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Exploring how landowners perceive societal requirements regarding voluntary participation in environmental management - using a case of wetland restoration

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Politically and in the public debate there is an increased focus on how private landowners should contribute to nature and the environment by changing their management practices. As this may conflict with landowners' management plans, voluntary agreements have been used to create incentives to participate. Studies have investigated how the design of voluntary agreements influences landowners' willingness to accept voluntary agreements. Less attention has been given to how landowners perceive requirements when society suggests participation in voluntary agri-environmental practices. The aim of this study is to investigate how landowners perceive the rationales behind agri-environmental schemes as a measure of how they perceive requirements from society. Rationales behind agri-environmental schemes explored are; they 1) recognise private property rights 2) benefit the environment 3) modify behaviour 4) are voluntary and 5) offer financial incentives.

To allow for an in-depth study we chose one among many possible cases of environmental management, that is, wetland restoration. Potential wetlands are designated all over Denmark but we selected two specific areas to get a common ground for the interviews. Twenty-three in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 farmers in the case areas.

Preliminary results show that landowners' perceptions of private property rights were that if landowners are given societal responsibilities then they should have financial or other forms of compensation. The landowners questioned the suggested project's ability to reduce nitrogen leakage and wanted to make sure that they are acknowledged for eventual contribution to reduction. Most landowners thought they would have to modify behaviour both within and outside the wetlands. Furthermore, the landowners questioned the voluntariness of the schemes, as compulsory purchase might take place because authorities need to designate wetlands somewhere in order to achieve policy goals. Landowners emphasised the importance of financial compensation while simultaneously criticising the actually offered compensation for being far below market price of the land they lose.

Key words: landowners, agri-environmental schemes, rationales, perception, motivation