

## A truly nature friendly investment – support for the development of Blooming meadows



*Vascular plant diversity in an EU protected grassland habitat. Photo: LIFE IP LatViaNature*

Natural grasslands, or the EU's protected 'grassland' habitats, are true hotspots for Latvia's biodiversity – home to about 500 plant species, 60 species of bird (15 species for which it is the only breeding habitat) and nearly 5,000 invertebrates. Depending on habitat type, a single square metre of Latvian natural grasslands can contain up to 50 or 60 different plant species. Up to 0.5 tonnes of insects, many of which are critical for pollination, can be found in one hectare of meadow, and we are directly dependent on the health and numbers of these insects to be able to grow our own food. Natural meadows also capture and store carbon, regulate flood risks and perform other vital ecosystem services.<sup>1</sup>

During the late 19th and early 20th century, these habitats were widespread and constituted an important part of the traditional local landscapes. This was a result of the existence of many small farms, which managed their lands through livestock grazing and the collection of fodder. These were farming methods without much fertilisation that ensured the perfect conditions for plant and animal biodiversity. Unfortunately, after both world wars these areas started decreasing rapidly, mainly due to the development of more intensive farming methods with grassland improvement (fertilisation and ploughing), the creation of croplands and land abandonment. Nowadays, intensive agriculture, afforestation, land abandonment and improper management continue to be the biggest causes of the loss of these habitats. Currently, of the twelve EU protected habitat types found in Latvia, eleven of them are in an 'unfavorable-bad' status,

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<sup>1</sup> Rūsiņa S. (Ed.), [Protected Habitat Management Guidelines for Latvia. Volume 3. Semi-natural Grasslands. Nature Conservation Agency, Sigulda](#), 83-90.

meaning that they are under grave threat and rapidly declining in area and quality.<sup>2</sup> If a hundred years ago these meadows took up a third of the country's territory, today they are preserved on only 0.9 per cent, approximately 60,000 hectares, of Latvia's land surface.<sup>3</sup>

The preservation of these natural areas is highly dependent on the farmers and landowners who manage and maintain them, as these areas can only exist today with proper management. In Latvia, farmers can apply for rural support payments from the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) funds through the Rural Support service. So far this support has only been available for those grasslands that already qualify as EU protected habitats and meet certain criteria – such as a specific plant species' composition, soil characteristics and proper management. However, the latest data from habitat monitoring shows that there are more than 15,500 additional hectares of grasslands with the potential to become EU protected habitats. If restored and managed accordingly, these could increase the area of EU protected grasslands in Latvia by 26 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, they have not been able to receive proper support from the state or the EU. A new pilot programme, however, is designed specifically to help these grasslands and the landowners managing them.

## Blooming meadows – a new approach

A new pilot programme developed by the LIFE integrated LatViaNature project 'Blooming meadows' aims to gradually increase biodiversity in potentially biologically valuable grasslands that have not been ploughed for some time and where characteristics of a natural grassland have started to return. The goal is to help the grasslands achieve the status of an EU protected habitat, which would allow the manager of the grasslands to receive continuous support from CAP funding in the future. The support includes consultations and expertise from grassland habitat experts, as well as financial aid.<sup>5</sup>

## Governance, stakeholder collaboration and financing

The lead partner of the project LIFE IP LatViaNature is the Nature Conservation Agency. The total cost of the project is EUR 19.49 million, with EUR 11.69 million coming from the EU's LIFE programme and EUR 7.79 million from the Latvian Environmental Protection Fund of the State Regional Development Agency and the project partners' funding. The project is implemented by a team of ten organisations representing both the public and non-governmental sectors, including scientific institutions. The support in this particular scheme has been marked for 675 hectares of permanent grasslands across 70 farms which have been carefully selected from all over Latvia as part of an open call and selection process. The grasslands range in area from 0.6 to 30 hectares and include both pastures and meadows. EUR 405 000 is available for support to farmers over the four-year period.

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<sup>2</sup> Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia, [Ziņojums Eiropas Komisijai par biotopu \(dzīvotņu\) un sugu aizsardzības stāvokli Latvijā: Novērtējums par 2013.-2018. gada periodu](#), accessed 11 December, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia, [Dabas skaitīšanas dati: Latvijā vissliktāk šobrīd klājas zālājiem, arī pārējām biotopu grupām nepieciešama pārdomāta ilgtermiņa apsaimniekošana](#), skaitamdabu.gov.lv, accessed 11 December 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia, [Informatīvais ziņojums "Par Eiropas Savienības nozīmes aizsargājamo biotopu izplatības un kvalitātes apzināšanas rezultātiem un tālāko rīcību aizsargājamo biotopu labvēlīgas aizsardzības stāvokļa nodrošināšanas un tautsaimniecības nozaru attīstības interešu sabalansēšanai"](#), skaitamdabu.gov.lv, 16 May 2023.

<sup>5</sup> LIFE IP LatViaNature, [The pilot programme Blooming Meadows launched to increase grassland biodiversity](#), latvianature.daba.gov.lv, accessed 11 December 2023.



Photo: LIFE IP LatViaNature

In comparison to other rural support programmes in Latvia, this initiative does not disburse funds only according to work done (such as relying on the fact that the grass is cut or animals are grazing), but considers the results achieved. The amount of funding for a particular grasslands is reassessed every year (although a certain pre-agreed baseline is maintained) depending on changes in grassland structure that takes place during the period of the support, such as the presence of natural grassland plant indicator species, changes in the area covered by invasive or expansive species, litter layer, amount of shrubs and other characteristics that signal that the management is focused in the right direction – towards biodiversity. When farmers applied for support to protect their grasslands, they could decide if the amount of funding they received would depend solely on the results of their conservation activities or would be judged both on results as well as specific management actions taken. If they agree to the funding being tied only to the results, the farmers can choose which actions to implement on their grasslands and how often to do them, based on expert advice and their own understanding. This option requires no compulsory management activities, but the payments depend solely on the result. The other option is a combined approach which involves minimum compulsory management measures (such as the removal of excess bushes) that have been agreed upon in the grassland management plan, but still accounts for the actual results.<sup>6</sup>

### Close farmer-expert collaboration

To assess changes in the grasslands' biodiversity, a crucial part of the action is monitoring. This task is done not only by experts, but also by farmers themselves. They learn the plant species and monitor changes in their grassland over time using a unified methodology. Collaboration and an ongoing exchange of information occur between the farmers and project experts during the vegetation period for help with

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

species identification, advice on best management practices and so on. An app allows farmers to easily input the data they collect during monitoring and identify plant species. This is the first time the result-based payment approach<sup>7</sup> is being piloted in Latvia, based on experience in other European countries such as Ireland, the UK, Romania, Slovenia, Germany, Estonia and Lithuania.



*Educational seminars for the participants of the Blooming meadows programme. Photo: LIFE IP LatViaNature*

## Hope for the future of mainstreaming biodiversity

During this initiative, a significant amount of experience is being gathered on the best practices for collaboration between farmers and nature conservation experts. A real novelty in Latvia is also the project's focus on potentially biologically valuable grasslands, whose development has not received any large-scale incentives or support until now. In this context, these areas are on the cliff's edge at the moment, since EU grassland habitats mostly form in areas with relatively poor agricultural soil, which are also the prime candidates for afforestation, especially in the context of climate change mitigation actions and support schemes.

There is a huge interest and potential for replication: 240 farmers representing a total area of 2,500 hectares of land applied to this project. We hope that in the future, similar support programmes could be mainstreamed into Common Agriculture Policy support or other programmes or schemes that support biodiversity.

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<sup>7</sup> Result based payments network, [About result based payments](#), *Result based payments network*, accessed 11 December 2023.

## A broader benefit

Biodiverse grasslands offer not only ecosystem services, such as pollination, ecosystem balance and picturesque landscapes, but also provide various products that can directly benefit the farmer managing them and the local economy. The support for the development of biodiverse grasslands can give an extra incentive for rural communities to be able to earn decent income and maintain their rural lifestyles. As a complimentary activity in the LIFE IP LatViaNature project, a natural grassland product label is currently being developed, which aims to both create new business opportunities and grassland products and promote the protection of semi-natural grasslands.<sup>8</sup>



Examples of products from natural grasslands. Photos: Latvian Fund for Nature



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<sup>8</sup> LIFE IP LatViaNature, [Pļavu īpašnieki aicināti pieteikties jaunam dabisko pļavu produktu zīmolam](https://www.latvianature.daba.gov.lv), [latvianature.daba.gov.lv](https://www.latvianature.daba.gov.lv), accessed 11 December 2023.