

Agri-environmental schemes need co-ordinating across landscapes

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According to a recent viewpoint article, future agri-environmental schemes (AES) can more effectively pay for the provision of ecosystem services at a landscape level if they are prepared, designed and implemented in a collaborative and coordinated manner.

Certain ecosystems must be managed at the landscape scale, rather than at the local or farm scale, to optimise the provision of ecosystem services, such as freshwater and habitats for a wide range of biodiversity.

Current agri-environmental schemes (AES) that compensate farmers for managing land in an environmentally friendly way are typically targeted at the local level of management. This often results in uncoordinated actions across the landscape level. This article argues that, to be more effective, future AES must be planned, designed and implemented at landscape scale. It presents its viewpoint based on insights from a range of participatory agri-environmental policy making, spatial planning and collaborative approaches to environmental management around the world.

Large-scale management of ecosystems is challenging, not least because of the collaboration required to coordinate (across many areas) the actions of all stakeholders, including land managers, government bodies, experts, policymakers and members of the public. Difficulties

arise from the lack of collaboration across different areas and, for example, when collaboration is voluntary rather than underpinned by legislation, which can result in lower levels of commitment from those involved. In addition, mistrust between groups of stakeholders can hamper effective collaboration.

A key element of future AES is participation by all stakeholders. New programmes should incorporate local knowledge, in addition to expert views, to build trust and to encourage acceptance of the schemes. AES are more likely to succeed if stakeholders are included in the discussions and negotiations from the beginning.

Schemes need to be evaluated. Evidence for the impact of the schemes should be decided in advance, appropriate monitoring schemes should be developed and information collected across all relevant scales of management. However, if the chosen indicators perform inadequately, they should be reconsidered. Compliance with the scheme will be increased if land managers agree with the way the indicators are selected and measured.

Sufficient funding is needed for the collaborative programmes and is as central to the success of the schemes as payments to the farmers. However, to ensure farmers join the scheme and are willing collaborators, payment levels to farmers need to be high enough to compete with other opportunities for land use and other sources of income available to farmers.

Moreover, the design and implementation of future programmes should incorporate feedback mechanisms that support the flow of communication among all groups of stakeholders, especially the views from the grassroots level. Close relationships created across all management levels will enhance the ability of ecosystems to provide essential services. Overall, they propose a rethink of the design and implementation of payments for agri-environmental services that encourage collaborative management and focus on process as much as outcomes.