



National Rural Network – EIP-AGRI FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Project Name/Title

EIP-AGRI Focus Group - Profitability of Permanent Grassland

Context

In short Permanent Grassland is defined as “land used which grows grasses and or herbaceous forage naturally either self-seeded or through cultivation which hasn’t been included in the crop rotation of the holding for more than five years. Permanent Grassland may also include shrubs and/or trees which can be grazed provided that the grasses and other herbaceous forage remain predominant (EIP-AGRI, 2016, p.4). According to statistics from 2012 - European Permanent grassland stretches over 60 million hectares with the highest percentage of Utilised Agricultural Area found in Ireland (80%). However overall European percentage of Utilised Agricultural Area in Permanent grassland has declined as a result of afforestation, intensification and or abandonment. Afforestation and abandonment practices are becoming more common across European agricultural areas effecting livestock production systems and the ecosystem services provided by Permanent grassland included biodiversity initiatives, sequestration and scenic living landscapes which consequently effect tourism and agri-tourism efforts. As a result the maintenance of permanent grassland areas became one of the priorities of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in particular through the greening payments scheme. Consequently, the above aspects resulted in the creation of this focus group.

The Focus Group

This focus group researched the profitability of permanent grassland and in particular how to manage it in a way which combines carbon sequestration, biodiversity and profitability. This focus group consisted of 20 experts – the focus group evaluated the current situation of European permanent grasslands and researched sustainable innovative ways to increase their productivity for farmers.

Priorities of the Focus Group

The main priorities of the focus group were as follows:

- To research and outline the main farming systems which use permanent grassland.
- To gather practices which improve the productivity and efficiency in both agricultural production systems (milk and meat) both for intensive and extensive farming systems – examples include enhanced fertilisation management, more efficient grazing-mowing patterns and ICT at farm level for more efficient management
- To collate grassland management practices which benefit and increase animal welfare, health and productivity.
- To pinpoint good practices of grassland management and composition which enables the growth and development of superior and functional agricultural products.



- To research the main characteristics relating to grassland management with biodiversity and carbon footprint and to list examples which
- To account for failure factors which reduce the use of the use of the identified techniques/systems by farmers and create solutions of how to overcome these factors.

Activities or Areas (of the FG)

As this is a very broad topic the focus group researched the subject of increasing permanent grassland sustainability and productivity into 7 main aspects these included:

1. To define grassland typology with regards biodiversity and productivity
2. To achieve grassland production and quality which meets all animal welfare needs
3. The focus group set out benchmarking grassland dry matter production and reviewing its utilisation at both national and regional European levels.
4. Researching increased grassland functionality by the diversification of sward composition
5. The focus group researched a means of increasing resource efficiency in order to improve permanent grassland profitability and sustainability
6. To focus on the Differentiation of grass-based products which can get higher market value in doing so linking quality traits and management practices which are related to ecosystem services
7. The focus group reviewed a Life cycle assessment which evaluates the environmental impacts of grassland-based systems by implementing Life Cycle Thinking (LCT)

Recommendations

Recommendations included:

Grazing Management: With regards Farm Planning – to integrate the Spring rotation planner into agricultural grassland management. To use grass budgeting to ration agricultural grass supply. To apply grazing patterns which provide a heterogeneous landscape.

Cutting for hay/silage/haylage in relation to farm planning to give priority to herbage feed (e.g. fresh grass, hay, haylage, silage) compared to (food) feed grains (e.g. cereal, pulses, maize), because it provides a better grazing system and flexibility at farm level.

Animal health/welfare - efficient use of medicines and include animal health and welfare as a central element of the grazing system. As a result to maximizing production, reducing the use of medicines, impact on local biodiversity and reproductive challenges.

Knowledge transfer – establish new strategies to make grassland management an attractive farming activity for younger generations. To improve the knowledge transfer to farmers about farm management options such as seed mixtures, fertilisers, amendments, weed control, grazing regime, type and density of trees through agroforestry practices. Doing this by using innovative informative tools that are developed and work to local conditions for example SAFE family programs.



Lessons

The focus group concluded that future multidisciplinary investigations on the different types of permanent grassland and plant species are needed.
Regarding Mediterranean grassland - the creation of well-adapted species and varieties to those habitats needs to be developed.
An increase effort in on-farm experimentation and knowledge transfer to farmers is needed concentration on the correct use of the different management strategies adapted to the local situations and climates which considers sites and landscape scales.

Key Words

- Permeant Grassland
- Afforestation
- Intensification
- Biodiversity
- Sustainability
- Grassland topology
- Common Agricultural Policy
- Carbon sequestration
- Multifunctionality
- Land Recording Mechanisms (LRM)
- Ecosystem services
- Agro-ecosystems
- Conservation
- Conjugated Linoleic Acids
- Dry matter
- Decision Support Systems
- Protected Geographical Indication
- Utilised Agricultural Area
- Life Cycle Assessment
- Life Cycle Thinking
- LPIS Land Parcel Identification Systems

Further information

Website	https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en
Additional info sources, links Full EIP-AGRI Report link	https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/content/profitability-permanent-grassland

Report compiled by Dr Shane Conway – NUI Galway/Irish NRN

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