a pasture management tool should be included in GAEC and enforced (but not paid for) as part of this scheme.

*Payment rates:* these should cover the cost of employing a shepherd and the loss of income from lower productivity and limited flock size. Free range grazing still exists but, because the grazing land is generally not owned by the farmer, the payments and management requirements cannot be attached to land in the grazier's control. To maintain these extensive systems it will be necessary to pay on the basis of the flock with a premium rate for Cyprus fat-tailed sheep, and a requirement to graze extensively at about 10 animals per ha. Such a scheme could usefully be coupled with an extension until 2009 of the 2004-06 RDP measure 'Special support for meeting EU standards in sheep/goat's milk' (measure 2.1 in the current RDP).

### **Other proposals**

For 2007-13, in addition to the three schemes described above, other new measures for the benefit of farmland bird habitats in IBAs and elsewhere have been proposed by environmental experts:

- a Special Environmental Plan for subsidising *Leguminosae* at altitudes over 300m to benefit birds living at these altitudes, as they would no longer need to go to the lowland plains for food; and
- an agri-environment payment for delaying the harvest of cereals to avoid the destruction of nests and eggs, which could apply to Akamas, Xeros, Diarizos, Pafos Plain IBAs and also be of benefit to farmland birds generally if applied more widely.

## **7.8 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures**

### **Delivery**

Cyprus had no previous experience of agri-environment schemes prior to the 2004-06 programme - SAPARD was not used.

There is an unfortunate perception among farmers that agri-environment is just another EU requirement, and they have little understanding of the environmental objectives. An interview survey<sup>51</sup> in 2005 of key people involved in the agri-environment programmes revealed that farmers could not readily understand the commitments required and were concerned about the impact on their income; they felt that they were not adequately consulted at the design stage of the scheme, which was mainly presented through the media (TV, radio etc) and not accessible to everyone; some modifications to the scheme were made after strong representations. Farmers have been further frustrated by late payment of agri-environment support during the 2004-06 period.

The Department of Agriculture employs agronomists and private companies to inform farmers about rural development schemes, and although their job specification requires knowledge of environmental conservation issues, they generally do not have the expertise to make judgements about habitat management for birds. The paying agency Cyprus Agricultural Payments Organisation (CAPO) runs the Farmer's Service Centre providing information material, application forms and instructions for the rural development measures<sup>52</sup>. CAPO also

<sup>50</sup> still in the planning stage at the time of writing

<sup>51</sup> Oréade-Brèche (2005) *Evaluation Des Mesures Agro-Environnementales Agri/ G4/ 2004 Annexe 21: Etude Nationale Chypre* [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index\\_fr.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index_fr.htm) (report published in English)

<sup>52</sup> Cyprus Agricultural Payments Organization, general leaflet '*Informative Publication*' Available online from:

controls compliance and applies penalties. Despite this system for providing them with information, farmers generally do not have sufficient information about birds and their habitat requirements, and no bird conservation experts are used to train either farmers or their advisers.

A recent study of the implementation of agri-environment measures in the EU made the following recommendations for Cyprus:

- the Environment Service and other stakeholders should be more substantially involved in the review of the measures for the 2007-13 programme;
- it is of major importance that both farmers and the general public are convinced that agri-environment measures are needed to tackle serious environmental problems (and are not simply a subsidy - there is a misconception among farmers that the agri-environment measures were implemented not as a response to environmental problems but as an obligation of Cyprus to the EU);
- the staff resources involved in the overall implementation of the agri-environment measures should be increased and properly trained;
- agri-environment measures could be improved, especially those related to areas within the Natura 2000 network - with the assistance and cooperation of those involved with such programmes;
- agri-environment funding is not sufficient to allow implementation to the desired level;
- educating farmers and the general public about environmental issues is an integral part for the successful implementation of the agri-environment measures and this should continue<sup>53</sup>.

### **Evaluation**

For the 2004-06 RDP there are no proposals to use any kind of biodiversity indicators to evaluate agri-environment schemes or any other measures, and Annex 1 species and their habitats have not been taken into account. Some studies on the status of birds have been done in IBAs/SPAs, by the Game Fund and Birdlife Cyprus, but none cover the whole area over which agri-environment measures are implemented.

The arrangements for evaluation of 2007-13 programme are not yet known, but it will be important to ensure that agri-environment schemes are evaluated for their impact on farmland birds, especially the important Annex 1 species.

## **7.9 Natura 2000**

Although 50% of the UAA in Cyprus is classified as high nature value land only 1% of this has been proposed for Natura 2000 designation, as a direct result of local opposition which led to all privately owned land (including most farmland) being taken out of the designation proposals. Agri-environment schemes targeted at the biodiversity management of all high nature value land would be the most effective way of implementing the EU requirement to use Axis 2 funds to contribute to biodiversity and protect and develop high nature value farming.

## **7.10 Impacts of other Axis 2 measures on farmland birds**

### ***Organic farming (e.g. grapes, oranges, potatoes etc.)***

Organic farming is generally beneficial for birds, especially insect-eaters such as Roller, Masked Shrike, Cyprus Wheatear, Cyprus Warbler, Calandra Lark, Lesser Grey and Red-backed Shrikes (on migration) and for birds in the Akamas, Xeros, Diarizos, Pafos Plain and Panagia IBAs. Unfortunately the extent of organic farming is too low to have any serious impact on bird conservation, and is currently limited by the small size of the market for organic products in Cyprus. However, organic produce is being promoted to supermarkets and other

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[http://www.capo.gov.cy/capo/capo.nsf/DMLpublications\\_en/DMLpublications\\_en?OpenDocument](http://www.capo.gov.cy/capo/capo.nsf/DMLpublications_en/DMLpublications_en?OpenDocument) [Accessed 8/7/2006]

<sup>53</sup> Oréade-Brèche (2005) op.cit.

outlets and may gain a larger share of the food market, which would be of benefit to these birds. For this measure to be effective it may need to be combined with other measures, especially LFA payments, to support the labour force required for organic production.

### ***Afforestation of farmland***

The impact of this measure on birds is not clear but tree planting could be very damaging for open-landscape species such as Griffon Vulture, Stone Curlew and Calandra Lark. Applications for afforestation should not be approved on high nature value farmland habitats, and exotic species should not be planted.

### ***LFA support***

To comply with the Commission's Guidelines on Axis 2 support, it is important that LFA support is only available for extensive management and is conditional on no increase in the level of chemical inputs or in field size.

## **7.11 Negative impacts of Axis 1 measures on farmland birds**

RDP support for investment in the modernisation of agriculture, to be continued in 2007-13, is likely to lead to intensification of farming, with consequent negative impacts on Annex 1 birds primarily affecting those species using areas of mixed traditional farming such as Masked Shrike, Roller, Cyprus Wheatear, Cyprus Warbler, Long-legged Buzzard and Cretzschmar's Bunting. Applications for these investments within Akamas, Xeros, Diarizos, Pafos Plain and Panagia IBAs should only be approved if they have the support of government environmental advisers. Improvement of pastures should not be supported on high nature value farmland, as this will degrade existing habitats.

## **7.12 GAEC**

If properly defined and enforced GAEC cross-compliance can safeguard the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds, and protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement. The Cyprus GAEC cross-compliance measures for 2007-13 have not been announced and it is not clear if they will fulfil this important role of protecting the many small but important habitat features for birds.

The current definitions of GFP are, at least in theory, good for birds but in practice there is little or no benefit on the ground because GFP is not widely applied - so far it is at an 'experimental' level. Although GFP guidelines include protection of habitats the main concern of the control procedures has been with the application of pesticides (dose, frequency of use, timing etc) and nitrification.

In addition to the requirement to protect areas of semi-natural vegetation there are other requirements now covered by GFP that could be of benefit to birds if transferred to GAEC and properly enforced. These include:

- reducing fertilisers and pesticides;
- maintaining pasture land;
- no burning of vegetation to 'prepare' pastureland (this is already prohibited, to protect soils from erosion, but burning is a significant threat to grassland habitats in IBAs, and also to forests - 20% of forest fires in Cyprus during the period 2000-2005 were attributed to agricultural activities);
- cutting new growth to achieve a satisfactory cover of annual vegetation;
- avoiding over-grazing.

### **7.13 Opportunities to use other EAFRD measures to support agri-environment management for farmland birds**

#### ***Axis 3 - Drawing up protection and management plans for NATURA 2000 sites and other places of high natural value (Article 57a)***

The preparation of protection and management plans for key wildlife sites is one of the major nature conservation challenges Cyprus will face over the 2007-13 period, and this measure could provide an important source of funding. The management plans will be critical for establishing long-term management strategies and defining the legal framework, minimum operating conditions and necessary restrictions; they will also specify the management practices to be compensated and supported, and provide guidance for other business activities that could bring wider socio-economic benefits to the local economy. Guidelines will be required to ensure that suitably qualified people are involved in the preparation of the plans, that there is full stakeholder participation and that the plans meet the relevant provisions of the Birds and Habitats Directives (79/409/EEC and 92/43/EEC).

#### ***Axis 3 - Article 52a iii) and Article 55***

Carefully planned and designed 'green tourism' activities could be a means of supporting farm incomes in areas of high natural value. This measure can make funding available for government departments, individuals and local authorities to provide small-scale infrastructure (e.g. information centres and signposting of sites of interest), access paths and small-capacity accommodation (e.g. through restoration of abandoned village houses) and for the development and marketing of tourism services. In Natura 2000 sites all such funding would need to be subject to a rigorous environmental impact assessment study in order to ensure that the proposed development would have no adverse impact on protected habitats or species.

## 8 The Czech Republic

### Key points for the Czech Republic 2007-13

*Are bird conservation priorities adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 RDP?*

The long tradition of nature conservation in the Czech Republic is reflected in the close co-operation between the Ministry of Agriculture and environmental experts, a well designed agri-environment programme for 2004-06 and the high priority given in the National Rural Development Strategy to the conservation of permanent grasslands habitats both within Natura 2000 sites and on unprotected farmland.

Farmland birds are already in serious decline in the Czech Republic and the Farmland Bird Index has dropped by 21% in just three years, from 2000-2003.

Successful agri-environment schemes depend on adequate payment rates and budget allocations. In 2007-13 more than half the budget will be allocated to Axis 2, and a significant proportion of this will be spent on agri-environment. Compared to the current programme, a real increase will be needed in the agri-environment budget because:

- although the funds allocated to grassland agri-environment measures will probably be adequate to cover semi-natural grasslands, additional funds may be needed to extend bird friendly measures (such as unmown strips) to the much larger area of improved grassland;
- significant additional funding will be needed for the arable measure 'winter bird food strips';
- other new agri-environment measures for habitat management and creation on arable land could be of benefit to farmland birds, but would require extra funds; in the current proposals, arable schemes are principally targeted at controlling pollution and soil erosion, not at bird habitats.

The proposal to use the population index of selected farmland birds as an impact indicator for both Axis 2 and the RDP as a whole deserves support, and should enable the schemes to be adjusted, if necessary, to maximise benefits to biodiversity during the life of the programme.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for bird conservation priorities?*

The Czech Republic has used SAPARD and the 2004-06 programme to develop and refine a wide range of agri-environment measures, designed with the benefit of expert advice. Some measures are specifically targeted at Annex 1 birds such as Corncrake.

Additional benefits for farmland birds could be achieved by:

- adding new arable measures such as winter stubble and conservation headlands or strips (unsown and/or managed without chemicals);
- adding a measure to encourage sheep grazing on dry semi-natural grasslands, which would apply to a relatively small area but could benefit birds.

*What are the barriers to delivery of appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures where they are needed for bird conservation priorities?*

Administration is efficient and well planned, and farmers are provided with information and advice from a variety of sources - seminars, publications and the internet; however, farmer training is not a compulsory element of agri-environment contracts.

Two reports have concluded that farmers need a better understanding of agri-environment measures if the programme is to be effective. Farmers in national parks and protected landscape areas now receive better quality environmental information and advice compared to farmers elsewhere, because staff in these areas have been trained by environmental experts.

In the wider countryside the environmental skills of Ministry of Agriculture advisory staff are perceived to be very low, and effective expert training will be required to remedy this.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for bird conservation?*

The risk of Axis 1 farm investments damaging farmland bird habitats could be reduced if:

- the criteria used to assess applications included an evaluation of the impact on environmentally friendly farming (the National Conservation and Landscape Protection Agency has done work on this);
- drainage proposals required approval from nature conservation authorities, to protect wet grassland used by Corncrakes and waders.

The risk of destroying farmland bird habitats by afforestation could be avoided if Axis 2 support for afforestation was restricted to arable land, and if the opinion of the nature conservation authority was required on all proposals (not just on those of more than 0.5 ha).

Two proposed changes to GAEC would be of particular benefit to birds:

- mowing all grassland from the middle outwards, or from side to side, would be of benefit to Corncrakes and also to raptors feeding on small mammals;
- protection of small landscape elements and watercourses would benefit all farmland birds.

The way in which the current GAEC requirement for permanent grassland is defined at an individual farm level (maintaining an area at least 95% of the 2005 reference level) does not protect all species-rich grasslands from ploughing up, and thus puts bird habitats at risk.

## **8.1 Agriculture in the Czech Republic**

Agricultural land covers just over half of the total area of the Czech Republic and around 75% of this is arable land. Soil erosion is a major problem, with 46% of agricultural land in the Czech Republic vulnerable, mostly to soil erosion by water. Half the farmland is classified as Less Favoured Area and 6% is in organic production. There is an unusually large proportion of tenanted land, often farmed in large units by businesses (average size 1500 ha). Privately owned farms account for only about one quarter of the land and are much smaller - about 40 ha on average.

## **8.2 Annex 1 farmland birds in the Czech Republic**

Farmland in the Czech Republic accounts for less than 3% of all EU farmland but it provides breeding and feeding grounds for eight of the twenty Annex 1 farmland birds targeted by BirdLife for support through agri-environment schemes. Of these, six are in unfavourable population status in Europe - Night Heron, Purple Heron, White Stork, Corncrake, Great Bustard and Imperial Eagle - while the latter three species are also of global conservation concern.

The nineteen IBAs important for farmland birds are almost all grasslands of various types (including improved grassland) and all have been designated as Natura 2000 sites. There is a total of about 100000 ha of farmland in these SPAs. It is estimated that in the country as a whole there are about 40000 ha of species rich grassland and a further 300000 ha of partly

degraded semi-natural grasslands (mostly as a result of fertilisation)<sup>54</sup>. Farmland birds are already in serious decline in the Czech Republic and the Farmland Bird Index dropped by 21% in just three years, from 2000-2003<sup>55</sup>.

Please see Annex 4 for more details of important farmland birds and their habitats in the Czech Republic.

### **8.3 Threats to existing habitats for Annex 1 and other farmland birds in the Czech Republic**

#### ***Permanent wet grassland***

These grasslands are used as seasonal pastures for cattle or mown for hay if the weather permits. As a result of previous drainage they are now mostly found in the mountains (but new wet grasslands are being created by restoration projects). Wet grassland habitats are important for both Corncrake and White Stork and bird friendly management requires mowing from the middle to the edge, late each year, using light machinery. Threats to these grasslands include:

- abandonment, followed by loss of the grassland habitat through natural colonisation by scrub and trees;
- high stocking densities which can lead to nitrification of the grasslands, disturbance of birds and loss of native grassland plants;
- changes to the hydrological regime either by drainage or flooding.

#### ***Arable land***

Arable land, much of it intensively managed, is the predominant use of farmland in the Czech Republic. The National Strategy notes that when the intensity of farming decreased in the early 1990s the downward trend in farmland bird populations was briefly reversed (species which temporarily recovered included quail, red-backed shrike and whinchat)<sup>56</sup>. This reversal was short-lived, and the downward trend had resumed again before accession. Current threats to birds of arable farmland include the increasing use of winter cereals, which is reducing the area of over-wintered stubble - an important food source for more common farmland birds such as the Yellowhammer, one of the species used for the Farmland Bird Index.

#### ***Dry grasslands***

These grasslands are mostly farmed by tenant farmers and used as seasonal pastures (usually for cattle) and as meadows for hay. Some of the unimproved grasslands are shared grazing areas. Like wet grasslands, these are important for both Corncrake and White Stork and ideally the meadows would be mown from the middle to the edge after mid-August and grazing would not start until August (or the most important parts would be fenced off until then). From the farmers' point of view this bird-friendly management misses the best grazing period and produces very poor quality hay. Threats include:

- abandonment of unimproved grasslands, followed by loss of grassland habitats through natural colonisation by scrub and trees; without support these areas would be abandoned;
- earlier mowing and grazing;
- increased fertiliser use;
- too intensive grazing.

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<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic (2006) Appendices to National Strategic Rural Development Plan of the Czech Republic for the period 2007 - 2013. Prague.

<sup>55</sup> source: Eurostat

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic (2006) op.cit.

## 8.4 Opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds

In addition to the need to address the threats to existing bird habitats outlined above, there is a significant case for the creation of new habitats for farmland birds generally. The following table identifies the type of farmland management, the opportunity to improve bird habitats and the birds which would benefit.

Farm type	Opportunity to create habitats or adopt bird-friendly management practices	This would improve breeding or feeding areas for:
grassland	mowing from the middle to the edge or from one side to the other	Corncrake and other ground nesting birds and also raptors which hunt small mammals
dry meadows	sheep grazing (there are very few sheep left in the Czech Republic)	all birds using short grass meadows
arable land	winter stubble	farmland birds generally

## 8.5 National Strategy and budget allocations for 2007-13

There is a strong tradition of nature conservation in the Czech Republic and the Ministry of Agriculture has worked closely with both government environmental institutions and NGOs on the rural development programme through a series of working groups. For example, the grassland management proposals are based on long-term work of the Expert Corncrake Group of the Czech Society for Ornithology.

In the 2004-06 period 35% of the EAGGF (Guarantee and Guidance) support under both the SOP and RDP was allocated to agri-environment, and a similar proportion to support for LFAs<sup>57</sup>. Significant proportions of the agri-environment budget were spent on measures to reduce agro-chemical inputs and to protect and improve soils, likely to have relatively little impact on farmland birds compared to more targeted measures.

The proposed allocation of 2007-13 EAFRD funding between Axes (at the time data was collected for this report) was: 23% to Axis 1, **54% to Axis 2**, 18% to Axis 3 and 5% to Axis 4. Precise figures were not available, but about 80% of the Axis 2 budget is likely to be spent on agri-environment payments.

The national strategy for 2007-13 refers to the management of Corncrake on permanent grasslands, and to the conservation of bird populations as a focus of Natura 2000 payments on agricultural land.

Agri-environment schemes for nature conservation on arable land seem to have been undervalued, with the main priority being to limit soil erosion and protect water. If the decline in the farmland bird index is to be reversed more emphasis will have to be placed on the needs of birds within the arable agri-environment schemes.

## 8.6 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13

The current agri-environment programme is based on pilot schemes developed using SAPARD and other funding, and has nearly 30 different measures in three main sections - organic farming, grassland measures, and landscape conservation (including arable measures) plus a suite of special measures for farms in a small area where cave protection is important.

Grassland accounts for almost two thirds of all land in agri-environment schemes, and 72% of the permanent grasslands in the Czech Republic are under agri-environment management, mainly schemes to reduce the use of pesticides and mineral fertilisers<sup>58</sup>. The area of land managed under schemes targeted specifically at birds is much smaller and is concentrated in areas important for birds, irrespective of the protection status of the land.

<sup>57</sup> Country profiles DGAgri

<sup>58</sup> Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic (2006) op.cit.

### ***Zonal grassland measures for birds***

These schemes have been carefully designed with the help of environmental experts and are targeted both at SPAs and at other important localities, identified by nature conservation authorities as important for breeding Corncrake and waders or having Natura 2000 biotopes:

- a scheme for extensive grassland management for Corncrake is working well;
- a similar scheme for breeding waders was unpopular with farmers but changes have been made to mowing dates and payment rates for 2007-13 to address this;
- other measures including late mowing of dry species-rich grassland, and hand mowing of wet grasslands will prevent intensification or abandonment of these grasslands, and are designed to benefit birds, but late mowing and disposal of grass causes significant problems for farmers. These measures are more acceptable on less intensive upland grasslands, and future uptake will depend on payment rates taking account of the problems.

It has been pointed out that payment rates for some less-popular measures on marginal grasslands have been calculated on the basis of production lost through reduced fertiliser use - but in fact these grasslands would have been abandoned if agri-environment payments were not available, so payments should reflect the total cost to the farmer of mowing, grazing and other management. If payment rates were recalculated in this way the uptake would improve.

### ***A potential horizontal grassland measure***

A measure for **unmown strips within grass fields**, managed on a rotational basis from year to year, has been tested in the Bile Karpaty Protected Landscape Area and could be of great benefit to plants, insects and farmland birds if it was a horizontal measure available on all 900,000 hectares of grassland in the Czech Republic. It requires managing 5 -10% of a grassland field each year as an undisturbed strip 6 -12 metres wide, without fertilisers or grazing and left unmown until the following spring.

### ***Horizontal arable measures***

A measure designed to provide **winter food for birds** (originally Partridge, which are hunted) with strips 6 -12 metres wide within arable fields sown with a crop mixture including buckwheat, millet and other selected crops, and left unmanaged until the following spring. The existing scheme has had poor uptake because the payment rates do not cover the disruption to farming activities in the rest of the field. This scheme would have the potential to benefit seed eating birds on 2.6 million hectares of arable land, if it was offered as a horizontal measure with improved rates of payment.

Another horizontal measure to create **grass strips in arable fields**, which had almost no uptake (only three farmers were interested), was designed to combat erosion. If farmers could be persuaded to adopt it on intensive arable land it also could benefit farmland birds, if appropriate seeds mixes and management were prescribed.

## **8.7 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures**

A recent report on implementation of 2004-06 agri-environment measures in the Czech Republic concluded that:

- agri-environment measures have a positive impact on the environment but farmers find it difficult to choose the best scheme from the many available (29 in the 2004-06 Plan);
- education and training for farmers is necessary to achieve agri-environment objectives, and it is important for farmers to understand that agri-environment is not just financial support but helps them to adopt environmentally friendly production methods;

- farmers are not given enough information about how to comply with agri-environment requirements and about what will be inspected during control visits<sup>59</sup>;

The Ministry of Agriculture's own mid-term assessment of SAPARD agri-environment measures also concluded that more information and advice for farmers were needed<sup>60</sup>.

Environmental experts suggest that the value of site-specific advice (matching agri-environment options to the environmental opportunities of individual farms) is not properly recognised. The results have been good where nature conservation staff provide such advice and is a very effective way of improving farmers' understanding.

Some problems have arisen where neither the regional advisory staff nor the farmers have understood how to combine entitlements to direct payments and the demands of GAEC with nature conservation requirements for special sites. This seems to be due partly to a failure of communication between the different institutions involved.

### ***Evaluation***

In contrast to many other Member States the Czech Republic has already used birds as an indicator of the impact of some agri-environment schemes - a baseline study of Partridge was made in 2002 for an experimental agri-environment measure to plant winter bird-food crops on arable land, and ornithological monitoring was used for grassland measures in the 2004-06 programme. Populations of selected farmland birds will be used as indicator for both Axis 2 and the RDP as a whole. Ornithologists point out that it will be important to use properly controlled 'before and after' monitoring.

## **8.8 Natura 2000 compensation payments and agri-environment schemes**

### ***Legal restrictions***

There are legal restrictions prohibiting the use of fertilisers in parts of protected landscape areas and National Parks but not yet on farmland in SPAs.

### ***Payments in Natura 2000 areas***

Compensation payments for legal restrictions, when they are in place, will take only a small proportion of the Axis 2 budget in 2007-13 but agri-environment measures (such as the zonal measures for permanent grasslands aimed at Corncrake and other birds) should meet the management needs of SPAs. Other agri-environment schemes have special options for protected sites - for example using regional grass seeds mixes where arable land is converted to grassland.

## **8.9 Negative impacts of Axis 2 measures on farmland birds**

### ***Afforestation of farmland***

Where grasslands are converted to forests all meadow birds will be affected by the loss of habitat. Afforestation of small parcels (of less than 0.5ha) currently does not require consultation with nature conservation authorities but can still harm some valuable habitats.

### ***Less Favoured Areas***

Current LFA requirements can conflict with Corncrake management on land not in agri-environment schemes because under Good Farming Practice the first cut of grass must be taken by 15 July, endangering young birds.

<sup>59</sup> Oréade-Brèche (2005) *Evaluation Des Mesures Agro-Environnementales Agri/ G4/ 2004 Annexe 21: Etude Nationale République Tchèque* [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index\\_fr.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index_fr.htm) (report published in English)

<sup>60</sup> Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic (2006) op.cit.

## 8.10 Negative impacts of Axis 1 measures farmland birds

There are risks that investment to modernise farms could lead to the loss of extensively managed grasslands - for example by increasing stocking rates or fertiliser use, or by drainage. These risks could be reduced if the criteria used to assess applications included an evaluation of the impact on environmentally friendly farming<sup>61</sup>, and if drainage proposals required approval from nature conservation authorities, to protect wet grassland used by Corncrakes and waders.

## 8.11 GAEC

If properly defined and enforced GAEC can safeguard the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds and protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement.

Areas of semi-natural vegetation, some wetlands and permanent grasslands, peat bogs and ponds are already protected by law in the Czech Republic. In the current programme all farmers receiving agri-environment or LFA payments are prohibited from converting grassland to arable land, but this welcome protection for bird habitats may be lost unless it is transferred to GAEC - under the current definition of GAEC farmers may convert up to 5% of their grassland without penalty.

Biodiversity experts point out that there were some problems with the current definition of Good Farming Practice, which requires grass to be mown or grazed twice a year, where this conflicted with agri-environment requirements, but these have gradually been resolved by derogations.

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<sup>61</sup> the Czech Nature Conservation and Landscape Protection Agency has already done some work on this

## 9 Estonia

### Key points for Estonia 2007-13

Estonia has a significant share of the EU populations of five important Annex 1 farmland birds including 15% of the EU25 population of the Corncrake, which has suffered serious decline in Estonia.

At least 50% of the semi-natural habitats in Estonia are outside Natura 2000 sites, and many grasslands have already been abandoned; the longer these are left unmanaged the more serious will be the effect on birds; the remaining grasslands are threatened by both abandonment and intensification.

Estonia is one of the few Member States to have an agri-environment evaluation programme already set up using biodiversity impact indicators.

*Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan?*

The most serious problem for Estonian agri-environment schemes in 2004-06 has been shortage of funds. Measures for high nature value habitats and their associated birds were piloted before accession but not implemented in the current programme, despite the allocation of additional funds to agri-environment during the course of the programme.

To meet the EU 2007-13 Guidelines on protecting and developing high nature value farming systems, the first priority for agri-environment funding in all Member States should be to secure long-term conservation management of existing high nature value farmland habitats used by Annex 1 birds and other protected species. The National Strategy for 2007-13 makes reference to maintaining or enhancing biodiversity in high nature value farmlands but it is not clear to what extent Axis 2 funding will be targeted at this priority, or if there will be sufficient provision for the management of existing high nature value grasslands outside Natura areas.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Two new measures are proposed for the 2007-13 programme:

- a measure for the management of semi-natural grassland in Natura 2000 areas should halt the loss of these grasslands, but it will only be available in protected areas, not on other high nature value grassland;
- the current entry-level agri-environment scheme will be replaced by the more demanding *Environmentally Friendly Management Scheme* from 2009. This was expected to create new habitats for farmland birds - but it has recently been proposed that this new scheme should apply only to arable land, and that the options of most benefit to birds should be excluded, such as strips of permanent grass along field boundaries and across large fields.

If these measures are restricted as described above (to Natura 2000 areas and arable land respectively) it will leave the large areas of high nature value semi-natural grasslands outside Natura 2000 sites with no agri-environment measures for habitat management and still vulnerable to the two threats of abandonment and intensification.

*What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?*

GAEC requirements could be altered to benefit grassland birds - for example by specifying mowing from the centre of the field outwards.

Estonian farmers have a favourable attitude to agri-environment, and compulsory agri-environment training measures encourage and support this - but the basic training is not long enough to cover all biodiversity issues and additional training will be needed for new habitat management measures.

There is a need to improve the training of paying agency inspectors in habitat definition and management.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?*

There is some concern that afforestation of abandoned grasslands will threaten habitats for Annex 1 birds such as Corncrake and Spotted Crake.

No negative impacts of Annex 1 measures were reported (and it was pointed out that support for rebuilding stone walls is likely to benefit birds).

## **9.1 Agriculture in Estonia**

The utilised agricultural area (UAA) covers almost 40 % of the rural area, forests cover 32% and 16 % is classified as other land (a major part of this is unused agricultural land). Of the UAA, arable land accounted for 57 %, meadows and natural pastures 30 % orchards, nurseries and permanent crops 9 %, while fallow accounted for 4 %<sup>62</sup>.

## **9.2 Annex 1 farmland birds in Estonia**

Estonia's farmland accounts for less than 1% of the EU25 total but it provides breeding or feeding grounds for major populations of four of the twenty Annex 1 farmland birds targeted by BirdLife for support through agri-environment schemes. Two of these, Corncrake and Great Snipe (15% and 19% of the EU25 populations respectively) are of global conservation concern under the IUCN Red List criteria. Corncrake populations have declined significantly in Estonia, possibly by as much as 50%.

Estonian farmland also helps to support significant populations of the Lesser Spotted Eagle and White Stork (both Annex 1 species in unfavourable population status in Europe), one quarter of the EU25 population of the Spotted Crake, and provides feeding grounds for migrating Barnacle Geese. There are still a few pairs of the Roller (almost extinct in Estonia) which prefers mixed traditional farmland habitats.

The total area of agricultural land within the IBAs is 73205 ha and includes areas defined as natural grasslands in the CORINE Land Cover Database, because preservation of natural grasslands in Estonia can only be ensured by ongoing traditional agricultural land-use (grazing or mowing). Please see Annex 4 for more details of important farmland birds and their habitats in Estonia.

## **9.3 Threats to existing farmland habitats for Annex 1 and other farmland birds in Estonia**

As a result of the drop in both livestock numbers and profitability, abandonment is the main threat both to grazed dry grasslands and to wet grasslands near rivers and coasts. Once abandoned, grassland is soon colonised by trees and shrubs. The value of wet grasslands for nesting birds is also threatened by grazing or mowing too early in the season - 1 July is too early, mowing should be delayed until at least 15 July and ideally until 1 August.

Mixed traditional farmland is at risk of intensification, leading to the loss of small fields. Arable land on larger farms is threatened by intensification, and by abandonment on smaller farms.

<sup>62</sup> Source: European Commission [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/countries/ee/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/countries/ee/index_en.htm)

## 9.4 Opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds

In addition to the need to address the threats to existing grassland habitats outlined above, there are opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds on arable land. The table below identifies the opportunities to improve bird habitats and the birds which would benefit.

Farm type	Opportunity to create habitats or adopt bird-friendly management practices	This would improve breeding or feeding areas for:
Arable	grass field margins, mown late	new habitats for Corncrake, Grey Partridge, Whinchat and probably Skylark
Arable	winter green cover	feeding/resting areas for migrating geese
Arable	strips of natural vegetation within the field	most ground nesting birds including Corncrake and Great Snipe

## 9.5 National Strategy and budget allocations for 2007-13

In the Estonian National Strategy for 2007-13 ensuring the continuation of farming on Natura 2000 sites is one of the main targets for Axis 2, and maintaining or enhancing biodiversity (including birds) in high nature value farmlands has been set as a general target. The main objective of the rural development programme will be to ensure environmental stability through using environment-friendly methods of agricultural production, and to guarantee agricultural land use in the regions where it is important for shaping traditional landscapes and for the preservation of high nature value areas.

The proposed allocation of 2007-13 EAFRD funding between Axes (at the time data was collected for this report) was: 40% to Axis 1, 39% to Axis 2, 21% to Axis 3 and 10% to Axis 4.

These objectives certainly allow scope for grassland management for birds but it is not clear if the priority given to different agri-environment measures will reflect the management needs of declining Annex 1 birds such as the Corncrake. Environmental experts point out that:

- targeted agri-environment measures were designed for the current programme but not implemented because of funding restrictions;
- additional funding will be needed in 2007-13 to cover:
  - new measures and higher than anticipated rates of uptake;
  - extending the new entry-level measure to grasslands; and
  - extending the new high nature value measure outside Natura 2000 sites.

## 9.6 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13

Estonian farmers are interested in environmentally friendly management and have a very positive attitude towards agri-environment schemes, which has been fostered by the gradual implementation of nationally funded pre-accession schemes from 2000 to 2004.

Agri-environment support was the largest single element in the RDP, and a programme of both entry level and targeted measures was developed, with advice from environmental experts and using the experience of Estonian national programmes. The opportunities to support management of farmland for birds changed drastically in 2004, when support for nearly all supplementary measures within the pilot programme was discontinued, and only about 6 % of available funds were spent on biodiversity-related measures thereafter<sup>63</sup>.

An agri-environment evaluation report in 2005 noted that, faced with a funding problem, the Ministry of Agriculture decided to prioritise the entry level scheme for environmental production because it dealt with a number of environmental problems related to agricultural production, and provided the basis on which farmers could build up to more demanding agri-environment measures. This meant that other measures, including some targeted at farmland management for birds, were not implemented and some may not be brought back into the

<sup>63</sup> Anonymous 2004, 2005 quoted in Herzon I and Mikk M (2006) *Farmers' perceptions of biodiversity and their willingness to enhance it through agri-environment schemes: A comparative study from Estonia and Finland*. Journal for Nature Conservation, in press

programme until 2009 - for example a semi-natural habitats measure was not offered under the RDP, although similar state-aid support continued in Natura 2000 areas only (see below)<sup>64</sup>.

For 2007-13 there are two schemes (in addition to the *Organic Farming Scheme*) which could benefit farmland birds. It is proposed to discontinue the current entry level *Environmentally Friendly Production Scheme* and replace it with the more demanding **Environmentally Friendly Management Scheme** (EMS), which has been tested on more than 4000 ha in two pilot areas since 2001. Details are not yet finalised but it may be targeted at 35% of Estonian farmland and could be of considerably more benefit to farmland birds than the scheme it replaces, provided it is available for both arable and grassland, and the following requirements are included in the final version:

- mark all semi-natural habitats and valuable landscape elements<sup>65</sup> on the Whole Farm Map and do not damage, disturb or destroy any of these semi-natural habitats or valuable landscape elements. Fertilisers and plant protection products must not be used within one and a half metres of semi-natural habitats and valuable landscape elements;
- strips of perennial vegetation at least 2 (or 4) metres wide must be established or retained on all boundaries where the cultivated area meets uncultivated areas, such as roads. The strips should be mowed at least once a year during a time period suitable for ground nesting birds. No fertilisers or crop protection products should be applied to these strips and they must not be allowed to overgrow;
- in fields larger than 30 hectares, the farmer should establish an uncropped and uncultivated mid-field strip (minimum width of 3 metres) with perennial vegetation, and manage it as above;
- follow a planned crop rotation plan and, from 1 November to 31 March, ensure that there is green cover on 30% of the land to which crop rotation is applied;
- stocking rate of grazing animals on the farm to be no more than 1.5 Livestock Units (LU) per hectare of cultivated land;
- the applicant must participate in at least 6 hours of training in *Environmentally Friendly Management* within the first year following application, and in at least 12 hours of training in *Environmentally Friendly Management* in total during the remaining four years of commitment.

Of major concern to biodiversity experts is a recent proposal to offer this *Environmentally Friendly Management Scheme* only on arable land, not on grassland. Given the importance of appropriately managed grassland habitats to declining Annex 1 birds in Estonia, and the serious threat of abandonment, there is no environmental justification for excluding grassland from this scheme. Its potential biodiversity value may be restricted even further by a proposal to drop boundary strips and mid-field strips from the options, making the scheme of much less benefit to farmland birds.

The second new scheme for 2007-13 is **Management of Semi-Natural Grassland and High Nature Value Farmland in Natura 2000 areas**. This measure, which was dropped from the 2004-06 programme, applies only within Natura 2000 sites and only on farmland that is not registered for SAPS direct aid. The management requirements have not been finalised, but are likely to be based on Ministry of Environment payment schemes operating for the past five years for the restoration and maintenance of high nature value grasslands in Natura 2000 sites, including wooded meadows, coastal grasslands, floodplain meadows, wet meadows, wooded pastures and dry grasslands.

### **Comments on 2007-13 proposals**

These two new measures appear to be well designed and of potential benefit to birds (especially with mowing dates later than 15 July) - but restricting their availability to arable land and Natura 2000 areas respectively threatens to leave large areas of high nature value

<sup>64</sup> Oréade-Brèche (2005) Evaluation Des Mesures Agro-Environnementales Agri/ G4/ 2004 Annexe 22: Etude Nationale Estonie (report published in English)

<sup>65</sup> hedges, hedgerows, stonewalls and other traditional field boundaries, ponds and wetlands, springs, stone heaps and isolated glacial boulders, alleys, coppices and forest patches, trees of notable landscape and biodiversity value, objects of historical or archaeological value

semi-natural grasslands outside Natura 2000 sites, without any agri-environment measures for grassland management and at risk of abandonment or intensification. These grasslands are important for significant populations of Annex 1 birds in unfavourable population status, including Corncrake and White Stork.

## **9.7 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures**

### ***Delivery***

Estonian farmers have a favourable attitude to agri-environment, which is encouraged and supported by compulsory agri-environment training measures, but the basic training is not long enough to cover all biodiversity issues and additional training will be needed for new habitat management measures. The most significant problem in providing farmer training has been the limited number of advisers with the necessary technical expertise - there are 30-40 in Estonia, which is not considered sufficient.<sup>66</sup>

There is also a need to improve the training of paying agency inspectors in habitat definition and management.

### ***Evaluation***

Estonia has a detailed programme of independent evaluation of RDP measures, which includes evaluating the biodiversity impact of measures using a range of indicators including farmland bird populations (see Annex 2 for details).

## **9.8 Natura 2000**

About 17% of the Axis 2 budget will be allocated to Natura 2000 management and farmers in Natura 2000 areas will have access either to compensation or to agri-environment payments for habitat management and species protection - but this will not address the needs of Annex 1 birds using the large areas of high nature value habitat outside Natura 2000 sites.

## **9.9 Negative impacts of Axis 2 measures on farmland birds**

### ***Afforestation of farmland***

As in many Member States there are concerns that afforestation of grasslands, including those already abandoned, may threaten habitats of Annex 1 birds in Estonia, including Corncrake and Spotted Crane.

### ***Areas with handicaps (formerly Less Favoured Areas)***

Half the farmland in Estonia is eligible for LFA support but this has taken a smaller share of the RDP budget than in many Member States and is perceived to have benefited birds by supporting compliance with GFP requirements on land that otherwise might have been abandoned.

## **9.10 Impacts of Axis 1 measures farmland birds**

No negative impacts of Axis 1 measures were reported and it was pointed out that support for rebuilding stone walls may provide nesting sites and feeding places for some farmland birds.

## **9.11 GAEC**

If properly defined and enforced GAEC can safeguard the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds, and protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement.

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<sup>66</sup> Oréade-Brèche (2005) op.cit.

Biodiversity experts point out that the current definition of GAEC, which has already been harmonised with GFP, could be improved by:

- changing the last date by which grass must be mown, from 31 July to 15 August;
- requiring the use of 'middle outwards' or similar mowing techniques to protect chicks of ground nesting birds;
- adjusting grazing requirements, which in some cases are too low.

## 10 Hungary

### Key points for Hungary 2007-13

Hungary has seventeen of the twenty Annex 1 farmland birds targeted by BirdLife as key species to be supported through agri-environment schemes in the new Member States, including two globally threatened birds - the Imperial Eagle and the Aquatic warbler (58% and 15% respectively of the EU25 populations). There are also major populations of nine other Annex 1 farmland birds in unfavourable population status. Many of the 40 IBAs are almost entirely farmland and together they account for a total of more than 700000 hectares of agricultural land. Arable land is a major habitat but there are extensive areas of unimproved permanent dry grassland, steppe and pseudo-steppe habitats, mixed traditional farming, permanent crops and wet grassland.

*Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan?*

Hungary developed agri-environment programmes before accession that were well received by farmers. Agri-environment schemes are popular and have well-designed and targeted measures for birds, but late payment of agri-environment funds is a big problem for farmers.

As a result of temporary national budget deficiencies, agri-environment payments have not been paid every year. There are now concerns that, due to national financial constraints, agri-environment schemes may not open to new applicants until 2009, and then may not open every year after that.

To meet the EU 2007-13 Guidelines on protecting and developing high nature value farming systems, the first priority for agri-environment funding in all Member States should be to secure long-term conservation management of existing high nature value farmland habitats used by Annex 1 birds and other protected species. In the 2004-06 programme more than 70% of the agri-environment budget is taken by the entry-level *Arable Stewardship Scheme* and the *Integrated Management Scheme*, which prevent some intensification but otherwise deliver limited biodiversity benefits. Environmental organisations argue that the management requirements and budget allocations for these schemes should be reviewed, and steps taken to increase uptake of high nature value measures.

Natura 2000 payments in 2007-13 will have an important role in ensuring that existing valuable habitats are not altered and in supporting the (often uneconomic) farming systems which maintain them. The national strategy identifies Natura 2000 payments as a tool to achieve sustainable management of agricultural land, but environmental organisations are concerned that EAFRD funding for Natura 2000 will not be sufficient.

Axis 3 measures for conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage could be the only possible source of funding for Natura 2000 management plans, as there is no other budget.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?*

There is a very well designed *High Nature Value Area Scheme* with measures for Great bustard, Corncrake and other birds in these areas, with complex requirements. Specialist environmental staff from the National Parks (Ministry of Environment) are closely involved in its design, delivery and control, which is a significant factor in its success, and advice from National Park experts helps farmers to comply with requirements. This measure deserves more uptake in the future.

There is a serious risk that traditional farming systems will disappear from high nature value areas and 'tanya' (traditional arable farms) will not survive on the Great Plain, with the loss of

valuable habitats and populations of Annex 1 birds. High agri-environment payment rates will help to keep these forms of management alive in the future.

Farmers in these traditional farming areas would also be helped by carefully targeted Axis 1 and Axis 3 support to draw economic benefits from their high levels of environmental management (e.g. support for producer groups, co-operatives, accreditation schemes)

The relatively low payment rates of the *Organic Scheme* make it much less attractive to farmers than the *Integrated Management Scheme* which is of less environmental benefit. The organic movement has been established for more than 20 years in Hungary and if payments rates were revised and controls became more effective, uptake of the organic scheme would improve and it would be of much greater benefit to biodiversity.

A horizontal scheme for *Grass Margins on Arable Land* could be of great benefit to farmland birds and biodiversity generally but has had minimal uptake despite good payment rates, apparently due to lack of information and advice for farmers.

*What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Problems with the national share of rural development funding for 2004-06 have led to serious delays in payment which put at risk farmers' positive attitude to agri-environment schemes and the biodiversity management of important sites.

Natura 2000 legislation has been in place since 2004 but problems with incompatible IACS and Natura 2000 mapping systems made it impossible for farmers to identify Natura boundaries on the ground.

Training for farmers is an obligatory part of every agri-environment scheme but the present system is not effective and the potential benefits are often lost because most advisors have very little environmental knowledge.

Control of farmers' compliance with agri-environment measures is poor, partly because paying agency staff have little or no environmental knowledge.

Control of GAEC and other cross-compliance requirements is not effective - for example, although permission is required from the environmental authorities to convert grassland to arable in high nature value and Natura 2000 areas farmers often ignore this.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?*

LFA measures have taken a relatively small proportion of the budget but would be of greater environmental benefit if they were more focused on high nature value areas, and were not used to support intensive farming.

The comprehensive list of environmental requirements in Good Farming Practice will be replaced in 2007 by GAEC as the baseline management requirement for agri-environment and other Axis 2 measures. There are several requirements in GFP which, if transferred to GAEC for 2007-13, would bring great benefits to farmland birds, place few additional demands on farmers and make more effective use of agri-environment funds. These are to:

- use bird-friendly mowing techniques (from the middle outwards);
- preserve small ponds; and
- inform environmental authorities when the nests of protected birds are found.

There have been some problems of conflict between GAEC requirements and traditional management of high nature value areas which could be resolved by implementing the policy advice of the national park authorities and offering derogations to farmers in agri-environment and Natura 2000 schemes.

## 10.1 Agriculture in Hungary

Hungary has much more arable land (almost half of the territory) and slightly less forest (19%) and grassland (11%) than the EU average<sup>67</sup>. Around 40% of the farmland is owned and managed by private farmers, mostly as small subsistence units. The remainder is managed by large enterprises, mostly on tenanted land<sup>68</sup>. The main crops are wheat and maize, and there are significant problems of soil erosion and compaction and loss of biodiversity as a result of previous farming methods. Soil conditions are better than those in many Western European countries but soil erosion on agricultural and forest land affects 40% of the country, mainly due to inappropriate land use and cultivation techniques in vulnerable areas<sup>69</sup>.

## 10.2 Annex 1 farmland birds in Hungary

Hungary has seventeen of the twenty Annex 1 farmland birds targeted by BirdLife as key species to be supported through agri-environment schemes in the new Member States, including two globally threatened birds - the Imperial Eagle and the Aquatic warbler (58% and 15% respectively of the EU25 populations are found in Hungary). There are also major populations of other Annex 1 birds in unfavourable population status - 89% of the EU25 population of the Red-footed Falcon, 39% of the Lesser Grey Shrike population and more than 11% of the EU25 populations of three species of heron.

Many of the 40 IBAs used by these birds are almost entirely farmland and together they account for a total of more than 700 000 hectares of agricultural land, much of it designated as Natura 2000. Arable land is a major habitat but there are extensive areas of unimproved permanent dry grassland, steppe and pseudo-steppe habitats, mixed traditional farming, permanent crops and wet grassland.

Please see Annex 4 for more details of important farmland birds and their habitats in Hungary.

## 10.3 Threats to existing farmland habitats for Annex 1 and other farmland birds in Hungary

### **Arable land**

Commercially farmed arable land dominates the Hungarian landscape, especially in the Great Plain, but there are considerable regional variations from grassland/arable mosaics to large arable fields growing a single crop with no field margins. Arable land is important for the Great Bustard, Imperial Eagle, Roller and other species<sup>70</sup>. Threats to arable habitats include:

- afforestation;
- intensification (more fertilisers, fewer crop types);
- lack of field margins;
- monocultures;
- energy crops.

### **Unimproved grasslands**

The grasslands of Hungary are very diverse, with steppe, pseudo steppe, montane grassland, pastoral woodland and wet grasslands (areas that have high water tables or are periodically flooded, including riverine and lakeside flood-meadows, polders, and upland rough grassland) Traditional pastoral agriculture still survives, with indigenous cattle, sheep and horses, but few of the younger farmers have the necessary skills (and most farm advisers have to obtain their

<sup>67</sup> Oréade-Brèche (2005) *Evaluation Des Mesures Agro-Environnementales Agri/ G4/ 2004 Annexe 21: Etude Nationale Hongrie* (report published in English) [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index\\_fr.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index_fr.htm)

<sup>68</sup> DG Agri Member State profile

<sup>69</sup> Figezky, G. (2006) *Europe's Living Countryside: promoting policies for sustainable rural development; Hungary National Report*. Land Use Policy Group.

<sup>70</sup> Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*, Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*, Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*, Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*, Eurasian Thick-knee *Burhinus oediacnemus*, Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* and White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*.

information from books) because their generation is more familiar with the intensive livestock production systems of the collective and state farms<sup>71</sup>. Grasslands are important for Corncrake, Great Bustard and Imperial Eagle and many other Annex 1 birds<sup>72</sup>. The main threats to these grassland habitats are:

- abandonment, leading to scrub invasion;
- declining numbers of grazing livestock, and the cost of purchasing grazing stock;
- no market for hay or animals;
- ploughing up;
- afforestation;
- canalisation of rivers which, together with the recent drier climate, has lowered the water table and threatened wet grasslands.

### **Mixed traditional farming**

These traditionally managed areas have a mosaic of different arable crops, grasslands and perennial crops, providing a very wide range of habitats for birds. Much of the land is jointly owned, and often farmed by someone other than the owner. The main threats are:

- foreign procurement;
- state purchase of large areas, followed by the creation of monocultures;
- rural poverty;
- lack of markets for produce.

### **Perennial crops**

Hungary has a long tradition of vineyards and orchards, which are the dominant habitat in some regions. Most of them are intensively managed, but traditional extensive orchards survive, especially near the Tisza river. Often the land is jointly owned and in common use. The threats to these areas are the same as those for mixed traditional farming.

## **10.4 Opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds**

There are significant opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds. The following table identifies these opportunities, and the birds which would use the new habitats.

<b>Farm type</b>	<b>Opportunity</b>	<b>Opportunity to improve breeding or feeding areas for:</b>
Arable	Preferred management for birds will depend on the species targeted, but could include: chemical free borders to arable crops, managed but not seeded; managed fallow; more than 20% rape or alfalfa in the crop rotation; deferring harvest until 15 July; no cultivation between 15 April and 15 July; approximately 5% higher plants in the seed mix; use of crop rotation with green cover all year and root plants; organic cropping; row crops sown in spring; non cultivated patches in autumn corn, 20 square metres in size; leaving corn stubble all winter; mixed farming; hedges; wetland habitats with long term non-cultivation; managing land for breeding Lapwing, near grassland if possible, by ploughing in November, maintenance work in February, and no cultivation from March to middle of July); wild bird cover crops of corn, cole crops, flax; and long term management of set-aside.	Montagu's Harrier, Roller, Lesser Grey Shrike, Stone Curlew and White Stork

<sup>71</sup> Figecky, G. (2006) op.cit.

<sup>72</sup> and *Coracias garrulus*, *Falco vespertinus*, *Glareola pratincola*, *Lanius minor*, *Falco cherrug*, *Burhinus oedicnemus*, *Circus pygargus*, *Ciconia ciconia*, *Acrocephalus paludicola*, *Porzana porzana*, *Milvus migrans*, *Aquila pomarina*, *Ciconia nigra*, *Circaetus gallicus*

Farm type	Opportunity	Opportunity to improve breeding or feeding areas for:
Grassland	Maintenance of grassland with short grass; prevention of high grazing density; development of diverse grassland structure; preservation of landscape elements; prohibition of burning of wasteland; prohibition of poisoning crows; flooding grassland; restoration of mown meadows, late mowing, using a drum mower, leaving unmown strips; mowing by hand or using small machines; mowing small parcels; growing alfalfa; establishing grassland; and maintenance of wood pasture.	Lesser Spotted Eagle, Red-footed Falcon, Great Bustard, Montagu's Harrier, Roller, Lesser Grey Shrike, Collared Pratincole, Aquatic Warbler, and Spotted Crake
Rice	growing organic rice; drains inside rice fields 40 cm deep and 60 cm wide.	Squacco Heron and Night Heron
Orchards	maintenance of old orchards with high trees; grassy spaces between lines of grapes cultivated on poles; areas of natural regeneration; no use of chemical weed control until July.	Turtle-dove, Skylark and Grey Partridge

## 10.5 National Strategy and budget allocations for 2007-13

The Hungarian Rural Development Strategy for 2007-2013 lists high biodiversity as a strength and the loss of biodiversity in Hungary as an agri-environmental problem. Natura 2000 payments are identified as a tool to achieve sustainable management of agricultural land and to increase biodiversity of the forest environment, but neither Natura 2000 nor biodiversity are mentioned in the description of measures of Axes 1, 3 or 4.

The proposed allocation of 2007-13 EAFRD funding between Axes (at the time data was collected for this report) was: Axis 1 40-45%, **Axis 2 36-37%**, Axis 3 10-14% and Axis 4 5-6%.

The respondents to the questionnaire survey for this study expressed concerns about the availability of national co-funding for the EAFRD and about budget allocations, including :

- that basic horizontal measures such as the arable stewardship scheme and the integrated farming scheme could again take a disproportionate share of the budget without providing significant benefits for biodiversity and birds;
- that insufficient funds may be allocated for the new Natura 2000 measures. (A recent report gives a rough estimate of an annual cost of €8 million to establish and manage the Natura 2000 network<sup>73</sup> - this would be less than 4% of the Axis 2 budget).

## 10.6 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13

A well-developed agri-environment programme has existed since 2002, which is popular with farmers. A recent report on rural development in Hungary, commenting on the 2004-06 rural development plan, noted that:

'The measures ... selected for implementation seem to show a fairly strong grasp of the environmental measures, with funds allocated for agri-environment and LFA amounting to more than half of the total budget. However the assessment of the plan showed that it lacks clear, quantified environmental objectives and the indicators to measure these. There are some very environmentally targeted measures, especially the agri-environmental ones, whereas for example the LFA scheme completely failed to address the issue adequately. In addition, the plan has an overall production-based approach with soil erosion being the top priority when environmental concerns are discussed.'<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Figeczky, G. (2006) op.cit.

<sup>74</sup> Figeczky, G. (2006) op.cit.

The current agri-environment measures are likely to continue in 2007-13, with some modifications, and will be delivered as part of a new system, with three levels of management requirements for each farm:

- compulsory requirements
- requirements of which one must be chosen by the farmer (nutrient management, crop protection, soil protection, cropping structure, other agri-environment management)
- voluntary requirements.

### ***Agri-environment measures targeted specifically at farmland birds***

The 2004-06 programme has three measures specifically targeted at birds and another which benefits insect-feeding birds by supporting their food supplies. It is likely that these will not be altered significantly compared to the last programming period. The most effective way of improving habitat management for Annex 1 birds would be to focus on increasing the uptake of these measures within the eligible areas. (A fifth measure, for bird-friendly management of fishponds on farms, will have to be funded under the aqua-environment measures of the European Fisheries Fund in 2007-13). The four measures are:

#### ***High Nature Value Area Schemes (ESAs)***

This zonal scheme applies to both arable and grasslands, which took almost 12% of the agri-environment budget in 2004-06. The eligible area is currently about 10% of the agricultural land (including seven IBAs<sup>75</sup>) and this is expected to increase to about 15% in 2007-13, taking about 15-20% of the agri-environment budget.

#### *Comments*

This is a well targeted scheme with complex management requirements based on nature conservation experience with special measures for a) Corncrake, b) Great Bustard and c) farmland birds using different types of crop (arable in general, alfalfa for Great Bustard, and grassland). It requires major changes in management practice and farmers' concerns about the complexity can be overcome by good advice, often from National Park staff. Payment rates make this measure very attractive. The main problems with farmers arise with late mowing, because the late hay has much less nutritive value for livestock.

#### ***Tanya (small farming system) scheme***

This zonal scheme applies only to a very small proportion of the farmed land and only to farmers of a 'tanya' (a traditional arable system in certain areas of the Great Plain) with a mosaic of small parcels of crops, providing valuable habitats for birds. It takes just under 5% of the 2004-06 agri-environment budget and this proportion is expected to rise to perhaps 8% in 2007-13.

#### *Comments*

Management requirements are targeted at landscape conservation (mosaics) and the protection of low-input management systems and at protecting a farming system at serious risk of disappearance. Many of these areas could be used for intensive agriculture, which would mean much less biodiversity. Although relatively little change in management is required, the systems are labour intensive and uneconomic and high payment rates will be the key to keeping this form of management alive in the future.

#### ***Reed Management***

This horizontal measures applies to managed reedbeds and is directly targeted at the requirements of wetland birds. It took less than 1% of the agri-environment budget in 2004-06.

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<sup>75</sup> These are 8, 9, 15, 26,37, 44, 51 as described in Annex 4

### Comments

The management requirements are very effective in protecting birds' nesting and feeding places<sup>76</sup>. The requirements do mean changes in usual management practice but the relatively high uptake (compared to overall reed cover in the country) shows that payment rates make this measure attractive enough. Only some very intensive reed management companies with a solid export market are unlikely to apply for it. Many of the national parks have applied for this scheme.

### Apiculture

This applies to all arable land and prohibits the use of fertilisers and pesticides and specifies the cultivation of plants for bee keeping purposes.

### Comments

This measure takes a very small fraction of the budget and is unlikely to gain more significance in the future, but about 75% of the farmland in Hungary is eligible and from an environmental point of view it is still a good way of preventing intensification in areas where this is obviously not profitable. It definitely increases the variety of insects in the area, which provides food for many birds.

### Other agri-environment measures

The horizontal measure for unfertilised **grass margins on arable fields** could be of much greater benefit to farmland birds if it had better uptake. Although more than 75% of the farmland in Hungary is eligible this measure used less than 1% of the agri-environment budget in 2004-06. It is targeted at providing green corridors and habitats for animals and plants but also has wider environmental effects (on chemical diffuse pollution of water bodies and the soil). It could be a very important measure for farmland birds as few farmers use margins now, the measure is not difficult to comply with and has attractive payment rates. Uptake has been very low, largely due to lack of information for farmers.

Two other horizontal measures, which together have used 60-70% of the 2004-06 agri-environment budget, have more limited benefits for birds. The very popular **Arable Stewardship Scheme** (for which applicants are selected using a points system) limits inputs of chemicals and fertilisers<sup>77</sup> and has taken almost 45% of the current budget. The management requirements are easy to meet, mainly because most Hungarian farmers cannot afford expensive chemicals or fertilisers - for example the requirements limit nitrogen supply to 170kg/ha but the average use in Hungary in 2004 was 58 Kg/ha (on arable crops, gardens orchards and vineyards)<sup>78</sup>. The payment rate may therefore be considered too high at present. If effectively controlled the scheme is likely to prevent large-scale intensification of arable production in many areas, providing some safeguards for biodiversity generally.

Another popular horizontal scheme with limited use of fertilisers and plant protection products and low intensity irrigation is the **Integrated Management Scheme**, for both arable and perennial crops, taking almost 30% of the current budget. Farmers using very intensive methods can still use quite a wide range of pesticides likely to kill invertebrates - the biodiversity benefits of this scheme would be increased if it had a more restrictive and "greener" list of approved plant protection products. The payment rate is too high compared to that for organic farming, providing little incentive to join the **Organic Management Scheme**, a horizontal scheme that covers arable crops, perennial crops, steppe and pseudo-steppe habitats and wet grasslands. It takes only 5-8% of the budget, perhaps because the payment rate in itself is rarely high enough to encourage farmers to join the scheme, so it is taken up

<sup>76</sup> e.g. any management can undertaken between 15 December and 15 February; 20% of the reeds must be left untouched each year; at least 10 cm high stubble must remain after harvest

<sup>77</sup> Compulsory soil investigation, nutrient management plan, nutrient supply limited to a maximum of 170 kg N/ha/year, chemicals with high environmental risks cannot be used.

<sup>78</sup> István Szucs Studies in agricultural economics, 2004, Research and Information Institute for agricultural economics, Budapest, 2004, quoted in Oréade-Brèche (2005) *Evaluation Des Mesures Agro-Environnementales Agri/ G4/ 2004 Annexe 21: Etude Nationale Hongrie* (report published in English)  
[http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index\\_fr.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index_fr.htm)

mainly by farmers who are conservation minded (or who receive advice), or by those who are offered trading (usually export) opportunities for organic produce. Although it is of more benefit to birds the organic scheme cannot compete with the higher payment rates of the integrated farming scheme (which allows the use of pesticides and herbicides, thus reducing biodiversity and food supplies of insects and native plants).

In addition to the new three-tier structure for agri-environment schemes in 2007-13 several revised or additional schemes are proposed, for:

- arable;
- grassland;
- plantation schemes (orchards, energy crops);
- livestock;
- conservation of genetic resources;
- flood prevention reservoirs established along the River Tisza;
- Natura 2000 site schemes;
- Water Framework Directive.

There are no proposals to use non-productive investments to support agri-environment schemes, although these could be of particular benefit for:

- special game (bird) alarm chain attached to the tractor to protect Great Bustards;
- construction of small dams, channels etc to improve the hydrological regime for birds;
- conversion of arable land into grassland;
- removal of non-indigenous invasive shrubs, using special equipment.

## **10.7 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures**

### ***Payments to farmers***

There have been major problems with severely delayed payments under the RDP - no agri-environment payments were made to farmers in 2004 and none are expected in 2006. The government tends to postpone payments each year, although eventually the full amount is paid. If this problem cannot be resolved, with adequate and timely provision of Hungarian government co-finance for the rural development programme, there is a real risk that farmers will be discouraged from entering schemes or will feel under no obligation to continue the required management if they are not paid. There are now concerns that, as a result of financial constraints, there is a possibility that agri-environment schemes may not open to new applicants until 2009, and then not open every year after that.

### ***Delivery***

Design, delivery, control and evaluation of agri-environment schemes is the sole responsibility of MARD and the paying agency - except for the zonal high nature value (ESA) measure, where responsibility is shared with the Ministry of Environment and its institutions (the 10 national parks, which were the conservation authorities until 2005). The national park field experts sometimes act as RDP advisers and assist paying agency staff to carry out field checks, and also provide informal advice to farmers - a system which seems to work well in most cases. The only other source of specialist advice on nature conservation and farming is a business operated by the NGO BirdLife Hungary.

Once every two years all farmers participating in an agri-environment scheme are required to attend a training course run by RDP advisers. There are obligatory parts of this training in ESAs that should cover the natural value of the area (including birds), the environmental objectives of the scheme and why and how the management requirements should be implemented. But the full environmental benefits of compulsory training are often lost, because only a few of the RDP advisors have sufficient environmental knowledge, and in many cases the essence of the scheme is forgotten.

Lack of environmental skills among paying agency staff and unsatisfactory levels of control outside ESAs means that when farmers fail to comply with agri-environment requirements (whether through lack of understanding or deliberate cheating) this is often not corrected.

### **Evaluation**

Pilot monitoring of both outputs and impacts of agri-environment schemes has started in two ESAs, where farmland bird populations are also monitored. No results are available yet, but long term monitoring will be needed on a much more extensive area of farmland.

In the 2007-13 programme the outcome indicators for the agri-environment measures are:

- the rate by which agricultural inputs are decreasing in the areas affected by the measure;
- the change in the area and state (based upon a description) of high nature value areas affected by the measure;
- the change in the area of valuable wetlands affected by the measure;
- gross nutrient balance in areas affected by the measure.

The description of high nature value areas will probably include a description of how the population of farmland birds is changing. Evaluation based on all the other indicators will only contain indirect effects for farmland birds or Annex 1 species - although bird populations will be monitored by BirdLife Hungary, outside high nature value areas this monitoring will not be synchronised with data collection for any of the rural development measures. The ELCo project proposed that outcome indicators should also include the area affected by invasive plants in floodplains and the existence of a mosaic type landscape in high nature value areas, and output indicators should cover biodiversity activities supported by Axis 1 and Axis 3 - for example the number of high nature value farmers given other grants (investment aid, infrastructure etc.) and the number of Natura 2000 management plans in place<sup>79</sup>.

### **10.8 Natura 2000**

National Natura 2000 legislation came into force in autumn of 2004, affecting 20% of Hungary's territory and doubling the area under nature protection. Maps accompanying the legislation were only indicative, showing the locations of sites but not detailed site boundaries, so farmers do not know exactly which parts of their farms fall within a Natura 2000 site. According to a report published in 2006, this was due to incompatibility of the geographical information systems developed by the paying agency and the conservation authority. The lack of accurate, published boundaries made it impossible to implement Article 16 measures in the 2004-06 programme, and difficult to target other rural development measures at Natura 2000 sites<sup>80</sup>.

#### **Legal restrictions**

In Natura 2000 sites (which include parts or all of 40 IBAs having a total of more than 700,000 ha of farmland) permission is required for ploughing and reseedling of grassland, restoration of land, change of use of cropland; cutting and introduction of trees, groups of trees and trees on pastures which are not protected by the forest regulations.

#### **Natura 2000 payments and other EAFRD support**

The 2007-13 programme will include new measures for Natura 2000 areas and areas affected by the Water Framework Directive. There is considerable overlap between high nature value (ESA) areas, which have a well targeted agri-environment scheme for Annex 1 birds, and Natura 2000 areas, so it will be essential to make clear what the two different schemes are paying for and to ensure that none of the benefits of the existing scheme are lost. It is expected that agri-environment payment rates for all schemes will be higher in Natura 2000 areas than elsewhere, which should encourage uptake.

On the large areas of farmland within Natura 2000 sites in Hungary the high levels of biodiversity may depend on traditional and extensive methods of farming with inherently low

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<sup>79</sup> Figeczky, G. (2006) op.cit.

<sup>80</sup> Figeczky, G. (2006) op.cit.

productivity, and farmers often have difficulty finding markets for their produce. Given the scale of Natura 2000 farming in Hungary there would seem to be potential for both farmers and Annex 1 birds to benefit from support from other Axes for:

- a quality assurance scheme linked to the management of Natura 2000 habitats for birds (Article 32);
- setting up supply chain co-operatives (Article 29), producer groups (Article 35) and micro-enterprises (Article 54);
- preparation of Natura 2000 management plans under Article 57(a) - this was proposed by WWF Hungary and a sub-measure was drafted by the Ministry of Environment but it had not been included in the draft plan at the time information was collected for this study (despite the fact that Natura 2000 is mentioned in the national strategy in relation to community policies). WWF point out that this will be the only way to get Natura 2000 plans in place, as there is no other budget or government resources available.

## **10.9 Negative impacts of Axis 2 measures on farmland birds**

### ***Areas with handicaps (formerly Less Favoured Areas)***

Unlike many other countries Hungary allocated only a small proportion of 2004-06 rural development funding to LFA support, but the existing payments have relatively few environmental requirements and these will be further reduced when GAEC replaces GFP in 2007(see below). Environmental experts suggest that in future these payments should focus much more on high nature value farming, and should not be used to support the continuation of intensive farming in areas where this is damaging the environment.

## **10.10 Impact of Axis 1 measures on farmland birds**

### ***Early retirement, support for semi-subsistence farms, and modernisation of agricultural holdings***

These measures could help farms that are not economically viable to restructure and invest, thus avoiding abandonment and perhaps making agri-environment schemes more attractive. But on the other hand there is a real risk that changes in farm size and structures will lead to more uniform and intensive systems of production with loss of valuable wildlife habitats - particularly the mosaics of traditional farming systems, and small landscape features.

The rates of farm investment grants will be higher in Natura 2000 areas than elsewhere, and it has also been suggested that applications from farmers in agri-environment schemes should be given priority. Care will be needed to ensure that these applications are in accord with the Commission's key action for Axis 1, of *'improving the environmental performance of farms and forestry'*<sup>81</sup>, and do not risk destroying wildlife habitats in the course of improvement (for example by drainage, road building etc).

## **10.11 GAEC**

If properly defined and enforced GAEC should safeguard the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds, and protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement.

### ***Good Farming Practice 2004-06***

The GFP requirements were reduced in number from 64 to 23 during the life of the RDP, but biodiversity experts point out that some of the requirements have the perverse effect of limiting the uptake and effectiveness of agri-environment schemes for birds, particularly in high nature value areas. Concerns include:

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<sup>81</sup> Council Decision of 20 February 2006 on Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007 to 2013) (2006/144/EC) section 3.1

- prohibiting traditional methods of livestock grazing (using pigs, and winter grazing) has effectively excluding areas managed in this way from agri-environment payments - both are traditional methods of managing high nature value areas. Winter grazing has a positive effect on birds and small game by breaking up the snow cover and helping them to find food, and also helps farmers to feed their animals more naturally and improve the animals' welfare by allowing them to move in winter. Winter grazing was not clearly defined in GFP and advice from the local National Park directorate was not taken up;
- restrictions on parcel sizes are contrary to the objectives of some agri-environment measures (for example the measure that aims to improve habitats of Great Bustard has a restriction that a parcel cannot be bigger than 40 hectares). Instead, parcel sizes characteristic of the local high nature value farmland should be safeguarded and maintained, and the development of new parcels, following the traditional structure, should be part of the measure. The regional and local character of the Hungarian landscape is so unique to different parts of Hungary that a uniform parcel structure is completely inappropriate and would lead to destruction of traditional landscape and natural values. National Park Directorates should be asked for advice, and the regulation should also include the summer folds of the animals, not just with the night folds. The location of parcels should also be taken into account, because some measures can be achieved more effectively on neighbouring parcels.
- mowing should be required on land not used as pastures, and abandoned grasslands that are not grazed by animals should be mown at least once a year;
- the new version of the ESA regulation has omitted an important requirement that only natural materials should be used to mark site borders, and neither field boundaries nor spot markers should be made of plastic or metal;
- more flexibility is needed - for example for farmers who have difficulty meeting deadlines on nutrient management for the whole farm.

#### **GAEC 2004-06**

The basis for SAPS cross-compliance since 2004 has fewer requirements, none of much direct benefit to birds, although preventing the spread of invasive plants could be very helpful in maintaining open habitats (but it is not controlled properly because inspectors do not have much knowledge of plants). Biodiversity experts have warned that some applications of the current GAEC could damage bird habitats and high nature value areas, and point out that:

- the ideal time of stubble ploughing (for birds) will vary in each region of Hungary so only general rules are needed, which could be modified and adjusted according to the actual region or measure;
- erosion is not clearly defined, nor are unwanted plants (some weeds are protected species);
- over and under grazing should be defined more precisely according to the local conditions and farmers should be helped in determining the proper level of grazing. Local advisors are needed, leaflets and brochures are insufficient;
- cultivation with machines can damage soil structure (compaction cannot be avoided, only minimised) and deep cultivation could be contrary to some ESA measures.

#### **GAEC 2007-2013**

This has not yet been defined but there are some key changes to the current definition of GAEC which would make this a much more effective baseline for agri-environment schemes, including:

- a requirement to inform the local national park directorate when the nest of a protected species of bird is found (this was included in GFP 2004-06);
- small ponds should be preserved (this was included in GFP 2004-06);
- mowing should be 'bird-friendly', from the middle of the field towards the edges (this was included in GFP 2004-06);

- resolving the conflicts with agri-environment schemes described above by offering derogations from GAEC for farmers in agri-environment schemes.

The rules on the preservation of the overall area of permanent pasture appear to be failing to protect some valuable semi-natural habitats from ploughing up. Grasslands can be converted into arable or other land uses after notifying the Field Registry Office, but in the case of protected areas (ESAs and Natura 2000 sites) the official permission of the environmental authority is also needed - and rarely given. In many cases farmers simply break the law and do the conversion without asking for permission, despite the possibility of a fine.

## 11 Latvia

### Key points for Latvia 2007-13

The population index of farmland birds for Latvia fell by 3.3% between 2000 and 2003. In Latvia 90% of the populations of three declining Annex 1 farmland birds depend on farmland habitats outside Natura 2000 areas.

Land abandonment is a major threat - large areas of open farmland and grasslands which are the main breeding areas for these and other Annex 1 birds have already been abandoned, and more will be lost if action is not taken to remove colonising shrubs and trees, and to maintain these areas as grasslands.

*Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan?*

To meet the EU 2007-13 Guidelines on protecting and developing high nature value farming systems, the first priority for agri-environment funding in all Member States should be to secure long-term conservation management of existing high nature value farmland habitats used by Annex 1 birds and other protected species. The Latvian Rural Development Strategy for 2007-2013 is generalised and does not prioritise the conservation of farmland birds or other nature conservation issues. A joint working group of biodiversity experts felt that time spent preparing proposals to improve the strategy had been wasted because very few of their proposals were taken into account. They have now secured support for several biodiversity proposals from the association of agricultural NGOs.

The budget available for agri-environment measures targeted at maintaining and creating grassland habitats for birds may be limited by competition from LFA payments and from other agri-environment measures which are popular with farmers but of much more limited benefit to farmland birds - in particular organic (biological) farming and a new measure for erosion control.

Habitats for farmland birds are threatened by the proposed allocation of 50% of the budget to Axis 1 measures without adequate controls to protect existing areas of semi-natural habitats and small landscape features.

Restoration of neglected land drainage systems (driven by GAEC requirements and supported by Axis 1 funding) is a major threat to wet grasslands which have developed on previously drained but neglected farmland and are used by Annex 1 birds, in both Natura 2000 sites and the wider countryside.

Afforestation of (abandoned) farmland using EAFRD Axis 2 funds should no longer be a threat to semi-natural grassland habitats as afforestation will be prohibited in SPAs, IBAs and Biologically Valuable Grasslands.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?*

An existing agri-environment scheme for extensive management of grasslands by late season mowing or low intensity grazing requires changes in mowing dates to give better protection for Corncrake and other ground nesting Annex 1 birds.

Where valuable grasslands have been abandoned and overgrown by bushes, targeted restoration measures will be needed, using non-productive investments, to clear the scrub before farmers enter the grassland management scheme.

Management of semi-natural grasslands by mowing may be the only cost-effective way of

maintaining large areas of these habitats, and if they are to survive the authorities may need to counter growing prejudice against so-called 'sofa farmers' who own the land and live elsewhere but are willing to manage it under agri-environment or other incentive schemes.

*What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?*

The current GAEC requirements fail to protect small landscape features and threaten to destroy valuable wet grassland habitats by re-instating neglected drainage systems.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Changes in national LFA regulations may lead to many LFA farmers abandoning grasslands they have maintained by mowing; to prevent the loss of these important habitats it will be very important that agri-environment 'mowing only' measures are available to these and other farmers without livestock.

## 11.1 Agriculture in Latvia

Latvia has more forest than agricultural land (45% and 39% respectively) and almost two thirds of the agricultural land is arable, and a similar proportion has been drained in the past. Abandonment of farmland has become a major problem - between 1995 and 2004 the proportion of unused farmland rose from 11% to 20%. The abandonment of grasslands is a now a major threat to many farmland birds, as without grazing or mowing these open areas will revert to woodland (by natural recolonisation or by planting). A more beneficial consequence of abandonment has been the restoration of natural hydrological regimes (and improved habitats for birds) where land drainage systems have not been maintained for the last 10-20 years. Where farming continues there are signs of significant intensification - for example between 1995 and 2003 the rate of application of mineral fertilisers on sown land increased from 23 kg/ha to 72 kg/ha and the use of pesticides and plant protection products increased from 0.2 kg/ha to 1.1 kg/ha<sup>82</sup>.

## 11.2 Annex 1 farmland birds in Latvia

Latvia's farmland accounts for only 1% of the EU25 total but it provides breeding and feeding grounds for major populations of three Annex 1 farmland birds targeted by BirdLife for support through agri-environment schemes. Latvia has nearly half the EU25 population of the Lesser Spotted Eagle, almost one quarter of the Corncrake population and 9% of the White Stork population. The first two species have unfavourable population status in Europe and the Corncrake is also of global conservation concern under the IUCN Red List criteria.

It is important to note that more than 90% of the Latvian populations of these three species are found outside Natura 2000 sites, and all of them depend on open extensively managed grassland habitats. The 2007-13 RDPs will therefore be critically important for the conservation and protection of these birds and also other Annex 1 and more common farmland species in the wider countryside<sup>83</sup>.

The most important grassland areas, with Great Snipe present, are located in Berzpils bogs and flood-plains, Dviete flood-plain, Kuja, Sita and Pededze flood-plain and Ziemeļgauja,

For several reasons significant parts of some IBAs are not included in Natura 2000 designations. The 43 IBAs that include farmland account for a total of more than 123000

<sup>82</sup> Statistical Yearbook of Latvia 2004 quoted in Oréade-Brèche (2005) *Evaluation Des Mesures Agro-Environnementales Agri/ G4/ 2004 Annexe 21: Etude Nationale Lettonie* (report published in English) [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index\\_fr.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index_fr.htm)

<sup>83</sup> Other important Annex 1 farmland and grassland birds: Great Snipe *Gallinago media* Roller *Coracias garrulus*, Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*, Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* and Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*)

hectares of farmland, with varying degrees of legal protection (see below). The farmland in IBAs is mostly wet grassland but also includes dry unimproved grassland and arable land. Please see Annex 4 for more details of important farmland birds and their habitats in Latvia.

### 11.3 Threats to existing farmland habitats for Annex 1 and other farmland birds in Latvia

#### ***Grassland (including Biologically Valuable grasslands<sup>84</sup>)***

Grasslands occupy 23% of the agricultural land and are mainly wet, including pastures, fallows, natural grasslands and periodically flooded meadows. Extensively managed wet grasslands are the optimum habitat for Corncrake and Great Snipe, important feeding grounds for Lesser Spotted Eagle and White Stork and of value to several other Annex 1 species<sup>85</sup>. Large areas of Latvian grasslands were abandoned as a result first of the creation and then the collapse of the collective farm system, and the consequent economic problems of rural areas. Gradually traditional farming practices have ceased and the rural population has declined (especially through the loss of farmsteads outside villages). Threats to wet grassland habitats include:

- abandonment and persistent overgrowth of scrub and trees;
- on-going and planned afforestation (potentially with Axis 2 funds);
- drainage (as a result of renewing or maintaining long neglected drainage systems, potentially with Axis 1 support);
- early mowing (before ground-nesting birds have fledged);
- use of chemicals and pesticides in protected areas;
- conversion to arable (only on a small scale at present);
- negative attitudes of the farming community towards agri-environment management by city-dwelling landowners;
- restoration of polders, or flood regulation measures which can alter the hydrological regime of grasslands.

#### ***Arable land***

Arable land, especially when part of a mosaic in mixed traditional farming areas with small fields, offers foraging territories for Lesser Spotted Eagle and White Stork, and is a major breeding habitat for other farmland birds<sup>86</sup>. This land is mainly used for growing cereals (mostly rye and wheat, less commonly barley and occasionally oats), fodder crops (mostly beet), root crops (mostly potatoes) and fallow land not more than 3 years old. Threats to existing valuable arable habitats include:

- abandonment;
- afforestation of (mainly abandoned) arable land, which will diminish the biological diversity and may threaten relatively common and widely distributed farmland bird populations;
- increased fertiliser and pesticide use (there have been significant increases in the past 6 years);
- restoration of long-neglected land drainage channels, reversing biodiversity gains of the past 10-20 years;
- use of chemicals and pesticides in protected areas.

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<sup>84</sup> 'Biologically Valuable' grasslands have been identified on 18,620 ha (4.5% of the total) but this proportion could increase as more survey data becomes available; about half the Biologically Valuable grasslands were being farmed in 2004.

<sup>85</sup> e.g. breeding Aquatic warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*, Montagu's harrier *Circus pygargus*, Spotted crane *Porzana porzana*, Ruff

<sup>86</sup> e.g. Oortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*, Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*, Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*, Curlew *Numenius arquata* and Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*. Field margins, edges and other landscape elements along with arable fields host a number of other breeding species, including Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Corncrake, Whinchat, Linnet etc.

### **Unimproved permanent dry grasslands (including Biologically Valuable Grasslands)**

There is practically no management of these marginal and unproductive dry meadows, dunes and sand plains, mostly situated near the coast, which are an important breeding area for the Tawny Pipit (a declining Annex 1 species). Threats to these unmanaged areas include:

- significant parts of former dry coastal grasslands, sandy open areas and heathland may be classified as forest land and thus excluded from farming;
- overgrowth of scrub and trees (natural succession);
- afforestation could continue in open areas outside protected areas;
- development of private housing and infrastructure projects;
- human pressure from tourism and recreation along the coast causes habitat degradation and disturbs wildlife, including breeding Tawny Pipits.

### **Small landscape elements on all types of agricultural land**

Small landscape features such as isolated bushes, individual trees, stone heaps, patches of unmown vegetation and wet depressions are of value to many Annex 1 and other farmland birds but are threatened with removal because they are not included in current GAEC cross-compliance requirements, so farmers lose area payments on the land occupied by these features.

## **11.4 Opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds**

In addition to the need to address the threats to existing Annex 1 bird habitats outlined above, there is a significant case for the creation of new habitats for farmland birds. Justification for habitat creation includes: the high proportion of key Annex 1 farmland species in Latvia which depend on land outside SPAs; the scale and nature of the threats to their habitats; and the 3.3% decline in the farmland bird index for Latvia between 2000 and 2003<sup>87</sup>. The following table identifies the types, preferred locations and reasons for creating new habitats.

<b>New habitat</b>	<b>Reason for creation</b>
<b>conversion of arable to permanent grassland</b> selected areas where natural succession to grassland would benefit Corncrake, Great Snipe and Lesser Spotted Eagle as well as a number of other common bird species.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• passive conversion is already happening on abandoned arable land (but is likely to be reversed as land-use intensifies)</li><li>• to avoid redrainage of land where biodiversity is improving as a result of abandonment</li></ul>
<b>grassy field margins on arable land</b> available in only 3 of the 26 districts in Latvia at present, wider application of this measure would benefit Corncrake, White Stork and many other farmland birds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• create diversity of habitats, shelter and food supplies in large arable fields</li><li>• also benefits for soils and water</li></ul>
<b>small ponds and scrapes (all agricultural land)</b> would benefit White Stork, Spotted Crake and other farmland birds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• create habitat diversity and provide food (invertebrates and amphibians)</li></ul>
<b>create small landscape elements (all agricultural land)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• habitat diversity, shelter, feeding and nesting areas (for birds and their prey)</li></ul>

## **11.5 National Strategy and budget allocations for 2007-13**

The Latvian Rural Development Strategy for 2007-2013 is very general and does not prioritise the conservation of farmland birds or other nature conservation issues. A joint working group

<sup>87</sup> Source: Eurostat

[http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?\\_pageid=1996,39140985&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL&screen=detailref&language=en&product=STRIND\\_ENVIRO&root=STRIND\\_ENVIRO/enviro/en073](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1996,39140985&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL&screen=detailref&language=en&product=STRIND_ENVIRO&root=STRIND_ENVIRO/enviro/en073)

of biodiversity experts<sup>88</sup> felt that time spent preparing proposals to improve the strategy had been wasted because very few of their proposals were taken in to account by the Ministry of Agriculture or the Institute of the Agrarian Economy. They are more hopeful of influencing the measures in the Plan and have secured support for several biodiversity proposals from the association of agricultural NGOs.

The proposed allocation of 2007-13 EAFRD funding between Axes (at the time data was collected for this report) was: Axis 1 - 50%, **Axis 2 - 30%** and Axis 3 - 20%. Half the Axis 2 budget is allocated to LFA support, 25% to agri-environment and 5% each to Natura 2000/WFD payments and afforestation of farmland.

It seems clear, from the scale, distribution and habitat requirements of declining farmland bird species in Latvia, that restoring and managing semi-natural grasslands is likely to be a critical factor in:

- meeting the government's legal obligations under the Birds Directive to safeguard the habitats of declining Annex 1 farmland species;
- delivering the Göteborg target to reverse biodiversity decline by 2010;
- ensuring that the Latvian government can demonstrate that rural development funding in Latvia has made a positive contribution to the conservation of farmland birds (measured by changes in the proposed EAFRD impact indicator of trends in the Farmland Bird Index).

Despite such a strong case for using Axis 2 to support restoration and management of semi-natural grasslands it is not clear that adequate funding will be allocated to measures targeted at these habitats in 2007-13. Specific issues raised by the experts contributing to this study include:

- a high proportion of the agri-environment budget may again be allocated to the organic farming scheme (which used 81% of the agri-environment budget in 2005) without any requirements to manage non-farmed areas, such as field margins, for the benefit of biodiversity;
- a new horizontal measure to control erosion in intensively farmed areas could also take a disproportionate share of the budget without providing significant benefits for biodiversity and birds;
- whether sufficient funds will be allocated to the measure to maintain biodiversity in Biologically Valuable Grasslands - bearing in mind the extent of existing contracts and the expected increase in the total area of high nature value grasslands;
- a proposal to reduce the payment rate for this Biologically Valuable Grassland scheme from €138/ha to €55/ha;
- whether any funding will be provided for a proposed new measure for non-productive investments to restore overgrown abandoned Biologically Valuable Grasslands - the longer they are left unmanaged the more difficult and expensive it will be to restore these important habitats;
- the proposal to allocate half the Axis 2 budget to LFA payments (now defined as areas with handicaps) when there are few biodiversity management requirements attached to these payments, the future of this measure is under review by the Commission, and the eligible area is likely to be reduced as a result of the new grazing requirements;

## **11.6 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13**

Three measures for extensively managed grassland are under consideration for the 2007-13 programme (for the management and restoration of existing valuable grasslands, and the creation of grass strips in intensive arable areas). These could be of great benefit to Annex 1 birds such as Corncrake, Great Snipe, White Stork, Lesser Spotted Eagle and other farmland birds, and are described below:

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<sup>88</sup> co-ordinated by the Latvian Fund for Nature (LFN), Latvian Ornithological Society (LOB) and the Latvian Entomological Society (LES)

### **Maintenance of biodiversity in high nature value grasslands**

This measure to protect and manage valuable grassland bird habitats was developed under SAPARD, implemented in 2004-06 and is expected to continue in 2007-13, with some modifications. It covers extensive grazing and/or late mowing of grasslands and is restricted to **Biologically Valuable Grasslands (BVG)** - these are found throughout Latvia and extend to 56,000 ha, of which around half are farmed. Work on the BVG inventory is continuing with support from the Ministry of Agriculture and several LIFE projects, so the total eligible area for 2007-13 will be bigger than in the previous programme.

By 2005, about 16% of the agri-environment budget was being used for 19,520 ha of grassland managed under this measure on 2340 farms. The timing of grassland mowing is critical to the breeding success of Corncrakes (which have flightless chicks) and other ground nesting grassland birds, because if mowing starts too early both nests and chicks will be destroyed. In the 2004-06 schemes mowing is permitted after 10 July, and in the next programming period it is proposed to extend this to after 15 July. These dates are a compromise between the farmers' desire for usable hay, botanical management requirements and the needs of the Annex 1 birds.

BirdLife Latvia and other nature conservation experts point out that 15 July is not late enough for breeding Corncrakes and other grassland birds. Corncrakes arrive in Latvia a little later than in more southerly Member States and the second brood continues from the middle of June until the end of August. There are nests with eggs till the end of July so protecting these late broods means delaying mowing until mid August on areas used by Corncrakes. (But such a late start for mowing is unnecessary on areas of grassland smaller than 1 ha, which are often too small to be suitable for Corncrakes).

Nature conservation experts recently proposed a modified agri-environment scheme with three mowing dates and three different payments (shown in Table 6) but this has not so far been adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture, which was sympathetic in principle, but concerned about the additional burden of administering and controlling more than one 'start date'. There are also concerns among some environmental experts that there is a risk of the reduced payment rates for maintenance of Biologically Valuable Grasslands, which could adversely affect uptake.

**Table 6 Proposal in Latvia for three different mowing dates and payments for grasslands used by Corncrake.**

Proposed management requirements and payment rates	Mowing after June 15 <sup>89</sup>	Mowing after July 15 <sup>90</sup>	Mowing after August 15 <sup>91</sup>
	% of maximum possible payment		
Mowing and removal of hay on areas of land larger than 1 ha	50%	70%	100%
Mowing and removal of hay on areas of land smaller than 1 ha (grasslands surrounded by populated areas or forests)	100%	100%	100%
Grass mulching <sup>92</sup>	forbidden	50%	70%

The method of mowing grasslands is also very important both for ground nesting birds and for birds that feed on the small mammals of grasslands, such as the Lesser Spotted Eagle. If the grass is cut from the outside of the field working in a concentric pattern towards the centre, the young birds and other animals will seek shelter in the remaining area of uncut grass until

<sup>89</sup> The payment compensates the additional expenses under difficult mowing circumstances and prohibition to use fertilizers and mow grasslands more than one time in season.

<sup>90</sup> The payment compensates all the same as in the point 1 + the loss of hay quality.

<sup>91</sup> The payment compensates all the same as in point 1+ that the hay can't be use as forage because of its low quality.

<sup>92</sup> Late mowing produces poor quality hay, unsuitable for fodder, so the farmer has no use for it and no reason to remove it - but if it is left to rot in the field the grassland habitat will deteriorate. Mulching the mown grass is a compromise which does less damage to the habitat and is more acceptable to the farmers, who otherwise might abandon the grassland

they are killed as the last grass is cut in the middle of the field. Mowing in a bird friendly pattern is a relatively inexpensive measure (the main cost being extra time and fuel) and although this is a legal requirement in some SPAs (Restricted Nature Territories and Nature Parks), it is often ignored by farmers.

### ***Restoration of biologically valuable grasslands, including wooded meadows***

This proposal is for a new horizontal measure targeted at valuable grasslands which have already been abandoned and overgrown by scrub (a similar measure was available for the maintenance of the landscape under the Joint Programme Document co-ordinated by the Ministry of Economics but seems to have had limited uptake<sup>93</sup>). After restoration the grassland could be managed under the existing scheme (described above), increasing the area of habitat available to Annex 1 birds (Lesser Spotted Eagle, White Stork, Corncrake etc.) The proposal has been put forward by the Latvian Fund for Nature, the Latvian Ornithological Society and the Latvian Entomological Society, and would seem to be a good candidate for Article 41 non-productive investment support, providing the 'front-loaded' payments needed for removal of overgrown scrub, to be followed by annual agri-environment management payments under the current scheme.

### ***Grass field margins and water protection zones***

This existing zonal measure for creating and maintaining permanent grassy strips 4-10 metres wide along watercourse and field margins has been targeted in 2004-06 at intensive arable land in only three of the 26 districts in Latvia; by 2005 it had been implemented by 244 farmers. If made available more widely it has the potential to provide new habitats in areas where these are scarce. A proposal has been submitted by the biodiversity NGOs (and recently supported by the association of agricultural NGOs) that this measure should be made horizontal in the 2007-13 programme so that the benefits to biodiversity (and Annex 1 birds) can be extended to intensively managed farmland throughout Latvia.

One other measure that would benefit farmland birds generally but has not been included in the 2007-13 proposals is the management and restoration of small landscape elements. Features such as isolated bushes, individual trees, stone heaps, patches of unmown vegetation, wet depressions etc are important to farmland birds and could to some extent be protected from deliberate damage or removal by adding them to the GAEC requirements (provided these were adequately controlled). But farmers are more likely to safeguard these features in the longer term if there is the possibility of agri-environment support to actively manage existing features and to create new ones.

## **11.7 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures**

A recent report on implementation of agri-environment measures in Latvia commented that although interest from the farming community was high, information on agri-environment measures for farmers was poor and fragmented, and Paying Agency staff were unable to provide farmers with competent advice<sup>94</sup>. Lack of adequate skills among delivery staff is a problem common to many of the new Member States but in Latvia information on farmland birds and their habitat requirements is available, and at least some training seminars have been held for advisers, project officers and paying agency staff.

There are as yet no proposals to evaluate the impact of agri-environment measures in the 2007-13 programme. The same report suggested that fragmentation of responsibilities may cause problems for evaluation, because the Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for the development of indicators and reporting to the Commission, but in practice agri-environment monitoring is the responsibility of Ministry of Environment and is included in National Environmental Monitoring Programme, which is currently being revised and restructured.

<sup>93</sup> Possibly because there was no link with support for follow-up management of the restored grasslands.

<sup>94</sup> Oréade-Brèche (2005) *Evaluation Des Mesures Agro-Environnementales Agri/ G4/ 2004 Annexe 21: Etude Nationale Lettonie* (report published in English) [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index\\_fr.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index_fr.htm)

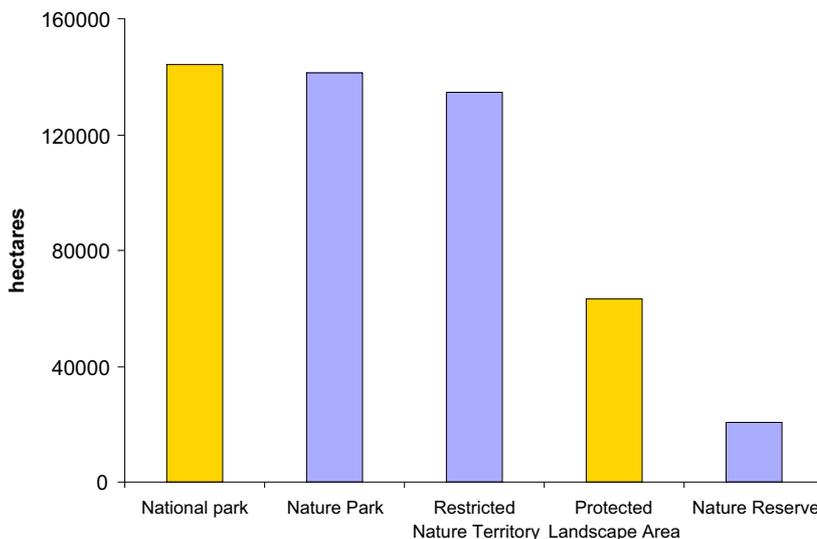
Some evaluation data will soon be available from areas which are covered by several LIFE projects, and data will be gathered for the reporting to the EU on the status of Natura 2000 territories but these inventories will not begin until 2006 or 2007. This appears to leave large areas of habitats used by Annex 1 birds in the wider countryside without any plans to assess the effectiveness of agri-environment measures targeted at these areas.

## 11.8 Natura 2000

### *Legal restrictions*

Management restrictions vary between SPAs, depending upon which of five categories of Specially Protected Nature Territories applies to the site designation. General regulations prohibit ploughing up or otherwise destroying meadows in Restricted Nature Territories; mowing of grass from field edges to the centre and burning old vegetation in spring are prohibited in both Restricted Nature Territories and Nature Parks - but these requirements are regularly ignored by farmers and do not apply to sites in other, less strict, categories. A large proportion (207,395 hectares; 41%, see Figure 5 below) of the protected parts of SPAs are covered by National Parks and Protected Landscape Areas, which are generally large territories with relatively low overall restrictions, or practically no restrictions in the case of Landscape Areas. Apart from the general regulations, sites may have their own management plans and individual regulations, which normally define a number of functional zones with different protection and management regulations. After being legally approved, the individual regulations replace the general regulations. Surprisingly there are no restrictions on the use of agricultural chemicals in SPAs, because the legislation was prepared some time ago when there were few agricultural SPAs and agricultural intensification was not seen as a threat.

**Figure 5 Coverage of the inland IBAs in Latvia by different national categories of nature and landscape protection**



### *Natura 2000 payments*

In the 2004-06 period Natura 2000 payments have been 'compensatory' or passive payments to the land-owners within Natura 2000 sites irrespective of their management activities or the actual restrictions within these sites (which vary greatly from very strict to practically none). The Ministry of Agriculture and biodiversity NGOs agree that this is not satisfactory, but until appropriate legal restrictions are in place it is difficult to see how these payments can be used more effectively. Despite this, 5% of the Axis 2 budget has been allocated to Natura 2000 compensation payments.

It would appear that for the immediate future targeted agri-environment measures will be a more effective means of managing Natura 2000 sites without adequate legal restrictions, and for those parts of IBAs that are not included in the designated SPAs.

## 11.9 Negative impacts of Axis 2 measures on farmland birds

Proposals for afforestation of farmland and support for areas with natural handicaps (Less Favoured Areas) could both have serious negative impacts on Annex 1 and other farmland birds, if implemented without taking account of the potential impact on biodiversity.

### ***Areas with handicaps (formerly Less Favoured Areas)***

LFA payments are perceived to have been an important factor in preventing abandonment of important grassland habitats for birds (despite the fact that few habitat management requirements are attached to the payments). As a result of changes in the national regulations a much smaller area of grassland is likely to be eligible for this type of payment in the 2007-13 programme and unless alternative support is provided much of this ineligible grassland may be abandoned.

On most LFA grassland farmers mow the grass because rearing cattle (and especially grazing cattle) is now a very small sector of Latvian agriculture. A new national regulation adopted in 2006 is likely to exclude significant areas of grassland from LFA support, simply because it is mown rather than grazed. On grasslands larger than 30 ha farmers will be required to have a minimum density of 0.2 livestock units per ha, to qualify for LFA payments. This new requirement has apparently been brought in to discriminate against landowners who are so-called 'sofa farmers', but it will also exclude active farmers who may not have enough livestock. Most of the Biologically Valuable Grassland areas have so far only been mown (some sources quote as much as 98%) and alternative Axis 2 support is likely to be needed for 'mowing only' management of these and other extensive grasslands if they are to avoid abandonment and survive as farmland bird habitats.

## 11.10 Negative impacts of Axis 1 measures on farmland birds

### ***Drainage of farmland***

Although 60% of Latvian farmland has been drained in the past most of these systems have been neglected for 10-20 years, allowing natural hydrological regimes to develop and wetland habitats to be re-established. In many places these have become important habitats for breeding waders, including declining Annex 1 species. Although there are no plans to use EAFRD funding to support new land drainage schemes the Ministry of Agriculture does propose to use Axis 1 funding to maintain or renew existing farmland drainage systems. An additional incentive for farmers to re-instate long-abandoned drains is the GAEC requirement that drains should be kept in good condition. Improved maintenance or restoration of drains could be just as much of a threat to birds as new drainage, and it is particularly important that this should not happen in Natura 2000 areas, where the priority should be to restore the natural hydrological regime and reverse the damaging effects of farm drainage, not to reinforce them.

This proposed use of Axis 1 funding does not seem to be in line with the Commission Strategic guideline for improving the competitiveness of the agriculture and forestry sector, which states that *'the resources devoted to Axis 1 should contribute to a strong and dynamic European agrifood sector by focusing on the priorities of knowledge transfer, modernisation, innovation and quality in the food chain, and on priority sectors for investment in physical and human capital'*. On farms where renewing drainage systems will destroy habitats used by Annex 1 birds such 'improvements' would seem to directly contradict one of the Commission's key actions for Axis 1, of *'improving the environmental performance of farms and forestry'*<sup>95</sup>.

### ***Other Axis 1 support for agricultural intensification***

Biodiversity NGOs are concerned that the large Axis 1 budget will be used for other schemes, such as bio-fuel production, with no safeguards for biodiversity, which will result in large uniform fields of intensively managed single crops, with consequent loss of habitat diversity

<sup>95</sup> Council Decision of 20 February 2006 on Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007 to 2013) (2006/144/EC) section 3.1

and field margins. Tighter GAEC definitions could help to avoid loss of habitats when farms increase productivity (see below).

### **11.11 GAEC**

If properly defined and enforced GAEC can safeguard the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds and protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement.

Biodiversity experts point out that while Annex 1 and other farmland birds may benefit from the requirement to maintain grassland by mowing or grazing, there are other problems with the current definition of GAEC:

- wetland habitats used by these birds are being destroyed by farmers complying with a requirement to maintain land drainage systems;
- there is no requirement to protect small landscape features and semi-natural areas on the farm and as a consequence these are excluded from the area payment, providing an incentive for farmers to remove them;
- there is no requirement to maintain uncultivated 1 metre wide field margins around arable fields - these (and the wider margins paid for by agri-environment schemes) could be of great benefit to farmland birds.

## 12 Lithuania

### Key points for Lithuania 2007-13

Lithuania's low lying farmland and extensive areas of grassland have major populations of three globally threatened Annex 1 birds - Aquatic Warbler, Corncrake and Great Snipe - and a significant proportion of the EU25 populations of Lesser Spotted Eagle, White Stork and Spotted Crake

Many grasslands, particularly wet grasslands, have already been abandoned and this continues to be a major threat. Other threats to the management of important bird habitats include intensive grazing, mowing (too early or too frequently) and new drainage or improvement of long-neglected drains.

*Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan?*

To meet the EU 2007-13 Guidelines on protecting and developing high nature value farming systems, the first priority for agri-environment funding in all Member States should be to secure long-term conservation management of existing high nature value farmland habitats used by Annex 1 birds and other protected species. Re-introduction of extensive grassland management should be a high priority for agri-environment schemes, but although the draft Lithuania Rural Development Strategy for 2007-2013 makes reference to the protection of the Natura 2000 network, it does not appear to prioritise the needs of Annex 1 or other farmland birds in the objectives of agri-environment measures.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?*

The only agri-environment scheme relevant to birds in the current programme is for grassland management, but it has been extremely unpopular with farmers and has had minimal uptake (despite being revised during the 2004-06 period). Ornithologists fear that, if current government proposals for changes to mowing dates are adopted, this important measure will again fail to attract farmers' support. It would be better, from the point of view of bird conservation, to provide a range of management options within the measure, targeted at the needs of different birds and their habitats. The requirements are well understood and have in fact already been adopted by Government as guidance for SPA management, so it is difficult to see why they should not also be used as the basis for targeted agri-environment schemes outside SPAs, with appropriate payment rates.

Natura 2000 legislation is in place and it should be possible to target Natura 2000 compensation payments at the needs of Annex 1 birds much more effectively than in 2004-06, when these were used as 'blanket' compensation payments, similar to ordinary LFA support. There are proposals to match Natura 2000 agreements to the needs of individual sites, but making full and effective use of these opportunities will depend on significant improvements in the administration and delivery of Axis 2 measures for biodiversity.

*What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Effective targeting of agri-environment measures has been very difficult because delivery agencies do not have access to digital maps giving them information on priority habitats, such as wetlands, at a farm scale. This affects not only agri-environment schemes but also increases the risk of other EAFRD-supported measures damaging valuable bird habitats.

Responsibility for Natura 2000 and agri-environment measures is rather fragmented within the Ministry of Agriculture, making co-operation and joint working unnecessarily difficult, at a time when complementary measures are required to deliver biodiversity management of farmland

both inside and outside Natura 2000 areas.

Effective agri-environment advice to farmers has been provided this year by the Chamber of Agriculture (under contract to the government) but additional trained staff will be needed if there is to be improved uptake of agri-environment measures in 2007-13.

A more integrated approach is needed for GAEC and agri-environment measures on abandoned land - for example by allowing a derogation from the annual GAEC mowing requirement until scrub has been cleared.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Afforestation of abandoned farmland using EAFRD Axis 2 funds is a major threat to these grassland habitats and will lead to their permanent loss.

Restoration of neglected land drainage systems (driven by GAEC requirements and supported by Axis 1 funding) is a major threat to wet grasslands which have developed on previously drained but neglected farmland and are used by Annex 1 birds.

There is a risk that Annex 1 support for semi-subsistence farms and early retirement could destroy valuable bird habitats of mixed traditional farmland and grasslands, unless these measures are properly targeted and assessed.

## **12.1 Agriculture in Lithuania**

Just over half the land in Lithuania is classified as farmland and the majority of this is arable. Around 80% of the farmland has been drained in the past. Land abandonment is a major problem - at the time of accession it was estimated that 17% of farmland was unused<sup>96</sup>. Almost 70% of the land is in private ownership and owners of small plots often lease them to larger farms.

## **12.2 Annex 1 farmland birds in Lithuania**

Lithuania's low lying farmland and extensive areas of grassland account for only 2% of the EU25 farmland but hold 20% of the EU25 Corncrake population, important populations of two other globally threatened Annex 1 birds - Aquatic warbler and Great Snipe - and a significant proportion of the EU25 populations of Lesser Spotted Eagle, White Stork and Spotted Crake.

## **12.3 Threats to existing farmland habitats for Annex 1 and other farmland birds in Lithuania**

### ***Permanent wet grassland***

Previously improved grassland on flood plains and in river valleys is the most common type of wet grassland and is important for all six species listed above and for other farmland birds<sup>97</sup>. The ideal management for birds would be to maintain the land as unimproved wet grassland, controlling invasive scrub, with mowing and/or extensive grazing late in the season (dates depend on the target bird species, see text box below). Much wet grassland has been abandoned and where still farmed it is used for haymaking and seasonal grazing for cattle. Threats to wet grassland habitats include:

- abandonment and overgrowth of reeds, scrub and trees;
- too intensive grazing;
- in some areas, improvement of drainage systems, destruction of beaver ponds, creation of large fields and the use of heavy machinery;

<sup>96</sup> Ministry of Agriculture, Republic of Lithuania (2005) Rural Development Plan 2004-2006 Lithuania

<sup>97</sup> for example Dunlin, Ruff, Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier.

- mowing too early (before ground-nesting birds have flown) and from the edge of the field towards the centre.

### ***Mixed traditional farmland***

Mixed traditional farmland was very common in Lithuania during the Soviet period and is still a feature of the smallest farms, which are typically about 3-6 ha, growing a range of crops in rotation plus grass for grazing and hay making (without the use of heavy machinery). Such farms usually produce milk and meat, under conditions very similar to organic farming but using some pesticides (insecticides and fungicides for potatoes, and herbicides for cereals). These small farmers mostly live on their land, and if they cease farming are likely to share the land with other farmers. Mixed traditional farmland could be locally important for White Stork, Corncrake, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Marsh Harrier, Red-backed Shrike, Ortolan Bunting and Roller. The main threats to these habitats are specialisation and intensification of production, and the ideal management for birds would be extensive ecological farming and crop rotations (no monocultures) in small fields with hedges; grass would be cut rather late. Existing small water bodies would be managed and new ones excavated.

### ***Arable land***

Arable land on mixed extensive farms, with small fields and varied landscape structure, is of greatest value to birds. Maintaining existing small-scale landscape structure is important because larger field sizes are of less benefit to birds. Threats to existing valuable arable habitats include:

- intensification of farming (especially increasing use of fertilisers, pesticides and heavy machinery, and a decrease in the variety of crops grown on the farm);
- in future, as farmers become more able to invest in improvements as a result of CAP direct aids, a sharp increase is expected in the use of non-selective herbicides and in reseeded soon after harvesting (leaving less food for birds).

### ***Unimproved dry grasslands***

Dry unimproved grasslands are relatively scarce, located mainly on slopes and often abandoned or used by small farmers for grazing of cattle, sheep and horses and for hay making (usually by hand). Unimproved dry grassland can be locally important for Red-backed Shrike, White Stork, Ortolan Bunting and Lesser Grey Shrike. The main threat is abandonment and overgrowth of scrub.

## **12.4 National Strategy and budget allocations for 2007-13**

The proposed allocation of 2007-13 EAFRD funding between Axes (at the time data was collected for this report) was: Axis 1- 43%, **Axis 2 - 40%** and Axis 3 - 13 %

Despite the comparatively generous allocation to Axis 2, environmental experts are concerned that tensions between the rural development objectives of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment mean that Axis 2 EAFRD funding will not be sufficiently well targeted at biodiversity objectives, and that the damaging environmental effects of some Axis 1 support will not be taken into account. Specific concerns include:

- the conservation of habitats for Annex 1 farmland birds outside Natura 2000 areas is not an objective of agri-environment management in the national strategy, despite the importance of Lithuania for many Annex 1 species;
- a high proportion of the agri-environment budget may again be allocated to LFA payments and to agri-environment measures which provide relatively little benefit for farmland birds or biodiversity generally;
- without adequate targeting and other safeguards EAFRD-funded support for afforestation, drainage, semi-subsistence farms and early retirement will destroy valuable bird habitats of mixed traditional farmland and grasslands.

## 12.5 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13

Lithuania had little pre-accession experience of agri-environment schemes. Pilot programmes of support for organic farming and a grassland management scheme on Rusne Island were implemented in the 1990s, but because the SAPARD programme was never implemented, the current agri-environment measures have been delivered by agencies with little experience in managing farmland for biodiversity.

The only agri-environment measure relevant to birds in either the 2004-06 programme or the 2007-13 proposals is the **Landscape Stewardship Scheme**, available on all natural and semi-natural grasslands (except in Natura 2000 areas where compensation payments will be available).

The uptake of the Landscape Stewardship Scheme has been extremely disappointing - in the past two years it has accounted for 16% of agri-environment applications but in 2005 was implemented on only 168 ha - less than 0.4% of the total area in agri-environment contracts and taking an even smaller proportion (0.13%) of the total agri-environment budget. This measure failed for a number of reasons:

- it had not been piloted (because SAPARD was not implemented);
- it did not initially distinguish wetlands;
- the prescriptions, especially for mowing and grazing, were stricter than was necessary from an ecological point of view, increasing farmers' reluctance to join the scheme and limiting both uptake and biodiversity benefits;
- the measure was designed for maintenance of grasslands, not specifically for birds, and because it was poorly designed and had unnecessarily strict requirements, it had more negative than positive effects on birds;
- the new version of the measure (approved only in 2006) is better, but still does not target birds specifically.

### ***Comments on the Landscape Stewardship scheme***

The late mowing dates in the original agri-environment and LFA schemes do not seem to be scientifically sound. On the contrary, very late mowing dates are detrimental to a number of bird species and their chicks, which cannot move properly in very long vegetation. In 2004-05 this grassland measure allowed mowing after 15 August, a date that suited neither farmers nor birds; in 2006 this was moved back two months to 15 June - too early for the birds, and the farmers were still discouraged from joining because of other, complicated, management requirements. The latest proposal under discussion (for 2007-13) is to allow mowing to start on 15 July, but this is not supported by the Lithuanian Ornithological Society. Although mid-July would be better from the birds' point of view<sup>98</sup>, the hay quality would be so poor that farmers would be unlikely to take up the scheme, which would be even more harmful to the birds.

Differentiating mowing dates to meet the needs of different Annex 1 birds would require even earlier dates in some cases, making the measure both more attractive for farmers and more efficient from an ecological point of view (particularly if it was targeted at meadows used by particular species). This principle has not been accepted by the programme designers (Ministry of Agriculture) and administrators (National Paying Agency), who appear to be unenthusiastic about more complicated mowing options, although they have proposed other options - for example to encourage extensive grazing and to manage overgrown meadows.

Given the urgent need to improve uptake of the Landscape Stewardship Scheme for the benefit of Annex 1 grassland birds, it is difficult to see why the Ministry of Agriculture has proposed changes which go against the advice of biodiversity experts. If administrative constraints mean that there can be only one mowing start date, the experts recommend it should be 1 July, two weeks later than the current scheme, but still early enough to be attractive to farmers, provided the payment rates are high enough.

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<sup>98</sup> Corncrake usually have eggs from late May until the middle of June in Lithuania, sometimes until the middle of July.

The Government has already set out, in 2004, detailed management requirements for these six key species in SPAs (see box below) - but these targeted measures could equally well be applied to agri-environment schemes outside SPAs, with appropriate payment rates.

### **Official guidance on SPA management for Annex 1 farmland birds in Lithuania**

This is a summary of prohibited and recommended management activities for key farmland birds which was published by the Government in 2004 as guidance for Natura 2000 designation and management<sup>99</sup> but have not yet been adopted for either agri-environment or Natura 2000 measures in the 2007-13 rural development programme:

#### **Great Snipe, Aquatic Warbler, Spotted Crake, Corncrake**

Prohibited activities:

changing the land use or water regime unless for conservation purposes (in practice this means no ploughing, drainage or afforestation).

Desirable activities:

rewetting, control of woody vegetation and reeds; control of predators; no pesticides; mowing and/or extensive grazing (1-2 cattle/ha) and other activities as shown in table below;

	start grazing after	start mowing after	other desirable management
Great Snipe	15 June	15 July	
Aquatic Warbler	20 July	20 July	
Spotted Crake	1 July	1 July	
Corncrake	15 June	1 July	organic farming, hand mowing, mechanised cutting from middle outwards to edge of field

#### **Lesser Spotted Eagle**

Prohibited activities:

changing the land use on an area 200 m around the nest (in practice this means no clearing, no highways, no buildings); change of water regime unless for conservation purposes; (in practice this means no drainage in the SPA); final forest cutting on an area 100 m around the nest (two natural or one artificial nests per one pair); forest cutting in April-July on area 200 m around the nest.

Desirable activities:

restoration of former water table, control of predators; increase in the area of meadows and grazing land, and organic farming, on in a 1 km wide belt of farmland surrounding the SPA forest tract; on clear-cut areas protect at least 15 retention trees per ha; no pesticides; on an area 200 m around the nest local roads closed to motor vehicles April – July; erect artificial nests.

#### **White Stork**

Prohibited activities:

changing the water regime unless for conservation purposes (in practice this means no drainage on the SPA);

Desirable activities:

organic farming; no pesticides; restoration of former small ponds and excavation of new ones; management of trees with nests, erection of new artificial nests.

## **12.6 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures**

### **Farm maps**

Effective targeting and delivery of agri-environment measures has been very difficult because neither farmers nor delivery agencies have access to digital maps giving them information on priority habitats, such as wetlands, at a farm scale. This affects not only agri-environment schemes but also increases the risk of other EAFRD-supported measure damaging valuable bird habitats. This will continue to be a major problem for effective use of environmental measures in the 2007-13 programme, if significant improvements are not made.

<sup>99</sup> General Terms of SPAs and SACs (Government decision No 276 of 15 03 2004; ([http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc\\_l?p\\_id=228645&p\\_query=&p\\_tr2=](http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.showdoc_l?p_id=228645&p_query=&p_tr2=))

In the current programme farmers have had to provide their own agri-environment maps, which they purchase from local licensed land surveyors (who do not have access to all the required data). This has contributed to the low number of applications, and about 70 % of all applications and payment claims submitted under the agri-environment measure had to be revised (the largest number of inaccurate applications from any RDP measure). The State Service of Protected Areas has also been involved since 2006, with specialists from the Parks' administrations having the right to mark boundaries of wetlands on the farm maps. During the next programming period 2007-13 this will become the responsibility of county administrations.

The problem is not the lack of digital mapping data but appears to be a lack of co-ordination between government departments and/or a lack of funding. The State Land Survey has the capacity to prepare digital maps showing boundaries of meadows, wetlands, protection belts of water bodies, Natura 2000 territories etc., and it submitted a proposal that the National Land Service should fund the preparation of such maps, but this suggestion has not yet been accepted.

### **Evaluation**

The Ministry of Agriculture is currently funding a study (under the agri-environment measure) of the Zuvintas Reserve and other bird habitats by the Lithuanian Ornithological Society, due for completion by the end of 2006. It will look at the impact of agricultural activities on protected bird species in an agrarian landscape; the effect of intensification of agriculture on abundance and distribution of birds; EU experiences in implementation of agri-environment programmes favourable for birds; and will make recommendations for new agri-environment measures and management prescriptions for Natura 2000 territories in Lithuania.

Despite this study there are as yet no proposals to evaluate the impact of agri-environment measures in the 2007-13 programme, and it is unlikely that Annex 1 farmland birds and their habitats will be taken into account, since the agri-environment measures do not target birds specifically.

A 2005 report on implementation of agri-environment measures in Lithuania commented on the lack of involvement of NGOs in discussion of the monitoring, evaluation and supervision of agri-environment measures<sup>100</sup>.

### **Advisory services**

Agri-environment advice to farmers for the 2004-06 programme is provided under annual contract which has not proved very effective. Initially the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture won the tender for the EU supported consultation and training programme, but then withdrew because of poor financial administration. The contract was taken over by Lithuanian Agricultural Advisory Service (LAAS) but implementation was rather difficult and at present is hampered financially. Under this programme, farmers sign up to an advisory contract for seminars and individual consultations, provided by LAAS; farmers pay 10% of the costs with the rest paid from EU Structural Funds.

Perhaps surprisingly, a much more effective source of agri-environment advice and support for farmers has been a separate consultation and advisory programme for farmers operated by the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture (LAC), under contract to the Ministry of Agriculture. Part of this programme deals with agri-environment measures, and each year the LAC prepares and distributes publications on each agri-environment measure and organises up to 100 well-publicised seminars and more than 2000 individual consultations; all consultations by LCA are provided free of charge to farmers, without any need for a contract. Seminars are attended both by farmers considering entering agri-environment schemes, and by those already participating (and also by local government officials who advise farmers). After the seminars farmers come for individual consultations, where LCA district advisors help them to

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<sup>100</sup> Oréade-Brèche (2005). Evaluation Des Mesures Agro-Environnementales Agri/ G4/ 2004 Annexe 25: Etude Nationale Lituanie (published in English) [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index\\_fr.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/measures/index_fr.htm)

prepare applications, and explain the options for implementation of different measures. The LCA district advisers have been trained to give agri-environment advice by two staff members from their central office, who also prepare the documents needed for individual consultations with farmers, and deal with queries that the district staff cannot answer.

The LCA programme currently seems to be the more effective of the two, but if it is to cope with an expanded agri-environment programme more resources will be needed, particularly for specialist staff in the central office (and there is no guarantee that LCA will win the contract in 2007-13).

Information and advice on agri-environment, birds and habitats is not limited to the official advisory programmes. The Protected Areas Service has recently taken an active role in this field, and state parks were encouraged to organise seminars on management of wetlands and on support in Natura 2000 areas for farmers, ward employees and regional paying agencies. Some national and regional parks (and even strict nature reserves) have organised seminars, and NGOs have been involved too.

## **12.7 Natura 2000**

### ***Legal restrictions***

Unfortunately, when most of the SPAs for farmland birds were designated, only the boundaries were confirmed. Restrictions for individual SPAs are not yet in place and no management plans have been prepared for farmland SPAs. This means that the important habitat management restrictions, already defined by the Government for the most protected farmland bird species (see box above) have not yet been integrated into the Draft Rural Development Plan for 2007-2013 support for Natura 2000 sites.

### ***Natura 2000 payments***

In the current programme Article 16 payments on Natura 2000 sites have been used as 'blanket' compensation payments (similar to ordinary LFA support), and have been much more popular with farmers than the agri-environment grassland scheme described above (5000 applications were received). As with the agri-environment scheme, the 15 August date for starting mowing was too late.

It is expected that when Natura 2000 designation is completed the agricultural area eligible for compensatory allowances will increase to 54 000 ha, and legal restrictions will provide the basis for much more specific Natura 2000 agreements, targeted at bird habitats in each SPA. Different allowances will be calculated for arable land areas, meadows and wetlands in accordance with the varying levels of management restrictions, plus a fixed amount for generally applicable restrictions on rural development, conversion to arable, construction of new farm buildings, afforestation etc. As no specific management prescriptions and dates for mowing or grazing will be set in legislation environmental experts hope that it will be possible to specify these in individual Natura 2000 contracts. If this can be done, and a large proportion of eligible farmers take up Natura 2000 compensation contracts, it would be an effective means of implementing SPA management plans - but it will require significant improvements in design and delivery of environmental management schemes.

## **12.8 Negative impacts of Axis 2 measures on farmland birds**

### ***Afforestation of farmland***

The National Strategy emphasises the importance of afforestation plans. The proposed afforestation measure for 2007-13, unlike the existing measure, appears to allow afforestation of abandoned land, threatening unprotected meadows and the birds nesting in them. Although SPAs should be protected by law, one Natura site has already been damaged with support from RDP funding when, in spring of 2005, natural meadows in Margininkai botanical-zoological reserve (which has SCI status) were afforested under this measure.

This type of damage to bird habitats is much more likely to happen in areas that are not part of the Natura 2000 network, but the risk could be much reduced if the Ministry of Agriculture used GIS and digital habitat mapping for designing different rural development measures, and for assessing farmers' applications.

## **12.9 Negative impacts of Axis 1 measures on farmland birds**

### ***Drainage of farmland***

Meadows that currently are flooded in spring (due to the poor condition of existing drainage systems), provide valuable habitats for numerous bird species and are at risk of drainage supported by EAFRD funding. Improving the technical condition of neglected drainage systems is one of the activities that Axis 1 support will focus on, as an investment in farm infrastructure.

This proposed use of Axis 1 funding does not seem to be in line with the Commission Strategic guideline for improving the competitiveness of the agriculture and forestry sector, which states that *'the resources devoted to Axis 1 should contribute to a strong and dynamic European agrifood sector by focusing on the priorities of knowledge transfer, modernisation, innovation and quality in the food chain, and on priority sectors for investment in physical and human capital'*. On farms where renewing drainage systems will destroy habitats used by Annex 1 birds such 'improvements' would seem to directly contradict one of the Commission's key actions for Axis 1, of *'improving the environmental performance of farms and forestry'*<sup>101</sup>.

As with afforestation, a satisfactory compromise could be found by mapping these important wet meadow areas and using GIS zoning to plan and implement rural development measures in a way which does not threaten valuable habitats.

### ***Support for semi-subsistence farming***

Objectives of the current measure include increasing the size and improving the structure of farms, increasing their competitiveness, and improving the market-orientated sector. Many mixed traditional farms are semi-subsistence and provide rich habitats for Annex 1 birds, but the proposed measure for 2007-13 does not mention the implementation of agri-environmental requirements. Without proper control, support for semi-subsistence farming in some areas could lead to farming intensification and loss of diversity and landscape features, with consequent negative effects on birds and their habitats.

### ***Early retirement***

This measure is targeted especially at small dairy farmers, so it will affect meadow birds and their habitats. The measure aims to improve farm structure by consolidating plots and thus improve the economic viability and competitiveness of remaining agricultural holdings. This may help to prevent land abandonment, but increasing farm size and competitiveness could mean intensification of farming and thus bring new threats to birds and their habitats. On the other hand, if a farming transferee cannot be found, the holding may be disposed of (without quota rights) to be used for non-agricultural purposes, forestry or the creation of ecological reserves for at least 5 years. In these circumstances forestry can seem more attractive economically than the creation of ecological reserves (which does not provide any income).

Again, using GIS and digital habitat mapping could provide the necessary zoning of measures and a convenient means of assessing applications.

## **12.10 GAEC**

If properly defined and enforced GAEC can prevent abandonment of grasslands, safeguard the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds and protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement.

<sup>101</sup> Council Decision of 20 February 2006 on Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007 to 2013) (2006/144/EC) section 3.1

The GAEC requirement to maintain all existing grassland by grazing or mowing (no later than 1 August) is favourable to birds and also provides for the maintenance of wooded pastures<sup>102</sup>. But similar mowing requirements in GFP have effectively excluded many abandoned grasslands from agri-environment schemes because scrub encroachment makes it impossible to mow them and many farmers do not have livestock.

Given the scale of grassland abandonment in Lithuania, and the importance of grassland habitats for birds it is important that this problem is resolved for 2007-13 and farmers are encouraged to enter abandoned grasslands in agri-environment schemes. If priority abandoned grasslands were identified by environmental authorities, farmers could be offered non-productive investment support for scrub clearance, and derogation from the GAEC mowing and grazing requirement in the first year of their contract (until scrub clearance is completed).

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<sup>102</sup> Source: Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition in Lithuania, presentation by Saulius Jasius. Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture and Romualdas Zemekis, Lithuanian Institute of Agrarian Economics

## 13 Poland

### Key points for Poland

Poland's agricultural land, especially the extensive grasslands and mixed traditional farmland, supports a very large proportion of the EU25 populations of five Annex 1 birds in unfavourable population status including three which are also of global conservation concern - Aquatic Warbler (77% of the EU25 population), Corncrake and Great Snipe (28% and 25% respectively). Poland also has much larger numbers of White Stork than any other Member State (41% of the EU25 population), and has 21% of the Lesser Spotted Eagle and 25% of the Spotted Crane populations.

There are 87 IBAs with farmland habitats, but the farming systems on which these birds depend are not restricted to IBAs and, without intervention in 2007-13, are unlikely to survive threats of intensification, change to other uses or abandonment. In the three years from 2000-03 the Farmland Bird Index for Poland declined by 13%.

*Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan?*

The current 2004-06 agri-environment programme has failed to protect key habitats used by these birds. By April 2007 it is forecast that Poland will have spent less than 35% of the agri-environment budget for 2004 - 06 and only about 4% of Polish farmers will have applied for agri-environment contracts - this is for an agri-environment programme that was very much reduced in scope during the months just before accession, in a Member State with large areas of high nature value farmland threatened by abandonment and intensification.

The delay in implementation of Directives 79/409 and 92/43 in Poland means that many Important Bird Areas will not be legally protected from agricultural change or be eligible for Natura 2000 compensation payments in 2007. Agri-environment payments will be needed to 'fill the gap' by supporting extensive grassland management and mixed traditional farming.

Poland has been given the largest allocation of EAFRD funding to a single Member State - 17% of the total EU25 budget. To meet the EU 2007-13 Guidelines on protecting and developing high nature value farming systems, the first priority for agri-environment funding in all Member States should be to secure long-term conservation management of existing high nature value farmland habitats used by Annex 1 birds and other protected species. In Poland's case this means targeting agri-environment schemes at the large areas of mixed traditional farmland and unimproved grasslands, including the 1.5 million ha of farmland in IBAs. Delivering these schemes will require major investment in the farm advisory system and a significant increase agri-environment funding for measures targeted at biodiversity.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?*

In the current programme 70% of the agri-environment expenditure has been allocated to 'shallow' measures of relatively little benefit to birds and there are concerns that this will happen again in 2007-13, at a time when the threats to high nature value farmland are likely to increase as agricultural production intensifies.

In the 2004-06 programme only one package (of two measures for extensive grassland) was targeted at habitat management for birds and this was confined to priority areas, excluding all or part of 24 Important Bird Areas. There was little uptake of the pastures (grazing) measure because the payment rates were too low, but there was more interest in the (mown) meadow measure from farmers without livestock, including absentee owners. Another measure, for grass buffer strips on arable land, which could have been of considerable benefit to birds, had very little uptake, again because of low payment rates

For the 2007-13 programme, proposed new measures targeted at maintaining extensive grasslands are more likely to appeal to farmers and should be available throughout the country. These are expected to have additional options targeted at breeding Corncrake and Aquatic Warbler - but the success of such measures will depend on the delivery system having a much improved technical capacity to identify appropriate habitats, provide advice to farmers and control implementation. It is not clear if this is a priority.

The new grassland measures could be supplemented by using non-productive investments to build small dams to create additional areas of wet grassland.

A proposed measure for field mosaics has the potential to provide much needed support for high nature value traditional farming systems if presented as part of a package of rural development measures from all three Axes, designed to address the economic and social problems of high nature value farming systems as well as their environmental management.

Many important wet grasslands on riverside pastures in Eastern Poland are common grazings, where farmers are unable to claim agri-environment payments under current rules.

*What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Delivering effective agri-environment schemes to protect birds and other biodiversity on more than 1.5 million ha of farmland in IBAs will be a major task, particularly when farms are small and agri-environment is a completely new concept for most farmers (and their advisers).

There have been serious delivery failures in 2004-06 due to inadequate resources, and lack of technical capacity and environmental management skills among advisers and paying agency staff. If these problems are not addressed as a matter of urgency it is difficult to see how the revised agri-environment programme will be able to deliver the government's obligations to protect habitats for important Annex 1 birds from the two major threats of intensification and abandonment. Improved environmental training of advisers and paying agency staff will be particularly important for the delivery of grassland measures targeted at Corncrake and Aquatic Warbler.

Because the current delivery system has been unable to cope with simpler measures, consideration could be given to phasing in the introduction of complex (and potentially very valuable) biodiversity specific measures such as those for mixed traditional farmland. If these were offered initially in 2007 in limited areas, using specially trained teams of advisers, the experience gained could be used to make their wider delivery more effective, and the delayed introduction would give time to train more specialist advisers.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Small landscape features and unimproved permanent grassland are both important for birds but have not been adequately protected by GAEC cross-compliance and by controls on grassland conversion.

LFA payments have taken a much larger share of the current budget than agri-environment measures and an opportunity has been missed to attach more demanding conditions for biodiversity management.

Semi-natural grasslands and other existing habitats of value to birds are not adequately protected from damage caused by EAFRD-funded afforestation, farm improvement and land consolidation schemes.

### 13.1 Agriculture in Poland

More than 50% of the land in Poland is farmed and half of this is classified as Less Favoured Area. There are still significant areas of mixed traditional farming in the south and east, but these farms are not economically viable. Unlike many new Member States, most of the farmland in Poland remained outside the state system and the majority of farms are still small, varying in average size from 3 ha in the mixed traditional farming area of the south-east to 17 ha in the north. The proportion of the population working in agriculture is far higher than the EU average and varies from 9% in some regions to more than 30% in the areas where traditional farming systems predominate. Many farms are semi-subsistence and fragmented - more than 18% of farms have six or more dispersed plots of land. It is quite common for farms or parcels of land to be owned and managed by people living and working in urban areas. Other problems facing rural areas include poor levels of education, poor access to financial services and an underdeveloped infrastructure. In the period between independence and EU accession the level of agricultural inputs and the number of livestock fell significantly.<sup>103</sup>

### 13.2 Annex 1 farmland birds in Poland

Poland's farmland accounts for 10% of the EU25 total but it provides breeding and feeding grounds for a very much greater proportion of Europe's threatened farmland birds. Of the twenty Annex 1 farmland bird species targeted by BirdLife for support through agri-environment schemes, seven species have more than 13% of their total EU25 population in Poland, including:

- a greater proportion than any other new Member State of the EU25 population of three birds of wet grassland, which are all of global conservation concern under the IUCN Red List criteria and in unfavourable population status in Europe - 77% of the Aquatic Warbler, 28% of Corncrake and 25% of Great Snipe;
- a much larger proportion (41%) of the EU25 population of White Stork than any other Member State and 21% of the Lesser Spotted Eagle population; both in unfavourable population status in Europe;
- large numbers of Spotted Crake and Montagu's Harrier (25% and 13% respectively) and of six species in the farmland bird index<sup>104</sup>.

More than 1.5 million hectares of Polish farmland is classified as IBAs - nearly 10% of all farmland. There are 87 IBAs with farmland habitats, mainly mixed traditional farmland and unimproved grasslands, but 34 of them have not been designated as SPAs. Although the large areas of high nature value farmland within these IBAs do not yet have the protection and benefits of SPA designation, the Polish government may already have a legal obligation under EU environmental law to avoid the deterioration or pollution of these IBA farmland habitats<sup>105</sup>. If the government is to fulfil both these and its Natura 2000 obligations, much higher priority and a significantly bigger budget will have to be given to agri-environment measures specifically targeted at threats to high nature value farmland (both inside and outside IBAs), in line with the Commission's strategic guidelines on the use of Axis 2 funding.

Please see Annex 4 for more details of important farmland birds and their habitats in Poland.

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<sup>103</sup> RDP 2005

<sup>104</sup> Yellow Wagtail (34.5 % of EU population), Whinchat (24.7% of EU population), Eurasian Skylark (23.1% of EU population), Yellowhammer (19.7% of EU population), Barn Swallow (19.7% of EU population) and Red-backed Shrike (14.1% of EU population)

<sup>105</sup> The European Court of Justice (Basse Corbière Judgement C374/98) has concluded that unclassified SPAs, pending their formal classification, are subject to the stricter protection regime defined in the first sentence of Article 4 (4) of the Birds Directive '**Member States shall take appropriate steps to avoid pollution or deterioration of habitats or any disturbances affecting the birds, in so far as these would be significant having regard to the objectives of this Article'** (our emphasis).

### **13.3 Threats to existing farmland habitats for Annex 1 and other birds in Poland**

Large areas of traditional farmland habitats and extensively managed grasslands, and the important bird populations they support, are threatened by intensification on the one hand and abandonment on the other, as Polish farmers take the opportunities offered by EU membership to increase productivity and efficiency (particularly on better quality soils) - or to abandon farming altogether and work in the towns and cities. In the three years from 2000-03 the Farmland Bird Index for Poland declined by 13%.

The main threats to existing farmland bird habitats are:

- land consolidation (reducing the mosaic of grass and arable crops and the semi-natural habitats between them)
- intensification of production (drainage, increased use of fertilisers and pesticides, earlier mowing, fewer crops in the rotation, and removal of small landscape features leading to loss of shelter, food and nesting sites)
- conversion of grassland to arable land
- afforestation
- land abandonment leading to loss of open farmland habitats through successional development of scrub.

Declines in bird populations can be expected to follow agricultural intensification, and the Polish Common Birds Monitoring Scheme has shown that densities of common farmland birds such as the Skylark and Northern Lapwing are much bigger in the eastern, less-intensively farmed part of Poland than in the western, more-intensive part. If birds like these decline in Poland it will mean losing a significant biodiversity resource for European farmland.

### **13.4 National Strategy and budget allocations for 2007-13**

The objectives of the National Strategy for 2007-13 include references to supporting valuable habitats in agricultural use and to SPAs in general, but it is not clear what funding and priority will be given to the conservation management of the 1.5 million ha of farmland habitats in IBAs, which are critical to achieving favourable population status for so many Annex 1 birds. The delay in implementation of Directives 79/409 and 92/43 in Poland means that many Important Bird Areas will not be legally protected from agricultural change or be eligible for Natura 2000 compensation payments in 2007. For the immediate future targeted agri-environment measures will be a more effective means of managing Natura 2000 sites which are without adequate legal restrictions, and for IBAs which are not designated as SPAs.

Poland has been given the largest allocation of EAFRD funding to a single Member State - 17% of the total EU25 budget. The proposed allocation of 2007-13 EAFRD funding is Axis 1 - 46%, **Axis 2 - 35%** and Axis 3 - 17%. Respondents to the survey were concerned that:

- Axis 2 has been allocated a relatively small proportion of the overall budget;
- a high proportion of the Axis 2 budget will again be allocated to LFA payments, without adequate safeguards for biodiversity;
- almost half the agri-environment budget is already committed to farmers who entered schemes in 2004-06;
- if the government decides to meet the expectations of individual farmers and farmers' organisations, it is very likely that "shallow" measures of limited biodiversity value will continue to take a major part of the remaining agri-environment budget, at the expense of measures targeted at high nature value farmland.

### **13.5 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13**

Poland had no national agri-environment schemes before accession but prepared a wide range of agri-environment measures for the 2004-06 programme, drawing on expert advice and the experience of a PHARE pilot project in two voivodships. Shortly before the 2004-06 Plan was finalised the proposed agri-environment programme was severely curtailed - agri-

environment measures were allocated only 7% of the total EAGGF funding and the original fifteen agri-environment packages were reduced to seven. Only one package (two measures for extensive grassland) was targeted at habitat management for biodiversity, and this was confined to priority areas excluding all or part of 24 Important Bird Areas.

Clearly the scope of the 2004-06 schemes was inadequate to protect important bird habitats from the threats outlined above (and there were also major problems with delivery, discussed below), but before considering the 2007-13 proposals it is relevant to look at some of the problems encountered with the design of the 2004-06 schemes, many of which will be included (with revisions) in the next programme.

### **Schemes targeted at Annex 1 farmland birds**

There are **two grassland measures** in the current programme which have the potential to benefit many of the target Annex 1 farmland species, including Aquatic Warbler which depends on the continuation of mowing in agriculturally poor wet meadows with particular plant communities; also Corncrake and Great Snipe, which benefit from late mowing, and other waders that are favoured by late mowing and/or extensive grazing of wet pastures, including Ruff and Northern Lapwing (more than 10% of the EU25 population is found in Poland) and other farmland birds<sup>106</sup>. The two measures are:

A well-designed zonal measure for **extensive meadows**, which is popular with farmers who have no grazing animals, but is not attractive to livestock farmers. In the 2004-06 programme it was available on improved and unimproved grasslands in limited priority areas that exclude 24 IBAs with significant coverage of grasslands<sup>107</sup>. The measure prohibits agricultural improvement of the grasslands, and limits fertiliser use and stocking densities and grazing regimes; mowing must be bird friendly (from the middle outwards, using shoeing devices) and mowing dates are prescribed - after 1 July for both single-cut and twice-cut meadows, and after 15 August for moist litter meadows. Payment rates vary, depending on whether the meadow is cut once or twice and by hand or machine. Farmers on Natura 2000 sites are paid an additional 20% above the normal rate.

A zonal measure for **extensive pastures**, which is unpopular with farmers because payment rates are low and there are fewer available livestock than in the past. It applies to the same zones (excluding many IBAs) as the extensive meadows measure and prohibits agricultural improvement of the grasslands, limits fertiliser and herbicide use, specifies stocking densities (all less than 1.0 LU/hectare) and grazing regimes for different grassland types (e.g. on lowland pastures grazing May-October and no sooner than two weeks after flooding, on mountain pastures grazing for 90 days after 20 May, leaving 25% growth ungrazed to be mown and removed in July-August). Payment rates vary with the type and altitude of the grassland.

More than 9,000 farmers (less than 1% of all Polish farmers) had applied for the extensive meadows measure on about 87,000 hectares by April 2006. It is attractive for landowners who have no livestock, often people living away from the village, but it is unpopular with livestock farmers because the late mowing dates result in poor quality hay and/or the need to buy in fodder, particularly in dry years. It is possible that some habitats have been mis-identified and the wrong management implemented, either because advisers lack the technical expertise or because farmers seek to enter land in the higher payment category for twice mown meadows, whether this is appropriate or not. Farm advisers would like to have more flexibility in setting mowing dates to reflect weather conditions and geographical differences - there is a two week phenological difference between NE and SW Poland. In contrast, only 962 farmers had applied for the extensive pastures measure, covering less than 8,000 hectares, by April 2006. It is so much less popular than the extensive meadows option because it is generally not an option for absent owners who cannot keep livestock and the

<sup>106</sup> such as Roller, *Aquila clanga*, *Aquila pomarina*, *Circus pygargus*, *Athene noctua* (decreasing) and other raptors using of these grasslands as hunting grounds

<sup>107</sup> The following IBAs have significant coverage of grasslands but are located wholly or partly outside priority zones: PL001, PL002, PL004, PL007, PL012, PL027, PL028, PL032, PL034, PL045, PL054, PL063, PL071, PL075, PL079, PL081, PL090, PL107, PL112, PL113, PL125, PL116, PL114, PL115 see Annex 4 for more information about these IBAs. Source: questionnaire survey for this study.

payment rates are not attractive to livestock farmers - some of whom cannot apply for any agri-environment payments at all on the large areas of common grazing on riverside pastures in Eastern Poland, which are important wet grassland habitats.

For 2007-13 these two zonal measures for extensive meadows and pastures will be replaced by two **new measures for extensive meadows and pastures**:

- a zonal measure for 'natural sites', restricted to Natura 2000 and other high priority grasslands where the floristic interest is documented; Natura 2000 sites will continue to receive 120% of the payment rates for other land:
- a widely available horizontal measure for extensive grasslands, both meadows and pastures, with much earlier mowing dates of after 1 June (first mowing) and after 1 July (second mowing). This will have additional options for:
  - protecting the habitats of nesting birds, with a later mowing date of 20 July and higher payment rates; and
  - Aquatic Warbler sites with higher payment rates.

The range of payment rates is expected to reflect the conservation interest of the land, with the highest rates for Natura 2000 sites and the lowest for the horizontal measure. The earlier mowing dates in the horizontal measure for meadows will make it more attractive to livestock farmers and support extensive grassland management - providing feeding areas for many species. But realising the potential benefits for key Annex 1 species, including Corncrake, will depend on advisers having the skills to target these options for late mowing and Aquatic Warbler nest sites at the right land. It will also be important for these options to be made available to owners without livestock, for whom they are much more attractive.

#### ***Other agri-environment schemes of more limited benefit to birds***

Uptake data for the current programme shows that more than 70% of an already restricted agri-environment budget has been spent on water and soil protection measures and organic farming. Both packages are easy for farmers to implement, have good payment rates and the potential to bring economic benefits to the farm (improvement in soil quality and access to organic markets). They are widely supported by farmers' organisations and likely to take a significant share of the 2007-13 budget. Some general benefits to birds could be expected from these two packages - for example in preventing abandonment, providing winter cover on arable land, and limiting the use of pesticides - but the failure to realise some of these limited benefits illustrates the wider problems in delivering agri-environment measures in Poland:

The **organic farming** measure applies to arable land, mixed traditional farmland, improved dry grassland and orchards. The farmer has to prepare an agri-environmental farm plan, mapped at 1:5000, showing permanent grassland and all landscape elements important for nature conservation (e.g. wetlands, hedgerows, field boundaries, peat bogs, etc.). These natural areas and features must not be destroyed - exceptions to this rule are granted only in justified cases and on condition that a minimum 3% of natural vegetation or features is retained. The measure has been attractive to subsistence and semi-subsistence farmers who needed to make little change to their management. Many farmers, including some who live in cities, do not produce organic food but manage the land for the agri-environment payments.

Popular options have been organic grassland (without any requirement for animal production) and organic orchards. The area of organic orchards has increased significantly in response to agri-environment payments which were over-generous for some orchard types such as sloe, walnuts, wild rose and chokeberry (*Aronia*) which are easy to grow under organic conditions (compared to apples, cherries, black currants and raspberries which are more likely to have serious plant protection problems and yield losses). Spot control visits by the paying agency revealed that a significant percentage of new organic orchards had been established on permanent grasslands (although the scheme prohibits this) and had damaged these semi-natural habitats. It is also likely that the requirement to maintain small natural landscape features has not been effective because farmers did not record them on the agri-environment farm maps. Amendments have been proposed to deal with these unwanted effects and improve the environmental benefits, but it is not clear if these have all been included for 2007-13, for example:

- a new option for low-expenditure organic orchards with lower payment rates to limit 'only for subsidies' creation of new orchards;
- replacing the current requirement to map and retain landscape features with a new, separate 'small natural landscape features' measure with payment rates related to the area or number of features.

A **winter cover** measure targeted at preventing soil erosion and protecting water quality is available on both arable farms and mixed traditional farmland. It has two options, undersowing grass in another crop and maintaining it throughout the winter (on a different field in each of the 5 years) or sowing an appropriate green crop (mustard, serradella, phacelia, vetch and rye or rye alone) before the end of September, without using additional fertilisers, so that at least one third of the farm's arable land has plant cover during the winter. In both cases the green cover must be ploughed in after the beginning of March. This is the most popular agri-environment measure, particularly for medium to large cereal farms, because it improves soil quality, does not require major changes in current practice and payments are reasonable. A total of almost half a million hectares and more than 32,000 farmers have taken up this measure. It will continue in 2007-13 but with payments differentiated by the size of the area sown, which should reduce the total cost of the measure. Winter crops are potentially good feeding habitat for birds such as wintering Northern Harrier and small grain-feeders.

A measure for **grass buffer strips on arable land**, aimed at reducing surface water pollution, controlling erosion and improving biodiversity, had far greater potential to benefit birds - but in practice very little has been achieved because the payment rates are too low, and by April 2006 less than 330km of buffer strips had been established, on only 81 farms, mainly large farms with a dense network of ditches or hobby farms. The measure requires the establishment of permanent grass strips 2m or 5m wide and at least 50m long, alongside watercourses or wetland habitats, or subdividing large fields. It offers considerable potential to provide nesting grounds for Ortolan Bunting, Grey Partridge and Common Quail (more than 10% of the EU25 population is in Poland) and other farmland species. The grass must be managed without pesticides or fertilisers, mown once a year (after 15 July) and fenced off from grazing livestock; for field boundary strips, the grass mix includes nectar producing herbs which should be of benefit to insect eating birds. The measure will continue in 2007-13, with separate sub-measures for buffer strips and field boundaries; payment rates have been increased (e.g. for 5 metre wide strips on better quality land the payment has increased from €20 to €25-28 per 100 running metre).

#### ***New schemes of potential benefit to birds***

Two other new measures for the 2007-13 programme, which would have been of particular value to farmland birds, do not appear to have been included in the most recent proposals. These are:

- **support for field mosaics**, targeted at the high nature value traditional farmland systems, with requirements to maintain small field size and field margins, use a 5 year crop rotation with at least 3 crops each year, and protect semi-natural habitats and small landscape features; and
- **non-productive investment support to improve habitat management for biodiversity**, including the construction of small dams to provide wet areas for the benefit of White Stork and other birds of wet grassland.

**Table 7 Proposed agri-environment programme for Poland 2007-13**

<b>Agri-environment packages</b>	<b>Options</b>
<b>Sustainable farming</b>	one option, entry level
<b>Organic farming</b>	12 different options covering arable, grassland, vegetable crops, herbs and orchards

<b>Agri-environment packages</b>	<b>Options</b>
<b>Low-input (extensively used) permanent pastures</b>	Two options for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low-input management of grasslands and pastures</li> <li>• bird breeding site protection</li> </ul>
<b>High value nature habitats protection</b>	Eight options for different types of semi-natural grasslands and fens
<b>Local crop plant varieties</b>	Four options for local crops and orchards
<b>Local breeds of farm animals</b>	Four options for cattle, sheep, horse and pigs
<b>Soil and water protection</b>	Three options for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• post-harvest undersowing</li> <li>• winter catch-crop</li> <li>• stubble catch-crop</li> </ul>
<b>Buffer zones</b>	Four options for 2m and 5m wide buffer strips and boundary strips

### ***Discussion of 2007-13 proposals***

In the absence of any experience of pilot projects for most of the 2004-06 measures, and a reduced budget, it is not surprising that, of the three measures likely to be of significant benefit to Annex 1 birds, uptake of two (for extensive pastures and grass buffer strips) has been so severely limited by inadequate payment rates and difficult management requirements. These problems were made worse by lack of skilled advisors (see below).

The proposed changes to the programme for 2007-13 address some of these issues and should improve uptake if payment rates are set at a level to be attractive to farmers, and the measures for extensive grassland and buffer strips are given adequate targets and budget allocations. But the benefit to threatened Annex 1 birds of the new grassland scheme for high nature value sites will depend on targeting the two special measures at appropriate sites, and it is difficult to envisage who will provide this advice to applicants until major improvements have been made to the advisory service. If these improvements are made, the grassland measure could usefully be supplemented by targeting non-productive investment at the creation of small dams in grasslands where Corncrake, White Stork and other birds would benefit.

If the delivery system was working effectively there is a strong argument for promoting the measure for field mosaics as part of an integrated package targeted at protecting and developing the biodiversity value of the remaining mixed traditional farming areas, and measure at grasslands. Given the problems of agri-environment delivery in Poland it might be better to take a more cautious approach initially and to pilot these new measures in areas where they are most needed and where fully trained advisers can assist with delivery, perhaps in nature and landscape protection zones where IBAs have not been designated under Natura 2000.

The proposed programme for 2007-13, shown in Table 7 above, still has a very strong emphasis on agri-environment measures not targeted at biodiversity. Without a significant transfer of both funding and delivery effort into the schemes for permanent pastures and high nature value grasslands, and the introduction of a coherent package of measure for mixed traditional farmland, it is difficult to see how Poland can safeguard the habitats of large populations of its important Annex 1 farmland birds.

## 13.6 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures

### *Delivery*

Poland has about 1.5 million farmers and almost 10% of its farmland is classified as habitats important for birds. Effective delivery of an agri-environment programme on this scale requires a major commitment of funding and expertise. The Polish Paying Agency (ARMA) has had major problems implementing agri-environment schemes and other measures in 2004 – 2006 causing delays in applications, making payments and other complications. These difficulties discourage farmers and were probably one of the reasons for the low number of applications - other reasons were the limitation of some measures to priority zones, low payment rates for some measures, complicated conditions, and insufficient advice, promotion and training for farmers. As a result it is forecast that by April 2007 it Poland will have spent less than 35% of the agri-environment budget for 2004 - 06 and only about 4% of Polish farmers will have agri-environment contracts.

### *Farm advisory services*

The most significant limiting factor for agri-environment uptake in Poland has been the availability and activity of advisers who lack adequate knowledge and expertise in biodiversity management. To save costs new advisers are trained 'in-house' by existing advisers, compounding the problem of lack of environmental expertise and negative attitudes to agri-environment schemes. Restructuring of the advisory services, introduced in January 2005, may weaken the link between local and national advisory centres and possibly affect the quality of advice. There is also concern that new powers to charge for agri-environment advice will, if implemented, disadvantage poorer farmers who are more likely to have high nature value farmland and should be among the key targets for agri-environment schemes<sup>108</sup>.

Successful implementation of new agri-environment schemes and other environmental measures will be impossible without sufficient funding to:

- employ properly trained agri-environmental advisers, supported by experts; and to
- train all advisers and inspectors in the management requirements of the new schemes; and
- provide information campaigns for farmers and give them assistance with preparing applications.

One way of providing additional skilled resources in time for the 2007-13 programme might be to use Axis 1 measures for “vocational training and information actions” (Article 21) and “use of advisory service and by farmers and forest holders” (Article 24) to finance specialist agri-environment advisory services provided by small private firms or NGOs, and cover the cost to farmers of using these services.

### *Evaluation*

No information was available on proposed indicators for agri-environment measures but, given the large populations of Annex 1 farmland birds threatened by decline, it is important that the impact of key agri-environment schemes on birds and their habitats is properly evaluated and used as a means of improving and targeting future agri-environment schemes

## 13.7 Negative impacts of Axis 2 measures on farmland birds

### *Afforestation of farmland*

Without environmental criteria to assess applications there is a risk that use of Axis 2 funding for afforestation could destroy grassland habitats important for birds.

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<sup>108</sup> ref Elco

## 13.8 Negative impacts of Axis 1 measures on farmland birds

### *Farm investment*

Lack of sufficient safeguards for Annex 1 birds and failures to use environmental impact assessment, or to refer to spatial management plans when assessing farm investment applications, could threaten grassland habitats. Giving priority in Natura 2000 areas to Axis 1 applications for investments other than for improving environment quality could, if not properly targeted, result in damaging intensification of agriculture on high nature value farmland.

### *Early retirement and land consolidation*

Together these poses a real threat to the important small-scale habitats for birds found in the mixed traditional farming areas, as younger farmers are likely to intensify production and consolidate parcels of land in an effort to improve income and reduce labour costs. One way of limiting the damaging effects on biodiversity might be to offer a integrated package of support in traditional farming areas using measures from all three Axes of EAFRD, and also to give incoming young farmers preferential access to agri-environment schemes for landscape conservation and habitat management.

## 13.9 GAEC

If properly defined and enforced GAEC can provide safeguards for the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds, and can protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement.

Biodiversity experts point out that there are problems with the current definition of GAEC in Poland:

- current GAEC requirements are in conflict with some agri-environment management requirements, but this could be at least partly resolved by:
  - changing the date by which mowing must be completed to 15 August for meadows and pastures and allowing exemptions for land in protected areas, IBAs and higher level agri-environment schemes;
  - prohibiting weed control by herbicides on fallow land;
  - leaving the protection of small landscape features and areas of semi-natural habitat as a GAEC requirement but allowing farmers to claim area payments on the land these features occupy (as permitted by the Implementing Regulation for direct payments<sup>109</sup>) and, at the same time, offering farmers an incentive to retain them - for example by giving additional points in scoring agri-environment applications, and making non-productive investment support available for the restoration or replacement of key features. This approach has been used for the entry-level agri-environment scheme in England<sup>110</sup>.
- the current legal requirement to maintain permanent grassland, which is a condition of LFA and agri-environment payments, could be transferred to GAEC and properly enforced; the cadastre (land registers) are still being updated, and farmers are, in some cases, converting permanent pastures into arable land without any penalties (e.g. where the plot is registered as arable land, but has been used for last 15 years as permanent grassland). Permanent unimproved grassland is important to Annex 1 birds for nesting and food supplies, and should be protected.

<sup>109</sup> Regulation 796/2004 Article 30.2 and 30.3

<sup>110</sup> Entry Level Stewardship, for details see: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/schemes/els/default.htm>

## 14 Slovakia

### Key points for Slovakia 2007-13

Slovakia has major populations of several Annex 1 farmland birds and 25% of the territory is designated as SPA. One third of the farmland in IBAs is already used intensively and half the IBAs are threatened by intensification.

*Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan?*

The Slovakia Rural Development Strategy for 2007-2013 makes general reference to Natura 2000 and biodiversity, The proposed allocation of more than 60% of the EAFRD budget to Axis 2 should help to secure future agri-environment uptake, provided adequate payment rates are set and expert advice is followed on setting management requirements.

To meet the EU 2007-13 Guidelines on protecting and developing high nature value farming systems, the first priority for agri-environment funding in all Member States should be to secure long-term conservation management of existing high nature value farmland habitats used by Annex 1 birds and other protected species. There is concern that LFA measures will again take a very large share of the Axis 2 budget, and provide relatively little biodiversity benefit.

In the current programme budgets were not pre-allocated to particular measures, and in practice the allocation was determined by the level of farmers' interest. This is not necessarily an effective means of allocating funds to measures of benefit to farmland birds.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Under the current 2004-2006 programme only one of 10 agri-environment measures is aimed directly at the protection of biodiversity (habitat protection of natural and semi-natural permanent grasslands). This scheme was well designed and well received by farmers and, although not specifically aimed at the protection of birds, some benefits for meadow birds are expected. But there were no specific measures directly targeting the needs of farmland bird species.

The proposals for 2007-13 include improvements to this measure and three important new horizontal measures (one for non-productive investments) and a Natura 2000 measure aimed specifically at Annex 1 farmland birds. Care will be needed to ensure that MoE proposals for these new measures are not modified to the extent that their benefit to birds is reduced.

*What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Due to fragmentation of land ownership of and ongoing restructuring of plots of land, schemes for planting trees and shrubs in intensive lowland farmland have failed.

Lack of environmental expertise among advisers and paying agency staff has meant that farmers are not well-informed about bird conservation and there have been problems with control of biodiversity measures.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Existing Article 16 LFA payments are tied to basic general management requirements, do not reflect the needs of Natura 2000 sites and have probably been of little benefit to birds. They may be replaced by targeted agri-environment schemes in 2007-13.

The current definition of GAEC offers no protection for landscape features and has mowing requirements that are too early for nesting birds.

## 14.1 Agriculture in Slovakia

Farmland covers 50% of the territory, forestry 40%. Almost 60% of the farmland is arable; the production of cereals, oil-producing plants and vegetables is increasing and the arable area covered by fodder crops, potatoes, maize and legumes is decreasing. Permanent grassland is also increasing whilst the percentage of hops, vineyards and orchards is decreasing. The size of an average farm is 300 ha, with cooperative enterprises in a dominant position.<sup>111</sup>

## 14.2 Annex 1 farmland birds in Slovakia

Slovakia's farmland accounts for only 1% of the EU25 total but it provides breeding and feeding grounds for major populations of several Annex 1 farmland birds including Imperial Eagle (38% of the EU25 population), Saker Falcon and Lesser Spotted Eagle (13% and 10% respectively), Corncrake, Lesser Grey Shrike, Red-footed Falcon and smaller numbers of other important species<sup>112</sup>

There are 40 IBAs in Slovakia, of which 38 (covering more than 25 % of the Slovak territory) have been submitted as SPAs. Farmland is a significant land use in 28 IBAs, occupying a total of nearly 330,000 hectares. A significant proportion of the farmland is used intensively and half of the IBAs are threatened by intensive agriculture.

Please see Annex 4 for more details of important farmland birds and their habitats in Slovakia.

## 14.3 Threats to existing farmland habitats for Annex 1 and other farmland birds in Slovakia

### ***Arable land***

Most arable land is now farmed intensively by tenants, and threats to biodiversity include:

- large scale monocultures, intensive use of fertilisers and pesticides, and intensive mechanisation (ploughing, sowing, mowing, harvesting);
- removal of scattered trees and shrubby vegetation, land drainage or inappropriate irrigation;
- unsuitable mowing techniques (mowing before the 1st August in core areas or before 15 July outside core areas, mowing from the both sides to the centre of the parcel at high speed and mowing by several mechanized mowers in the same area and at the same time);
- other significant threats include changes in traditional farming methods, land abandonment and burning of old growth.

### ***Unimproved permanent dry grassland and wet grassland***

Grasslands are managed extensively by tenants or owners for subsistence or shared farming and used for seasonal grazing by cattle and sheep, and for hay production. The main threats are:

- land abandonment and overgrowth with scrub;
- burning of old growth;
- unsuitable mowing techniques (as for arable land, above);
- intensive grazing with no limited on livestock density, and consequent trampling;

<sup>111</sup> Country profiles of Rural Development Plans at [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/countries/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/countries/index_en.htm)

<sup>112</sup> White stork, Great bustard, Purple heron, Squacco heron, Pygmy Cormorant, Roller, Stone curlew, Montagu's Harrier and other farmland birds.

- cutting of solitary old, dying and dead trees, bushes, hedgerows, windbreaks, tree lines, small woodlands and other natural vegetation on farmland; and
- on wet grassland there is a threat of future drainage.

### **Mixed traditional farming**

Now farmed extensively by owners and tenants, mixed traditional farmland is subject to threats are similar to those for grassland (above) plus future intensification.

## **14.4 Opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds**

In addition to the need to address the threats to existing Annex 1 bird habitats outlined above, there is a significant case for the creation of new habitats for farmland birds generally. The following table identifies the type of farmland management, the opportunity to improve bird habitats and the birds which would benefit.

<b>Farm type</b>	<b>Opportunity to create habitats or adopt bird-friendly management practices</b>	<b>This would improve breeding or feeding areas for:</b>
Arable land in SW and E Slovakia	Creation of grass strips.	<i>Porzana porzana, Lanius collurio, Anthus campestris, Lullula arborea, Alauda arvensis, Coturnix coturnix, Emberiza citronella, Falco tinnunculus, Falco vespertinus, Motacilla flava, Miliaria calandra, Passer montanus, Perdix perdix, Saxicola rubetra, Sylvia communis, Streptopelia turtur</i>
Intensive arable areas of S Slovakia	Maintenance of small landscape features - solitary old, dying and dead trees, bushes, hedgerows, windbreaks, tree lines, small woodlands, ditches and other natural vegetation on farmland	<i>Aquila heliaca, Falco cherrug, Milvus milvus, Coracias garrulus, Falco vespertinus, Lanius minor, Falco subbuteo, Asio otus, Buteo buteo, Falco tinnunculus, Passer domesticus</i>
Extensively farmed permanent grasslands throughout Slovakia	Abandonment and overgrowth of scrub	<i>Crex crex, Aquila pomarina, Aquila chrysaetos, Milvus milvus, Lanius collurio, Sylvia nisoria, Lanius excubitor, Anthus pratensis, Miliaria calandra, Saxicola rubetra,</i>
Traditional extensively managed orchards and vineyards in S Slovakia	Support to prevent further decrease in area of high nature value perennial crops	<i>Otus scops, Lanius minor</i>

## **14.5 National Strategy and budget allocations for 2007-13**

SAPARD agri-environment measures were implemented just before the RDP, and there was not enough time to evaluate them and use the results in preparing the RDP. (Some preliminary evaluation was done by the NGOs DAPHNE and BirdLife Slovakia, but these results do not appear to have been used either).

The Slovakia Rural Development Strategy for 2007-2013 makes general reference to Natura 2000 and biodiversity, and the proposed allocation of 2007-13 EAFRD funding between Axes (at the time data was collected for this report) was Axis 1 - 20%, **Axis 2 - 62%** and Axis 3 - 14%. In the current programme budgets were not pre-allocated to particular measures, and in practice the allocation was determined by the level of farmers' interest. This is unlikely to be the most effective way of targeting high nature value schemes.

There is concern among biodiversity experts that LFA measures may again take a very large share of the Axis 2 budget, and provide relatively little biodiversity benefit.

#### **14.6 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13**

There was some resistance to including bird conservation measures in the 2004-06 programme, and out of 10 schemes under the current programme, only one is aimed directly at the protection of biodiversity, namely '**natural and semi-natural grasslands**'. This scheme for extensive grassland management was well designed and well received by farmers, and although not specifically aimed at the protection of birds, some benefits for meadow birds are expected. It will be improved for 2007-13 by increasing the number of grassland types from four to seven. Some farmers have had problems complying with the management requirements because they do not have enough livestock or appropriate light-weight mowing machinery.

Another existing scheme, for **conversion of arable land to grassland**, is likely to be continued in the next period, and is potentially valuable to birds like White Stork when used on flooded areas. There has been a problem with seeds mixtures for this measure - semi-natural grasslands mixtures were only available for pilot projects and farmers use commercial mixtures instead, which are not appropriate. The Institute of Botany of the Slovak Academy of Sciences should be the certification authority for this seed but it lacked the capacity to take on the work. An authorisation institution for 2007-13 has not yet been appointed.

Two new schemes aimed specifically at Annex 1 birds are proposed for 2007-13, one a **late mowing scheme for Corncrake on permanent grasslands**, which is likely to be popular with farmers, because they can combine it with the measure for **habitat protection of natural and semi-natural permanent grasslands** (above). The other is a targeted **arable scheme with two options for Annex 1 birds** - one for Imperial Eagle, Saker Falcon, Red-footed Falcon, Black Kite and Red Kite, the other for Great Bustard. In the arable scheme the nest protection requirements are demanding for the farmers, and the payment rates are unlikely to be attractive to intensive lowland farmers. Care will be needed to ensure that Ministry of Environment proposals for these new measures are not modified to the extent that their benefit to birds is reduced.

In addition to these new schemes, non-productive investments will be offered for the installation of artificial nests, nest boxes and perching poles which should benefit Falcons, Harriers, Roller and White Stork.

#### **14.7 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures**

Despite a compulsory 20 hour agri-environment training course farmers have limited awareness of the needs of bird conservation. The government advisory service is not very well established, most of the accredited advisors have very limited knowledge of nature conservation issues and NGOs do a considerable amount of unofficial, unpaid advisory work. There are similar problems with paying agency staff, and control of biodiversity measures is a serious problem (there is proposal to involve the State Nature Conservancy in the control process.)

A key issue for 2007-13 will be improving the biodiversity skills of advisers and control staff and using the information and training for farmers to make them more aware of the management needs of birds.

#### **14.8 Natura 2000**

##### ***Legal restrictions***

Legal restrictions are in place to protect nests of Annex 1 birds but there are concerns that permanent pasture and landscape features are not adequately protected in high nature value areas (including Natura 2000 sites).

### **Natura 2000 payments**

Article 16 payments for environmental restrictions were available in four SPAs in the 2004-06 programme but were not focused on NATURA 2000 site management and are likely to have been of little benefit to birds. The scheme simply applied prescriptions equivalent to basic agri-environment schemes and basic GFP conditions, neither of which reflected the needs of Natura 2000 sites. As a result, farmers received LFA support without any obligation to respect rules concerning species protection (e.g. limits on management of non-cropped land during the breeding season, spraying of chemicals on non-productive land or stubble burning). Another problem has been the delay in designating SPAs, which has meant that many farmers have not received payments.

Two Natura 2000 measures for SPAs have been prepared but it is not clear if these will be used because of the high cost to the budget and the problems of applying general conditions to very different sites - instead farmers in SPAs may be given better access to agri-environment schemes.

### **14.9 GAEC**

If properly defined and enforced GAEC can safeguard the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds and protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement.

Current GFP rules include requirements concerning fertilisers, plant protection products, soil protection and animal fodder, establishing environmental standards aimed at the protection of water, soil and air. However, these rules do not contain any standards benefiting biodiversity.

Biodiversity experts point out that current GAEC covers the basic care of agricultural land by destroying weeds and protecting land from invasion by trees and other vegetation, but the current definition has many of the same deficiencies as GFP, including:

- mowing is required at least once per year, before 15 July, which is too early for ground-nesting birds;
- there are no GAEC standards for minimum stocking rates and/or appropriate regimes or the retention of landscape features or to protect permanent pasture from conversion to arable land - these would all benefit birds.

## 15 Slovenia

### 15.1 Key points for Slovenia 2007-13

Small farm size and the continuation of mixed traditional farming in the predominantly mountainous landscape support a variety of farmland habitats. Almost one quarter of the land in Slovenia is designated as SPA, with about 30,000 ha of farmland, including unimproved grassland (wet and dry), mixed traditional farmland, arable and perennial crops.

Slovenia has been delivering a complex agri-environment programme of 21 measures since 2001, with a well-organised administrative and advisory system, including compulsory training for farmers.

*Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan?*

The National Strategy makes clear that agri-environment schemes are to be the main tool for delivering habitat management in Natura 2000 areas. Reversing the recent declines in important Annex 1 birds such as Corncrake and Lesser Grey Shrike will require some changes to existing schemes and efforts to improve uptake of some of these more demanding schemes if these are to protect important habitats from abandonment or intensification.

*Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?*

About one third of all farmers in Slovenia participate in agri-environment schemes, but both they and their advisers see these schemes as another form of agricultural support rather than a means of delivering specific environmental benefits. Schemes with relatively little impact on habitat management are popular - for example integrated crop production and sustainable animal breeding - but other entry level schemes such as organic farming and extensive grassland management could be of much greater benefit to Annex 1 birds.

The few remaining wet grasslands are particularly important for Corncrake, which has declined in recent years as a result of habitat loss in all of the core wet grasslands in SPAs. A special grassland habitat conservation scheme for birds has had poor uptake, due to a combination of factors - restrictions on how different agri-environment schemes may be combined, lack of promotion by advisors and unduly restrictive management requirements.

Uptake of two other schemes has also been poor - these would have protected important SPA habitats of steep grasslands and traditional grassland orchards if they had been implemented more effectively.

*What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?*

The advisory service already plays a key role in shaping farmers' attitudes and influencing uptake of agri-environment schemes and will be an important factor in achieving targets for Natura 2000 habitats and species. Achieving sufficient uptake of the higher level habitat management schemes and helping farmers to implement the management requirements correctly will require extra training in habitat management for these advisers or the establishment of a specialist advisory service for Natura 2000 areas. Paying agency inspectors will also need to be trained in management requirements.

*What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?*

Flexibility in the current rules on conversion of permanent grassland appear to allow

destruction of wet grassland habitats without penalty, making it even more important that farmers are encouraged to manage this land for birds rather than convert it to more intensive grassland or arable.

IACS rules on eligibility of land may have been used by some farmers as an opportunity to destroy small landscape features important for birds, such as isolated bushes and trees.

If appropriate impact indicators are not used to evaluate the 2007-13 programme it will be impossible to know if Slovenia's substantial investment in agri-environment measures is able to reverse the decline in important Annex 1 bird populations and deliver the government's targets for Natura 2000 farmland.

## 15.2 Agriculture in Slovenia

About half the territory of Slovenia is agricultural land, predominantly permanent pasture, much of it in hilly or mountainous areas. Slovenian agriculture has retained a small farm structure, and prior to independence more than 90 % of Slovenia's UAA was occupied by small private agricultural holdings and only about 8 % by socially owned holdings, known today as 'agricultural enterprises'. Individual farms have an average size of about 4.8 ha, agricultural enterprises about 370 ha<sup>113</sup>.

## 15.3 Annex 1 farmland birds in Slovenia

Slovenia's farmland is less than 1% of the EU25 total but it provides breeding and feeding grounds for significant populations of six Annex 1 farmland birds targeted by BirdLife for support through agri-environment schemes. Five of these have unfavourable population status in Europe - Corncrake (also of global conservation concern), Lesser Grey Shrike, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Night Heron and Roller.

Significant areas of dry meadow and pasture can be found at a number of sites, concentrated in the west and southwest of the country. These support various specialist species, such as Short-toed Eagle, Woodlark, Ortolan Bunting and Tawny Pipit, although the total area of dry meadows is now decreasing due to encroachment of vegetation.

Please see Annex 4 for more details of important farmland birds and their habitats in Slovenia.

## 15.4 Threats to existing farmland habitats for Annex 1 and other birds in Slovenia

### *Wet grasslands*

Although the majority of wet meadows have been drained in the past, a small number of areas (the most notable being Ljubljansko barje) survived to form a network of sites now used for mowing for fodder or litter, and sporadic semi-intensive cattle grazing. These areas are home to important numbers of Corncrake and are used by other Annex 1 species - White Stork, Spotted Crake Lesser Spotted Eagle - and other farmland birds<sup>114</sup>. Optimum management for birds includes low input farming activities, limited use of mineral fertilisers and chemicals and late mowing, with existing drainage channels managed according to nature conservation guidelines (to undertake alternate cleaning of only one side of a channel every second year). Nearly one third of all IBAs in Slovenia have wet grassland that is under continuous threat of:

- conversion to arable land or to intensively managed grassland;
- intensive grazing;
- early mowing;

<sup>113</sup> DG Agri overview

<sup>114</sup> for example, *Coturnix coturnix*, *Sylvia nisoria* and *Lanius collurio*

- encroachment of bushes due to land abandonment.

### ***Unimproved permanent dry grassland***

Dry mountain grasslands are typical of seven SPAs, mostly in Western and Southern Slovenia and are important habitats for Corncrake and for raptors such as Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle and Short-toed Snake Eagle that require open landscape for hunting and benefit from extensive grassland management (especially grazing by cattle, sheep and goats). Many other farmland birds<sup>115</sup> use these grasslands, some of which have already been abandoned, leading to significant loss of habitat, while others are still used for grazing cattle and sheep, and for mowing. The main threat is the abandonment of high mountain farmland and the consequent encroachment of unwanted vegetation on grassland. The optimum management for birds would be extensive grazing with low LU/ha, late mowing where appropriate, and control of encroaching vegetation.

### ***Mixed traditional farming***

Predominantly traditional extensive mixed farmland, vital for the conservation of many threatened farmland species, remains in some rural areas, such as Slovenske gorice, Goricko and Kozjansko. This complex bird habitat is found in nearly half of all IBAs and is used for mixed, small-scale farming, with extensive cattle grazing, mowing, some arable land and perennial crops (including orchards and vineyards), forest edges, hedgerows and solitary bushes or trees. These areas are important for Roller, Lesser Grey Shrike, White Stork and many other birds<sup>116</sup>, which benefit from low input agriculture, especially mixed organic farming, in small-scale fields with limited livestock density, phased mowing, traditional perennial and mixed crops, traditional orchards and the maintenance of marginal areas and landscape features. Threats to mixed traditional farmland include:

- creation of monocultures;
- high fertiliser and pesticide inputs;
- conversion of grasslands to arable land;
- reduction in the total area of traditional orchards.

### ***Arable***

These habitats are now managed as intensive arable land, often within mixed traditional farming systems, but the optimum management for White Stork and other species<sup>117</sup> would be conversion to lower-input arable land, smaller-scale farming, reduction in the total area of arable land and promotion of suitable grassland management. The main threats are:

- creation of monoculture;
- high mineral and organic fertiliser inputs;
- pesticide and other chemical inputs; and
- land consolidation.

## **15.5 Opportunities to create new habitats for farmland birds**

In addition to the need to address the threats to existing Annex 1 bird habitats outlined above, there is a significant case for the creation of new habitats for farmland birds generally. The following table identifies the type of farmland management, the opportunity to improve bird habitats and the birds which would benefit.

<sup>115</sup> for example: *Alectoris graeca*, *Lullula arborea*, *Sylvia nisoria*, *Anthus campestris*, *Emberiza hortulana*, *Falco tinnunculus*, *Coturnix coturnix*, *Tyto alba*, *Upupa epops*, *Alauda arvensis*, *Monticola saxatilis*, *Lanius collurio*, *Carduelis cannabina*, *Miliaria calandra*

<sup>116</sup> *Coracias garrulus*, *Lanius minor*, *Ciconia ciconia*, *Falco tinnunculus*, *Coturnix coturnix*, *Otus scops*, *Upupa epops*, *Picus viridis*, *Jynx torquilla*, *Lullula arborea*, *Hirundo rustica*, *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, *Lanius collurio*, *Sturnus vulgaris*, *Passer montanus*, *Carduelis cannabina*, *Miliaria calandra*

<sup>117</sup> for example: *Falco tinnunculus*, *Vanellus vanellus*, *Tyto alba*, *Alauda arvensis*, *Galerida cristata*, *Carduelis cannabina*

Farm type	Opportunity to create habitats or adopt bird-friendly management practices	This would improve breeding or feeding areas for:
Grasslands, especially wet grasslands in selected IBAs	Late mowing (after 15 July)	All grassland birds, especially Corncrake and Common Quail
All types	Organic farming provides a good basis for habitat management for all farmland birds, especially on Natura 2000 sites	All birds, especially species characteristic for mixed traditional farmland, such as White Stork and large insectivores (e.g. Roller and Lesser Grey Shrike)
All types	Hedgerows and solitary bushes and trees, are present in many wet grasslands and maintenance of these landscape features, covering up to 3 % of the total grassland parcel, would be of benefit to birds.	Many birds characteristic of mixed traditional farmland and some grassland birds (e.g. Red-backed Shrike, Barred Warbler and to some extent Corncrake too)
Mixed traditional farmland	Supporting traditional management of the few remaining grassland orchards to prevent their conversion to arable or intensive orchards	Many birds characteristic for mixed traditional farmland, notably Lesser Grey Shrike, Grey-faced Woodpecker, Wryneck, and Common Redstart

## 15.6 National Strategy for 2007-13

The Slovenian Rural Development Strategy for 2007-2013 makes it clear that agri-environment schemes will be the main tool for achieving Natura 2000 targets, using the existing structure the 2004-06 RDP. DOPPS-BirdLife Slovenia argue that it will be difficult to achieve these targets for declining populations of important Annex 1 farmland birds without more emphasis on high level agri-environment schemes targeted at Natura 2000 areas - only one of the current 21 agri-environment measures is targeted at extensive grassland management for birds and this has had poor levels of uptake.

## 15.7 Agri-environment measures for farmland birds 2007-13

The existing complex programme of 21 measures was introduced in 2001 and is based on previous experience of developing and implementing national agri-environment schemes.

Although the Slovenian agri-environment programme has a section on management of protected areas there is only one measure targeted at grassland management for ground nesting birds, which has had very poor uptake (by 2005 only 10% of the 2006 target uptake of 10,000 ha had been achieved). This was due partly to an unnecessarily low average stocking rate requirement, which discouraged farmers, and also to a lack of promotion of the scheme. This scheme for **special grassland habitat conservation** (III/3 in the 2004-06 programme) could potentially benefit 70-80% of the Slovenian population of Corncrake if it was:

- redesigned as proposed by DOPPS-BirdLife Slovenia (see text box below)
- targeted at the 8,200 ha of core wet grasslands in eight SPAs; and
- actively promoted by advisers trained in high nature value habitat management.

Cattle grazing is important for the maintenance of wet grassland in SPAs but the maximum stocking rate of 1.9 LU per ha allowed by the popular scheme for **sustainable animal breeding** has led to problems of overstocking on these important habitats because the paying agency<sup>118</sup> is required to calculate the total farm stocking rate based on all the grassland (meadows and pasture).

<sup>118</sup> Agency of Republic of Slovenia for Agriculture Markets and Rural Development is the paying agency for EAGGF funds.

There are more general agri-environment measures, available throughout Slovenia, which could be of more benefit to farmland birds if their uptake was promoted, particularly in Natura 2000 areas. These include:

- an entry level measure for **extensive grassland conservation** (II/8 in the 2004-06 programme) which is particularly suitable for farms with no livestock;
- the **organic farming** scheme (I/8 in the 2004-06 programme), is of potential benefit to biodiversity on all Natura 2000 farms (for example, because it is more restrictive on pesticides than the popular integrated farming schemes) and could usefully be combined with specialist habitat management schemes, such as that for wet grassland.

There are two special habitat schemes which apply to only small areas of land but support traditional management of scarce habitats important for farmland birds, which otherwise may be lost. These schemes have had low levels of uptake in 2004-06, which could be improved by promoting them more vigorously. These are:

- **mowing steep grasslands** at least once a year by hand or using small machines, and removing the grass. This prevents abandonment and provides habitats for grassland birds (II/2 in the 2004-06 programme);
- maintaining **traditional management of grassland orchards** (II/4 in the 2004-06 programme) protects these semi-natural habitats from conversion to arable land or to intensive orchards.

#### ***Wet grassland management scheme for birds, proposed by DOPPS-BirdLife Slovenia***

##### **Objective**

Management of extensive wet grasslands for the conservation of birds and other fauna and flora. (Birds expected to benefit include *Crex crex*, *Circus cyaneus*, *Vanellus vanellus*, *Numenius arquata*, *Sylvia nisoria*, *Coturnix coturnix*, *Saxicola rubetra*, *Sylvia communis*, *Locustella naevia*, *Lanius collurio*)

##### **Eligible areas**

Only applicable to permanent wet extensive grasslands on specific Natura 2000 sites (see Annex 4 for details of IBAs).

##### **Management**

Conserve extensive wet grasslands and their associated landscape features such as hedgerows, solitary bushes and trees through:

- Basic livestock loading on farm = 0.0 – 1.9 LU/ha
- No pasturing allowed on grassland plots that are subject to this scheme (only for litter or other alternative use)
- At least one mowing every year including hay gathering (hay should not be left on the meadows)
- The first mowing should not be performed before 1st August
- Bird and other fauna species friendly type of mowing should be applied (from the side of the meadow to the centre) only on grasslands plots that exceed a 0,3 ha size
- Hedgerows and other marginal elements should be maintained and managed every second year
- Solitary bushes and trees of a maximum 5.0 – 15.0 metres width should be left on grasslands (the total coverage of elements should not exceed the 3% of a total grassland plot size)
- No fertilizers and other chemicals are allowed

##### **Other management recommendations**

- Application of traditional mower machine
- Low speed mowing on a minimum 10 cm up from the ground
- 3,0 – 5,0 metres set aside grassland strips on grasslands plots that exceed the 5,0 ha size

Compensation per hectare calculated as income foregone and additional costs related to specific agriculture practices applied mostly to low input agriculture on extensive wet grasslands.

### **Proposed indicators**

Control indicators: area of all permanent grasslands inside Natura 2000 sites under this scheme (in hectares); and area of marginal and other landscape elements (as percentage).

- Long term impact indicators: population of indicator bird species (Corncrake) on wet extensive grasslands; population of indicator flora species; and extent of traditional landscape features.

## **15.8 GAEC**

If properly defined and enforced GAEC should safeguard the non-farmed areas and small landscape features which are so important for farmland birds and protect semi-natural habitats from damage or destruction, leaving agri-environment schemes to pay for their management, restoration and improvement.

Since implementation of the IACS system in 2005, agri-environment support has been based on the total area of farmland in use, and some farmers have removed small landscape features such as isolated trees and bushes. These are important habitats for birds, which could be protected by suitable GAEC requirements and their management encouraged through agri-environment schemes. Biodiversity experts also point out that some areas of semi-natural vegetation are excluded from agri-environment schemes because they are more than 25m<sup>2</sup> in size and therefore do not qualify as managed farmland.

The protection of permanent grasslands from conversion is determined nationally with an overall loss of 8% permitted before state intervention is required - it appears that this flexibility could put at risk all the wet grasslands in Natura core areas.

## **15.9 Delivery and evaluation of agri-environment measures**

### ***Attitudes and training of farmers and advisers***

About one third of all farmers in Slovenia participate in agri-environment schemes but most farmers are more interested in the additional financial support than in the objectives of environmental management. If agri-environment measures are to succeed in delivering government targets on the 29883 ha of farmland in Natura 2000 sites, significantly more emphasis on high nature value habitat management will be required in:

- information and promotional material provided for farmers;
- training of farm advisers; and
- the 15 hours of training that farmers undertake during the 5 years of their agri-environment contract

The potential effectiveness of such a change of emphasis is illustrated by the 300% increase in uptake of the special grassland habitat conservation scheme in 2006 after it was promoted to farmers in all SPA core Corncrake areas.

A recent report on evaluation of agri-environment measures in Slovenia recommended that farmers' training should stress the environmental aspects of agri-environment measures as well as the financial aspects. This study also recommended that more emphasis should be given to on-the-spot inspections, and that staff carrying out these inspections should be better trained so that they could make independent decisions.

### ***Evaluation***

No information was available on proposals to evaluate the impact of agri-environment measures in the 2007-13 programme, but in the 2004-06 programme only uptake and output indicators have been used to evaluate agri-environment measures (for example area of land under agri-environment management, use of fertilisers and chemicals, production of fodder from grasslands). Monitoring data compiled by DOPPS-BirdLife Slovenia shows that numbers of Corncrake have declined in recent years due to a loss of suitable habitat across all the core

wet grasslands of SPAs, suggesting that agri-environment schemes may be too general and often targeted at the wrong areas<sup>119</sup>.

If appropriate impact indicators are not used to evaluate the 2007-13 programme it will be impossible to know if Slovenia's substantial investment in agri-environment measures is able to reverse the decline in important Annex 1 bird populations and deliver the government's targets for Natura 2000 farmland.

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<sup>119</sup> DOPPS BirdLife Slovenia (2005) *Integrating Natura 2000 Requirements into the National Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013 for Republic of Slovenia* Final Version 1.2. Ljubljana.

## 16 Conclusions and recommendations

This final section of the report draws general conclusions and recommendations from the whole study (key points for individual Member States have already been set out at the beginning of Sections 7 to 15).

Several Member States made remarkable progress in developing and piloting agri-environment schemes targeted at birds, given the timescale of the 2004-06 programmes and the need to build up institutional capacity to deliver biodiversity management. In many cases, experience of nationally funded pre-accession schemes was used to advantage. Similarly, SPA designation in many of the new Member States has been completed very quickly, providing legal protection for thousands of hectares of farmland designated as IBAs. (Poland and Cyprus are the exceptions, with large areas of farmland IBAs without legal protection).

Despite such efforts, this study has shown that many difficulties were encountered in implementing effective agri-environment schemes targeted at birds in the 2004-06 period. It is clear, from our analysis of the experience of the first RDPs and of the threats to farmland bird populations, that significant changes will be needed for the 2007-13 period in many Member States if agri-environment schemes are to succeed in protecting habitats for Annex 1 and farmland birds generally. The remainder of this section considers first the effective use of agri-environment schemes within land management policies for farmland bird conservation, then considers the four questions that the study set out to answer on the objectives, design and delivery of the proposed 2007-13 agri-environment schemes, and their relationship with other rural development and CAP policies.

Our recommendations are shown in **bold**.

### 16.1 Effective use of agri-environment schemes in farmland bird conservation

It is a fundamental principle of biodiversity conservation that the highest priority should be given to safeguarding and managing existing habitats of high nature value in an area, before attempting to create new habitats. The nine new Member States have only 21% of the farmland in Europe but their much greater significance in terms of farmland bird populations is a direct result of the extent and quality of their existing farmland bird habitats. This is illustrated by the fact that ten of the twenty Annex 1 farmland birds targeted by BirdLife for agri-environment support have more than 21% of their EU populations in the nine new Member States. In view of the far reaching structural, economic and social changes still affecting agriculture in the new Member States it is useful to consider how best to use agri-environment schemes, within the wider framework of land management decisions that will be made by both government and farmers.

This study has shown that agri-environment schemes can be a valuable method of managing and restoring existing important habitats and creating new ones, but only if they operate within a supportive hierarchy of other land management policies, which recognise the value of bird habitats. The supporting hierarchy of policies has four elements, outlined below, which should be considered at the landscape scale when setting objectives and targeting and delivering agri-environment support.

#### ***Securing long term use of the land for farming***

Abandonment and change to non-agricultural use are the main threats to securing long term farming in IBAs and other habitats important to birds, particularly grasslands. In most of the nine Member States marginal grazing lands were abandoned when livestock numbers declined dramatically in the 1990s, allowing scrub development and eventual loss of the open grassland habitat. The relatively low EU livestock quota allocations at accession provided little incentive for farmers to resume livestock farming, and in some Member States abandonment of grasslands has been actively encouraged through afforestation schemes and reclassification of the land as non-agricultural for tax and registration purposes, making it

ineligible for agri-environment support. Abandoned land may also be attractive to developers, if the owner has no interest in its long-term management.

- **RECOMMENDATION 1: high nature value farmland should be protected from abandonment and from conversion to non-agricultural uses. Permanent pastures of high nature value should be protected from conversion to arable land.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 2: all farmland in IBAs, and other high nature value farmland should be given highest priority for agri-environment schemes and non-productive investments targeted at restoration and re-instatement of appropriate habitat management for birds and other biodiversity.**

#### ***Protecting the spatial structure of the farmed landscape***

Farmland birds and other groups of highly mobile animals frequently depend on a combination of habitats and structural features within the landscape, often at a scale larger than that of individual plots or farm units - for example the combined value of small fields, mixed crops and small landscape features within mixed traditional farmland. Such complex patterns may survive partly as a result of fragmented ownership (as in Poland) and their loss may be hastened by support for land consolidation and farm investment, and by the profitability of large-scale commercial production. Even if agri-environment measures are available for individual elements of the mosaic, these measures alone are unlikely to offer sufficient protection at the landscape scale important to birds.

- **RECOMMENDATION 3: on all farmland small landscape features and non-farmed semi-natural habitats should be protected from damage or removal, through regulation or cross-compliance; restoration and replacement of these features should be supported by agri-environment and non-productive investments where appropriate.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 4: high nature value farming areas, where the farm structure and land-use patterns are an essential component of the biodiversity, should be identified and targeted by a combination of Axis 1 and 2 measures specifically designed to support the structure and pattern of land use.**

#### ***Support for low-input extensive farming systems***

Optimum farmland habitat management for birds will often require supporting extensive low-input systems which are rapidly becoming uneconomic and are now (or will soon be) threatened by intensification or abandonment - for example unimproved grasslands and mixed traditional farming. Agri-environment measures can make a significant contribution but it will also be necessary to find new ways of achieving traditional management results on the ground with less labour and of adding value to the products of extensive farming systems; and also exploiting new markets and products. Where farming systems in IBAs have already been intensified - for example arable and perennial crops - agri-environment support may best be used to introduce some elements of extensification without threatening the overall productivity of the farm unit.

- **RECOMMENDATION 5: surviving low-input extensive farming systems which provide habitats used by Annex 1 and other farmland birds should be seen as an environmental asset to be supported by well-designed agri-environment schemes with attractive payment rates - not seen as an economic problem to be solved by intensification. Targeted and coherent packages of measures from Axes 1, 2, and 3 will be needed to address the economic and social problems of high nature value farming systems and to promote their environmental sustainability.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 6: investment aid and other Axis 1 and Axis 3 measures for existing low-input farming systems should be directed not at agricultural intensification but at adding value to existing levels of production, improving quality, accessing new markets, finding modern alternatives to labour-intensive forms of habitat management and helping farming communities to access the**

**economic benefits of biodiversity management - for example through accreditation schemes and green tourism.**

### ***'Bird-friendly' agricultural management***

Significant benefits may be achieved by changes to 'in-field management' to provide food or cover for the birds (and their prey) or to improve the breeding success, particularly of ground nesting birds such as the Crakes. These changes are well suited to support through agri-environment management payments and non-productive investments, but it is essential that farmers understand why they are being paid for what they may view as old-fashioned and inefficient farming.

- **RECOMMENDATION 7: agri-environment schemes targeted at meeting birds' requirements by reducing the intensity of management on intensively managed land should be designed to meet known requirements of farmland species, and should offer payment rates which take account of the real costs to the farmer.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 8: agri-environment schemes targeted at birds should be accompanied by an explanation for farmers of the purpose, target species and environmental benefits of the scheme.**

Our analysis of the effective use of agri-environment schemes suggests that in many IBAs (and in the wider countryside) management of farmland for the benefit of birds and other biodiversity will depend on implementing a coherent and mutually supportive framework of measures that directly link biodiversity and Natura 2000 policies not just with agri-environment measures but also with other EAFRD measures and requirements. Where there is a threat of abandonment or large-scale intensification of high nature value farming systems it will be particularly important to first secure the long term agricultural use of the land and protection of the landscape structure, otherwise there is a real risk that agri-environment measures may not succeed in the long term.

## **16.2 Are conservation priorities for farmland birds adequately addressed in the objectives, targeting and funding of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plans?**

Although many National Strategies re-iterated the Commission Guidelines on using Axis 2 funding to contribute to biodiversity, high nature value farming and the Natura network it is not at all clear if these priorities are going to be carried through into funding, targeting, designing and delivering agri-environment schemes. It is a matter of concern to environmental experts that in many Member States the majority of the current agri-environment budget has been allocated to entry-level agri-environment schemes likely to be of little benefit to birds. To deliver EU nature conservation policy and targets a much stronger link will be required in 2007-13 between resource allocations to individual agri-environment schemes and the expected impact of these schemes on bird populations and biodiversity.

- **RECOMMENDATION 9: the EAFRD National Strategies should identify the priorities for farmland bird conservation in each Member State and make clear commitments to supporting land management for farmland birds within IBAs and elsewhere; to supporting and developing high nature value farming systems; to protecting and encouraging the management of landscape features and to ensuring that there is synergy (and no conflict) between these objectives and the activities supported by other measures in Axis 1, 2 and 3.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 10: budget allocations between Axes and within Axis 2, and area uptake targets for individual agri-environment schemes, should more closely reflect the biodiversity value of agri-environment schemes, the total area of existing high nature value bird habitats in need of management and the population status of key Annex 1 birds.**

- **RECOMMENDATION 11: as part of the design and delivery of agri-environment schemes, Member States should set quantified targets for population change of key bird species during the 2007-13 programme, including intermediate targets up to 2010, at different geographical scales (e.g. farm holding, high nature value area, Member State).**

It is particularly important to safeguard the habitats used by key Annex 1 birds in SPAs, but Natura 2000 compensation payments will not be available until national legal restrictions are in place, and then may not be able to cover all the positive management needed in some SPAs, such as grazing. Agri-environment schemes targeted at birds will continue to be needed within SPAs and other high nature value areas to achieve the positive management needed if Member States are to meet their Natura 2000 obligations.

- **RECOMMENDATION 12: from the beginning of the 2007-13 period Natura 2000 sites and other high nature value farmland should have priority for agri-environment schemes targeted at management of these areas for biodiversity, including birds; as Natura 2000 compensation payments are implemented, the flexibility available to Member States should be used to ensure that there are no gaps in this coverage (either geographically or in time).**

Less Favoured Area payments have taken a large share of Axis 2 budgets, often with few environmental conditions attached to the payments. Many of these areas have high nature value traditional farming systems and, if LFA payments are to remain a significant element of the budget, it is important that they support management for biodiversity.

- **RECOMMENDATION 13: LFA payments and their attached conditions should be structured in a way that supports and encourages high nature value management for the benefit of birds, and discourages intensification where this would damage biodiversity.**

### **16.3 Is the design of agri-environment schemes and measures fit for the purpose of safeguarding and managing farmland habitats for the conservation of farmland birds?**

Agri-environment schemes targeted at other environmental objectives could, with minor modifications, often also be of significant to birds without in any way compromising the original objective. This could be particularly effective where schemes are targeted at intensively farmed land.

- **RECOMMENDATION 14: all entry level and horizontal agri-environment schemes should have basic bird conservation measures as part of the scheme design - for example, retention and management of small landscape features on organic farms; use of nectar and seed producing plants and favourable mowing regimes for grass buffer strips; selection of seed mixes favoured by birds for winter cover crops.**

The management needs of some Annex 1 birds are complex and may be very specific. The most successful agri-environment schemes for birds have been designed by environmental experts and delivered with the expert assistance (sometimes unpaid) of staff in protected areas and environmental NGOs. In contrast, there were many examples of agri-environment schemes intended to benefit birds which had failed for a number of reasons, including poorly designed management requirements, unattractive payments rates and lack of support and advice from advisory staff.

- **RECOMMENDATION 15: where agri-environment schemes are targeted at the needs of specific birds or groups of birds, expert environmental advice should be sought and followed by all involved - scheme designers, advisory staff, farmers and paying agency staff; failure in any one of these four links may jeopardise the effectiveness of the whole scheme.**

- **RECOMMENDATION 16:** some flexibility should be allowed to delivery staff to adjust management requirements to the needs of particular species or to regional differences in farming systems, climate and habitats.
- **RECOMMENDATION 17:** greater priority should be given to using non-productive investments to support agri-environment schemes for habitat management for birds (for example to create ponds or small wetland areas, to provide nest boxes and perching poles).

The threat of land abandonment and the lack of grazing livestock will continue to be a major problem for agri-environment schemes targeted at grassland.

- **RECOMMENDATION 18:** support should be provided for re-introduction of grazing on abandoned high nature value land in a way that assists farmers to acquire livestock when they have none.
- **RECOMMENDATION 19:** payment rates for high nature value farming systems should reflect the real costs of farming land that would otherwise be abandoned, rather than simply taking account of income foregone.

#### **16.4 What are the barriers to delivering appropriate, targeted and effective agri-environment measures for the conservation of farmland birds?**

A major cause of failure of 2004-06 agri-environment schemes has been lack of biodiversity expertise in farm advisory services and paying agencies. This can have a damaging multiplier effect because if advisers do not understand habitat management schemes they are unlikely to promote them or to give appropriate technical advice or training to farmers; if paying agency staff cannot identify habitats or make judgements about management for biodiversity it is impossible to provide effective controls. In some Member States farmers are very supportive of agri-environment objectives but in others there is a prevalent view among farmers and advisors that agri-environment schemes as just another form of subsidy.

- **RECOMMENDATION 20:** in seven of the nine Member States studied, significant and urgent effort and investment by Ministries of Agriculture is needed to improve the biodiversity expertise of farm advisers. The national parks and other protected areas often provide good models of agri-environment delivery. These institutions, together with environment ministries, academics and NGOs should be considered as potential sources of contract trainers for advisory services and paying agencies.
- **RECOMMENDATION 21:** in all nine Member States, similar urgency and effort is needed to improve the biodiversity expertise of paying agency control staff.
- **RECOMMENDATION 22:** where farmers and their representatives are not supportive of agri-environment objectives, efforts should be made to gain this support by explaining why the management of farmland for biodiversity is a priority for EU funding and how their businesses can benefit both directly and indirectly.

Lack of administrative capacity and experience has contributed to difficulties in delivering agri-environment schemes in some Member States.

- **RECOMMENDATION 23:** priority should be given to providing adequate staff and other resources (e.g. digital maps of high nature value habitats) required for delivery of agri-environment schemes.
- **RECOMMENDATION 24:** arrangements for co-operation should be established between agricultural advisory/delivery staff and government environmental experts (who may be based locally), to ensure effective and accurate delivery of targeted agri-environment habitat management schemes.

Some farmers have been unable to join agri-environment schemes because of land tenure problems - this is an issue for many farmers maintaining important bird habitats through low-intensity grazing on grassland owned by someone else. A new concern is pressure from some active livestock farmers to make absentee owners of grasslands ineligible for agri-environment and LFA payments if they manage grasslands only by mowing; if landowners are excluded from Axis 2 support these valuable grassland bird habitats may be abandoned.

- **RECOMMENDATION 25: agri-environment support should be provided for the management of high nature value grasslands which are common grazing areas used by farmers who do not own the land.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 26: agri-environment, Natura 2000 and LFA payments should be available to any land occupier who can meet the management requirements for high nature value farmland, whether or not the land is used for agricultural production; this would including tenants, owner occupiers who live elsewhere and owners of shared grazing or cropping rights.**

### **16.5 What is the effect of other CAP policies on the delivery of effective agri-environment schemes for the conservation of farmland birds?**

The new GAEC baseline for agri-environment, Natura 2000 and LFA payments has the potential to provide more effective support for habitat management than the existing GFP, simply because both direct payments and Axis 2 support are at risk if farmers fail to comply with GAEC requirements. However, if existing biodiversity requirements in GFP are not transferred to GAEC the baseline may be weakened. This study has revealed that the effect of GAEC cross-compliance on agri-environment biodiversity objectives seems to have been underestimated, and that in many cases little attention has been paid to the requirement (in the framework for defining GAEC) to avoid the deterioration of habitats and the need to set standards for retention of landscape features.

- **RECOMMENDATION 27: effective bird conservation measures (including those now in GFP) should be included in GAEC requirements from 2007, for example the retention of small landscape features and ponds, and the use of bird friendly mowing techniques for grassland.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 28: where land is in an agri-environment contract that has specific habitat management requirements these should automatically take precedence over standard GAEC habitat management requirements (if there is a conflict between the two), without penalties being applied.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 29: the control of GAEC requirements, especially habitat protection measures, should be improved where necessary to ensure that cross-compliance provides an effective baseline for agri-environment schemes.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 30: national rules on the maintenance of permanent grassland should be revised, where necessary, to provide effective protection for all high nature value grassland; these rules should be properly enforced.**

Despite the Commission's Guidelines on maximising synergies between and within Axes and avoiding potential conflicts, this study has revealed proposals for Axis 1 and Axis 2 measures in 2007-13 that are, in some Member States, in conflict with the aims of agri-environment measures in the same programme.

- **RECOMMENDATION 31: EAFRD funds should not be used to support activities that will destroy or degrade existing farmland habitats for birds or other high nature value farmland.**
- **RECOMMENDATION 32: administrative safeguards should be put in place to ensure that such damage is avoided, particularly in the case of support for**

**improvements to drainage, other investments in modernising agricultural holdings, land consolidation schemes, afforestation of farmland and support for energy crops.**

High nature value farming systems are at risk in almost all Member States. Ensuring the long term survival and development of these low-input, low productivity farming systems in the face of economic and political pressures to convert to larger scale conventional farming will need well designed and funded agri-environment schemes supported by other EAFRD measures.

- **RECOMMENDATION 33: to ensure the protection and development of high nature value farming systems Member States should support agri-environment measures in these areas with coherent packages of EAFRD funding from the other three Axes targeted at the specific economic and social problems and needs of high nature value farming communities.**

The Farmland Bird Index is proposed as a biodiversity impact indicator for EAFRD but few Member States have yet prepared an evaluation programme for their 2007-13 agri-environment schemes.

- **RECOMMENDATION 34: high priority should be given to designing and setting up national evaluation programmes capable of measuring the impact of individual agri-environment schemes on the achievement of quantified targets for population change of key bird species (see recommendation 11 above) and capable of providing information to guide the adjustment of these schemes and their delivery systems where necessary.**

## **16.6 Conclusions**

It is clear from this study that efforts were made in the current RDPs in several (but not all) Member States to prioritise, design and implement agri-environment schemes for birds, with some notable successes but also significant failures and missed opportunities. Some of these problems were the result of lack of experience or resources, and the agri-environment schemes during 2004-06 have been, in some countries, effectively a pilot programme. There are striking differences among the Member States in their response to this experience. Some are refining and extending agri-environment measures for birds but others are proposing to abandon rather than improve the limited bird conservation measures now available, often in favour of schemes that are more popular with farmers but of less benefit to biodiversity.

If the decline in populations of key farmland birds is to be reversed, and the high nature value habitats on which they depend are to be properly managed for biodiversity, it is clear that many of the nine Member States will have to make significant changes to their current proposals for the design, funding and delivery of agri-environment and other EAFRD measures in the 2007-13 period.

This is a matter of concern not just for the individual Member States but for the EU as a whole - conservation of farmland birds in the new Member States will be critical to achieving EU objectives on Natura 2000 and biodiversity decline because these nine Member States hold such large proportions of declining Annex 1 farmland birds and high nature value habitats, relative to their area of agricultural land.

