How can policy makers work with farmers to encourage and enable widespread adoption of more sustainable permanent grassland management practices?

Objective: To understand farmers' attitudes, opportunities, and barriers related to adopting sustainable Permanent Grassland (PG) systems, with a focus on ecosystem service provision. Research encompassing different farming intensity types, biogeographic regions, and national contexts across five European countries (UK, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, and the Czech Republic) was conducted.

Methodology: 373 semi-structured farm interviews were conducted on circa 75 farms in each country. The farms were included to cover diverse livestock, intensity types, and production methods. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected using integrated behavioural models from social psychology and analysed thematically using Nvivo software and through multivariate data analysis.

Key Findings:

- Without policy change, most farmers plan to continue current practices to maintain their current benefits. For those farmers planning changes, both intensification and extensification were being considered. In terms of willingness to adopt new land management practices, farmers who had not changed land practices in the last 5 years were much less likely to consider adopting new practices in the coming years.

- For some farmers, decreased economic support would represent a “tipping point” in their decision making, resulting in land abandonment. Conversely, environmental factors such as promoting biodiversity, ensuring water supply and saving endangered species are factors which motivate some farmers to continue managing their lands. Across all countries, learning new skills was seen as the biggest challenge associated with implementing changes needed to improve and maintain PG and ES.

Policy Implications:

- National and regional policies should reflect priorities for PG management to deliver improved ES delivery appropriate for each geographical, economic and cultural context.

- Policies could consider that adopting new technology and innovations can provide opportunities for the agri-food sector to become more resilient and sustainable with fewer negative environmental impacts.

- Policy support can be linked to the transformation from direct subsidies to implementation of a new approach focusing on land capability and ‘working with nature’ to reduce negative environmental impacts and increase the overall sustainability and viability of the agri-food sector.

- Demonstration of effectiveness, advice and subsidies may be needed to facilitate the change.

Key References:

Tindale et al (submitted). Tipping points and farmer decision-making in European permanent grassland (PG) agricultural systems.

Jin, S. et al (submitted) Farmer Identities and Permanent Grassland Management: Evidence from Five European Biogeographic Zones.

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