

Bulgaria innovation example 2

LINBUL FARM: AN HNV FARM NEAR THE SKY AND ONLINE SALES OF GRASS FED BEEF

Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP)

www.step-bg.bg/en/

- **Location:** Petrohan area (1400 m a.s.l.), Western Stara Planina, Bulgaria
- **HNV system:** Extensive grazing, beef cattle on rough upland pastures
- **Scale of operation:** The farm manages 40 ha with 60 suckler cows
- **Timespan:** Created in 2010 with 30 cows
- **Keys to success:** Farmers enthusiasm, commitment and persistence, use of agri-environment HNV support and Natura 2000 support, on-line sales of the meat



Figure 1

Problems addressed by this example

The innovation is a response to the need to utilize feasibly the alpine HNV grasslands. The usual practice in the 2000-2006 period was that these grasslands were abandoned and encroachment process and loss of important habitats occurred. The introduction of new farming system (beef cows) plus the new rotation grazing techniques contributed to the conservation of more than 300 ha of HNV farmland. The online sales are a new tool for marketing the produce of the farm.

Story in a nutshell

Both Linbul farm owners (Pavlin and Sonya) come from the construction business. When creating the farm they decided to raise free range beef cows in a country and area where the majority of the cows are dairy ones and the consumption of veal and beef meat is limited (not traditional). The first year they finished dairy bulls for slaughtering to explore the climate and the grass and their effect on the cows. Their main aim was to create a herd of beef suckler cows by finishing the offspring. They bought their first 30 Aberdeen Angus cows in the autumn of 2011. Currently they have 60 beef cows and manage 40,5 ha of municipal HNV grassland. The farmer is applying rotational grazing system and believes that this makes the cows happier, improves the value of the grassland and the quality of the meat. They are processing and selling on-line the meat to customers in Sofia. The farm has its own blog (<https://petrohan.wordpress.com/>) and facebook page where Pavlin and Sonya share their active position on the continuous changes in Bulgarian legal acts and procedures that have negative impact on the HNV grasslands systems. For Bulgaria, living and working in a farm outside the settlement is an innovation in itself. The farmer believes that it is an innovation for Europe to rear young beef fed only by grass without corn. The farmers think that they have succeeded to motivate other young families to try their lifestyle and way of farming.



Figure 2 Free range grazing of Linbul cows



Figure 3



What does Linbul farm achieve for HNV farming?

- The farmer restored 300 ha of common HNV grasslands which after 5 years were let out to another farmer. Now he is managing and restoring other 40 ha of municipal HNV farmlands.
- The farmer is one of the first participants in the Agri-environmental scheme for maintenance of HNV grasslands. He suffered from the improper functioning of the LPIS system and the implementation of the “famous” eligibility rule of ‘50 trees and bushes per ha’.
- The farmer is sharing his position openly and tries to influence the decision makers to introduce the necessary changes in the grasslands legislation and implementation procedure in favor of the extensive grazing and livestock breeding.



Figure 4 Pavlin and his guarding dog



Figure 5 Their daughter already helps with farm activities



Figure 6 Pavlin always participates in on the farm trainings

Achievements

The overall achievements of the innovation are the introduction of new farming techniques for beef cattle; promotion of rotational grazing as a farm technique, including changes in the initial rules of the Paying agency that wanted to have grasslands as in a golf field during all seasons; restoration and management of HNV grasslands in remote alpine area; participation in/organization of joint activities with locals, changing the status quo – strengthening local human capital and networking; on-line sales and marketing of meat products; tasty veal meat from grass-fed cattle; blog and facebook followers.

Economics of HNV farming

The innovation is a good example of how dedicated farmers can survive and develop their farms in a HNV mountain area outside the villages. They motivate other families that the sustainable and nature friendly approach can be successful. Currently the socio-economic viability of the farm is stabilised, but it is still dependent on the direct payments and Natura 2000 payments. Maintaining the HNV grasslands and the amazing landscape in the area is also a precondition for developing alternative tourist activities in the region.

Maintaining or improving HNV values

The farmer was one of the first participants in the Agri-environmental scheme for maintenance of HNV grasslands. He spent 5 years (2009-2016) maintaining and restoring the rented municipal HNV grasslands in Petrohan area. When his contract with the municipality expired he was not allowed to rent the same grasslands. He was offered to rent 120 ha grasslands fully encroached by juniper. The farmer refused to rent them and currently manages only 40 ha grasslands, all of which are in Natura 2000 area.



How does Linbul farm respond to the HNV LINK innovation themes?

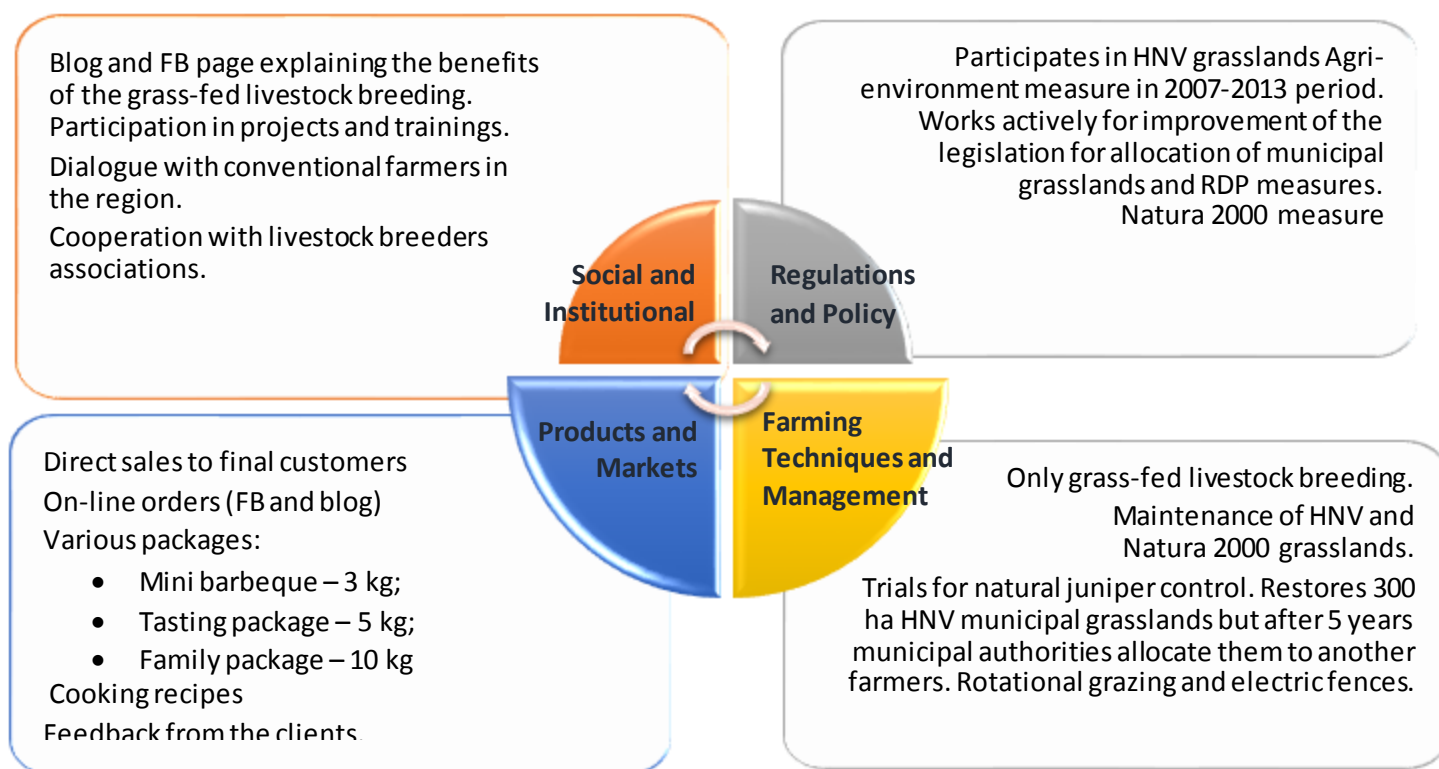


Figure 7 Shows how this innovation addresses the four themes of the HNV-Link innovation framework.

The process that made it happen and critical factors for success

- The main initiators were the farmers that decided to rent municipal grasslands and to rear beef cows. Their main motivation was to live in harmony with nature.
- ICT developments and social networks expansion allowed on-line sales.
- Rising awareness of the society about food quality, taste and safety (Linbul's recipes are very well accepted).

Actors and roles: Before starting the direct sales in 2013, Pavlin and Sonya, together with chefs, bloggers and magazines promoted beef meat taste and quality; which is not consumed traditionally in Bulgaria. There was a lack of trained butchers knowing how to prepare beef steaks, so they had to train them.

Institutional context that made it possible: CAP measures had positive and negative impact on farm development.

Resources: funding, staff etc.: Initially they had 1 co-worker that helped them. Currently they manage the farm only within the family.

Critical factors for success: The key success factor is the motivation and decisiveness of the farmer. He is sharing his position openly and tries to influence the decision makers to introduce the necessary changes in the legislation and its procedures in favour of extensive grazing and livestock breeding. Implementation of AEM and Natura 2000 measure (it is stated that socio-economic viability of the farm is dependent on them) despite the heavy administrative procedures.

Limiting factors, actual/potential problems, and how could they be overcome? Institutional and administrative procedures, especially changes in procedures for renting municipal grasslands by livestock farmers, not allowing them to continue managing the same grasslands after the first contract expired. Pavlin has again to start cleaning the newly rented grasslands, without long-term guarantee what will happen when his new contract expires. This is one of the reasons why he is currently applying for the Natura 2000 annual payments instead of undertaking new long-term agri-environment commitments for which he cannot secure the same pastures in the long-term.

Lessons learnt from this innovation example, and its potential replication

- Farmers' commitment, skills and personal belief are crucial for maintaining a HNV farm and farming systems
- Education, self-training and training and knowledge sharing are needed to improve the understanding of the High Nature Value grasslands and their maintenance requirements.

Overall lessons from this example, especially from point of view of HNV farming?

A key lesson is that farmers' commitment, skills and personal belief are crucial for maintaining an HNV farm and farming system. Pavlin really works in harmony with the nature and does not save his efforts to change the existing legal framework in favour of nature friendly grazing practices.

The constant changes in the existing legislation often demotivate farmers. For example, the lack of a provision giving a priority access to the municipal grasslands to farmers that managed them previously, demotivated them to improve the grasslands and prevent the encroachment.

Education and knowledge sharing are a key factor and driving force for the innovation described. Pavlin and his family invest and continuously improve their knowledge about HNV farming, marketing and cooking. They are open-minded and participate in projects with researchers, different field visits and discussions with farmers. They are willing to share this knowledge and to educate the others along the food chain – consumers, chefs, butchers and local farmers, even if with different opinion.

Is the innovation unique to its territory and its characteristics, or is it replicable in other areas?

The innovation could be replicated in other HNV grassland areas.

Could it be rolled out on a bigger territorial scale?

The innovation can be replicated nationally.

What would be needed to do this successfully?

Motivation and enthusiasm of young farmers and a different life-style in harmony with nature.

Links:

<https://petrohan.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/LinbulFarm/>

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