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Role of extension service in implementation of agricultural and environmental programmes in Podkarpacie region

Abstract. Importance of extension services in the realization of agricultural and environmental undertakings in Podkarpacie region is assessed. Results obtained from the study indicate that farmers in Podkarpacie are actively searching funds for and participating in agricultural and environmental programmes. Agricultural and environment advisors play important role in that process, mainly by organizing training workshops, as well as by preparing respective applications and agricultural and environmental plans.

Key words: advisory, agricultural and environmental programmes, EU Common Agriculture Policy (CAP)

Introduction

Along with social factors, natural and cultural assets belong to those values, for which the rural areas deserve supporting. Thanks to them the villages are worthy alternatives to cities and towns as places for rest, preservation of culture and tradition, and sources of ecological safety. Ecological agriculture, run in a natural manner and essentially without using chemicals, as well as integrated agriculture applying the principles of good agricultural practice, require both direct financial support and information activities [Wilkin et aleni 2005].

Agricultural and environmental programme is ranked among the most important activities in favour of multifunctional and sustainable development of agricultural areas and its launching is obligatory in all EU member countries. This programme is the most important instrument of financial support within the EU Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), consisting in granting financial assistance to farmers who meet the basic environment protection standards and apply pro-ecological production methods [Kociszewski 2006]. Agricultural and environmental activities enable effective integration of environment protection with the agri-economic development in such manner as to minimize any negative effects of agriculture and maximize its positive impact. Advisory services, related to a rational utilization of financial support available from the EU, have a significant role to play in this situation, by communicating correct information and supporting development of agriculture and rural areas, while observing the principles of environment protection. In this context, this study aims at assessing the advisory function in the realization of agricultural and environmental programmes in Podkarpacie region². A questionnaire survey was carried out in the first quarter of 2007 on a sample of 300 farmers

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from the Podkarpackie province. It was designed, among others, to find out the farmers' opinions and their assessment of the possibilities of availing an access to agricultural and environmental programmes in the region where small, semi-subsistence and economically weak farms dominate. The province has merely 1.5% of farms with arable area larger than 15 hectare, whereas the country average of proportion of farms larger than 15 hectare is 10.9%. Farms were selected by quota sampling, with due account taken of the agricultural structure. The research sample structure included a representative sample of farms not receiving direct EU subsidies [N=51], considered economically non viable, i.e. most often not running any agricultural production, or, if any, usually intended for satisfying just own needs, as well as a representative sample of farms which did apply for direct EU subsidies in 2005 [N=249], thus being 'viable' in the sense of conducting agricultural activity. On the basis of the arable land area possessed by farms receiving direct EU subsidies 3 layers were identified, i.e. farms with arable land area from 1.01 do 4.99 hectare [N= 112], from 5 to 9.99 hectare [N=86] and those with 10 hectare and more [N=51]. Opinions of farmers concerning their participation in agricultural and environmental programmes, as obtained from the survey, have been complemented with information obtained in the Podkarpacki Agricultural Extension Service Centre (PODR, in Boguchwała), as well as from the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture (ARMA) in Rzeszów. Moreover, direct interviews with agricultural and environmental advisors employed by the PODR were done.

Characteristics of agricultural and environmental programme as one of the activities of the Rural Development Plan (RDP)

The Common Agricultural Policy of the EU devotes more and more place to the environment protection. One of the financial instruments used by CAP is the Agricultural and Environmental Programme, included in the Rural Development Plan (RDP). It's tasks include, among others, a propagation of good agricultural practice, supporting development of organic agriculture, preserving of areas with a high natural value under risk of degradation, a protection of soils and waters, preserving of genetic stock of the local breeds of farm animals.

The EU funds are one of the basic sources for financing environmental investments in Poland. In the period of 2004-2006 the value of EU funds allotted to the environmental protection in Poland reached approximately 2500 million euro. In the financial perspective for years 2007-2013 the value of the EU funds to be allotted to the environmental protection in Poland will amount to 6000 million PLN [Karpńska 2007]. As mentioned, agricultural and environmental programmes which are continued in the RDP 2007-2013 are most important for the EU countries. The realization of the agricultural and environmental programme should contribute to the sustainable development of rural regions and to the preservation of biodiversity in these areas. The main assumption of the programme is to promote the agricultural production that is run with methods meeting requirements of the natural environment protection. The objective of this activity is to improve the state of natural environment in rural regions, in particular to restore their full value or preserve the state of valuable habitats that are used in agriculture and sustain the biodiversity in rural areas, promote sustainable farming system, sustainable utilization of soil and protection of waters, protection of threatened local races of farm animals and local varieties of cultivated plants.

The agricultural and environmental packages within the framework of the for years 2007-2013 are the following.

- Package 1. *Sustainable agriculture*: consists in rational utilization of natural resources, in order to reduce negative effects of agriculture on the environment.
- Package 2. *Organic agriculture*: covers farms which switch to organic production and organic farms with certificates.
- Package 3. *Extensive durable grassland*: consists in reducing fertilization, number and dates of mowings or intensity of pasturing/grazing.
- Package 4. *Protection of threatened species of birds and natural habitats beyond the Natura 2000 areas*: consists in reducing fertilization, intensity of pasturing /grazing on permanent grassland areas beyond those covered by Natura 2000.
- Package 5. *Protection of threatened species of birds and natural habitats in the Natura 2000 area*.
- Package 6. *Preserving threatened genetic resources of plants in agriculture*: enables protection and perfecting local or traditional varieties of cultivated plants.
- Package 7. *Preserving threatened genetic resources of animals in agriculture*: aims at protection of particularly precious breeds of farm animals.
- Package 8. *Protection of soils and waters*.
- Package 9. *Buffer zones*: consist in maintaining the existing buffer zones and baulks between arable fields, in order to reduce contamination of water and soil erosion.

A beneficiary may apply for agricultural and environmental payments when he is a farmer and he commits himself to realizing of an agricultural and environmental programme for a period of minimum 5 years, in accordance with a plan of agricultural and environmental activities, as well as to observing fundamental requirements resulting from the accepted package on the area of his entire farm.

Agricultural and environmental programmes in Podkarpackie region

Support for agricultural and environmental undertakings and improved wellbeing of animals enjoyed much interest all over the country (as many as 72 thousand of applications were submitted) and contributed to improving the environment and landscape of rural areas in Poland. From the information by the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture (ARMA) the Lubelskie province recorded the largest number of 11084 filed and considered applications for activity # 4 for an amount of 74,569,794.5 PLN, whereas the Śląskie province, with 1295 applications for an amount of 12,293,569.9 PLN, showed the lowest interest. Podkarpackie region was ranked in the seventh place in the country with 4351 applications for 46,489,960.2 PLN.

The surveyed farmers from Podkarpackie province were quite actively seeking the EU support. 178 person (i.e. 59.3% of the total surveyed) declared that they availed themselves of the funding available within individual programmes during the period of 2002-2006. Nearly 4% of the surveyed farmers applied for support within the SAPARD programme, approximately 92% of them applied for financial support for their farms within the RDP, including the majority applying for support for agricultural activity in areas with unfavourable conditions (31.7%). Nearly every 10th of the surveyed farmers applied for funds available within the Sector Operating Programme (SOP), financing mainly new investments in farms. More than 21% of the surveyed farmers applied for support for

agricultural and environmental undertakings and wellbeing of animals and they were the same farmers who applied also for direct payments.

According to Zegar [2007] farmers having larger farms and more economic leverage or strength, as expressed by ESU, acquire more EU support than the owners of smaller farms. It is confirmed by the results of author's own research, obtained in Podkarpace region (Fig. 1).

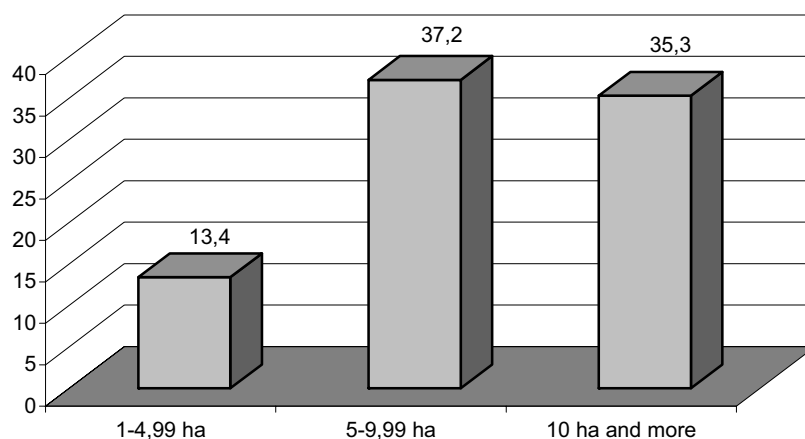


Fig. 1. Participation in the agricultural and environmental programmes by surveyed farmers over 2004-2006, by farm acreage groups, %

Source: own study.

However, in Podkarpace, farmers having arable land area from 5 do 10 hectare were most actively applying for support of their farms in the realization of agricultural and environmental programmes. Furthermore, it should be noted that the group of farmers not receiving direct payments [N=51] did not apply for support of any agricultural and environmental undertakings.

The question that seemed interesting was how is the acquiring of financial support for realization of agricultural and environmental programmes related to the economic size of farms. Therefore, the surveyed population of farms was subdivided (Fig. 2) into economic classes (by Economic Size Units, ESU) [Polish... 2006].

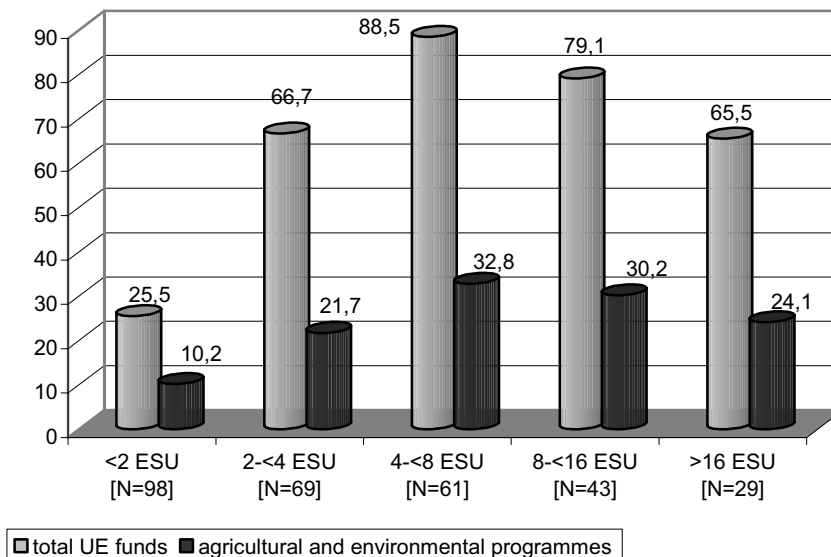


Fig. 2. Percentage of farmers availing themselves of the agricultural and environmental programmes, depending on their farm ESU

Source: own study.

It was found that farmers with higher economic strength (ESU) undertake a broader range of projects realizing agricultural and environmental programmes. However, farmers owning farms of economic strength between 4 and 8 ESU appear to be most active in this field. Also, this group of farmers took advantage of the EU funds available over 2002-2006, i.e. SAPARD, RDP and SPO, at the highest level.

Importance of advisory services for the realization of agricultural and environmental programmes

Extension services are very useful in villages and, after Poland has joined the EU, the expectations concerning their range and quality became much broadened. Broad access to information has a significant effect on making decisions in farm management and in seeking the EU funding. Information is provided to farmers mainly by the employees of the ODR agency of agricultural advisory services. ODRs have well developed organizational structure at local level. Therefore, through their extension officers, they offer farmers help in making correct decisions but, primarily, they provide help in preparing applications. Generally, as confirmed by the research by Miś [2007], the advisors' level of knowledge determines the amounts acquired within the framework of individual EU programmes.

Activities of the ODR agricultural advisory centre in the area of Podkarpackie province (PODR in Boguchwała) consist mainly of help provided to farmers in the realization of agricultural and environmental programmes, through advisory activities by

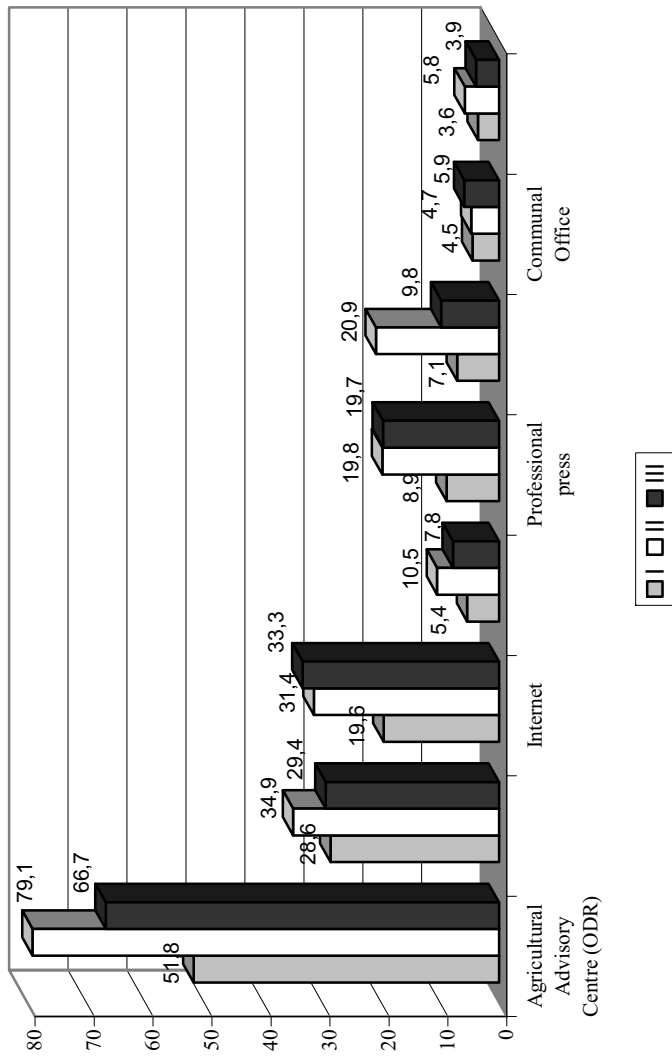
employees trained specifically for this. The agricultural and environmental advisors must complete suitable training organized by the Centrum Doradztwa Rolniczego (*Agricultural Advisory Centre*) in Brwinów and obtain an appropriate certificate. They help farmers through³:

- organizing courses in applying the principles of realizing individual packages, formal requirements, informing on the height/level of financial support, etc.
- preparing of an agricultural and environmental plan and other plans, e.g. fertilization plan which is necessary in the case of package S01, sustainable agriculture
- preparing applications for payments
- assistance to farmers in gathering the obligatory enclosures
- assistance in systematic keeping logs of farming activities and of basic data on animals, including records of agri-technical activities, information on treatments with plant protection chemicals, animal grazing, etc.
- recording of any changes in agricultural and environmental plan
- providing farmers with information about the need of collecting and keeping necessary documents, e.g. the current certificate of a spraying machine, etc.
- in case of realizing the package S02 (organic agriculture) assistance to farmers in preparing filings to a certifying agency and to the Provincial Inspectorate of Commercial Quality of Agricultural Produce and Foods, application for payments and suitable enclosures
- informing farmers of any new EU and national regulations,
- organizing trainings and advising in agricultural and environmental programmes realized within the framework of the RDP programme for 2007-2013.

All the above indicates that advisory institutions provide swift and correct information and consulting and play important role in the field of EU funding absorption by farmers. During author's own research farmers were asked about the basic source of information about funds available in individual RDP activities over the period of 2004-2006, in particular those related to support for agricultural and environmental undertakings. In the farmers' opinions the ODR agricultural extension service centres were the most important channel of information, followed by the media, i.e. press and TV (Fig. 3).

Moreover, the study covered a question whether the farmers used an institutional help when applying for EU funding. As many as 175 farmers, i.e. 58.3% of the total number surveyed, answered with an affirmative 'yes'. The surveyed farmers admitted help by ODRs (56.1% of them), mainly in filling in the application forms and preparing the agricultural and environmental plans. Other institutions, mentioned by farmers as those providing service in their application for EU funding, were ARMA (*Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture*), Forest Inspectorate, Communal Offices and Agricultural Chambers.

³ Prepared on the basis of interview with agricultural and environmental advisors from ODRs in Podkarpace region.



* I – farm with arable land area of 1-4,99 hectare, II – 5-9,99 hectare, III – 10 hectare and more

Fig. 3. Sources of information on funds available within the framework of RDP activity 4 'Support for agricultural and environmental undertakings'
Source: own study.

Conclusions

In summary, we conclude that, as Polish agriculture became an element of the agricultural sector in the EU member states, it acquired access to many support mechanisms that result from the EU Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). The survey has shown that farmers in Podkarpacie with farm size between 5 and 10 hectare of arable land area and farm economic size between 4 and 8 ESU proved to be most effective in the range of agricultural and environmental undertakings in order to raise the competitiveness of their farms. Thanks to trainings and direct advisory services by employees of Agricultural Advisory Centres in the Podkarpackie province farmers did not experienced major problems in filling their application forms.

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