

Farmers for a Sustainable Future in the Baltic Sea Region

A farming dimension to sustainable development

The farmers around the Baltic Sea are a part of the northern dimension of Europe. Farming is one of the basic economic activities in this region. The holistic question of integrating the environment and sustainable development into farming is concern of farmers.

Farm leaders representing farmers and their co-operatives in the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea, gathered in Visby in 1998 to discuss the environmental situation of the Baltic Sea. They created the Baltic Farmers Forum for Environment (BFFE) for all farmers in the Baltic Sea region. They concluded that all the sectors involved e.g. industry, agriculture, transport, energy production, communities and private households must take the responsibility to improve the situation of the Baltic Sea. They also presumed that actors within each sector will do their best to achieve this goal.

The Baltic Sea is very important to millions of people in the countries surrounding and depending on this northern brackish water and its bio-system. Not only those countries with waterfront but also those in the neighbourhood and drainage area have an equal interest in the state of the Baltic Sea.

Farmers recognise that agriculture does contribute to the nitrogen and phosphorus run-off on the Baltic sea which causes costs to the environment.

The agricultural sector is vital for all the countries in the Baltic Sea Region. A viable agriculture is an essential part of a sustainable society by guaranteeing food supplies and rural employment, maintaining rural landscape, sheltering many of the terrestrial species and by being a base for sustainable development.

Agriculture varies a lot in the Baltic Sea Region. The level of technology and knowledge, the economic situation and the size of the farms vary from country to country. The climatic conditions differ from a mild climate and high production potentials to very harsh arctic conditions and low production potentials. In spite of this our common goal must be viable and sustainable farming in all countries around the Baltic Sea. The farmers around the Baltic Sea need to co-operate in their own countries, but also work together in co-operation with other institutions and organisations to achieve this goal.

The basics for sustainable farming

The environmental goal means that agriculture has a responsibility to minimise negative effects on the environment in the Baltic Sea Area. To handle this in a sustainable way the farmers need conditions of economical and social sustainability. The EU-membership of the new countries has increased possibilities for using the CAP's environment measures for the agriculture sector.

The conditions for farming provided by society forms the prerequisites for environmentally friendly farming. If the society is reluctant to offer farmers conditions aiming at economical and social sustainability, it will be very difficult to achieve an ecological and sustainable agriculture.

The perspective in sustainable agriculture has been predominantly focused mainly on biological and technical aspects of utilising natural resources and protection of the environment.

This perspective is too narrow and does not consider enough the differences between countries. It is necessary to take a broader approach where the inter linkage between environment, food production, rural development, land ownership and financial resources as well as other economic and policy aspects are taken into consideration.

The restoring process of the environment is long and laborious and must take into account the realities of the bio-system of the Baltic Sea. The key problems that have to be addressed are:

Rural poverty and too low profitability in farming, lack of both financial resources for environmentally motivated investments and knowledge of appropriate techniques and slow privatisation of agricultural land.

It is important to recognise the role of women farmers and young farmers in the work towards sustainable agriculture. It is also necessary to involve farmers and their professional organisations and co-operatives in the process. Any top-down perspective in the implementation of action plans will not be successful without the engagement of the farmers.

The governmental actions often focus on legislating tighter standards. This is normally the cheapest and politically the easiest way to try to solve problems. But mere legislation without sufficient financing of the implementation is inadequate. Both are necessary.

What the governments and administration should do:

- enhance economic viability and sustainable farming in rural areas.
- ensure that coherence exist between the goals determined by society and the allocated economic resources.
- provide good legal framework that stresses goals rather than methods.
- involve farmers in the process of environmental improvement.
- allocate resources for information, training and education.
- support practical advisory services to farmers.
- support investments in animal manure handling.
- encourage cultivation of permanent crops and catch-crops on agricultural land.
- recognise and work with farm organisations.

The commitment and future work of Baltic Sea farmers

At the Haikko conference the farmers of the Baltic Sea region restated their commitment to work towards a sustainable Baltic Sea. The farmers and their organisations have a responsibility themselves to enhance the environmental and sustainability questions. Strong independent farmer organisations play an important role in the efforts to improve the environmental efforts as they are indispensable for a fruitful dialogue between farmers and governments. The farmers organisations can support and advocate environmental considerations and appropriate methods. To do this the farmers' organisations around the Baltic will strengthen their co-operation.

The conference stressed particularly the following aspects:

To fulfil this environmental commitment the farmers need adequate economic and social conditions. Thus the conference call upon the countries within the Baltic Sea Council and the EU to allocate substantial financial resources for environmental and sustainable development measures to address the key problems slowing down the farmers work for the environment.

They also call upon the national governments and their organisations to assume their responsibilities in developing sustainable farming around the Baltic Sea as the step towards a Sustainable Baltic Sea. Farmers are willing to do their utmost to support a sustainable environmental development in agriculture as a part of a sustainable development in the Baltic Sea Region. Farmers are very keen to do this in democratic co-operation with others.

Farmers presume that everybody will do their utmost to join us on the sustainable path.

The main part of the countries involved are the members of the EU which gives those countries new possibilities. But also by working within the HELCOM and Baltic 21 processes one can go forward on the sustainable path in developing their agricultural frameworks.

The process of restoring the environment is long. Therefore, we need more knowledge about the effects of different measures concerning the Baltic Sea. The conference stressed the need to take account of all kinds of environmental loads having an impact on the eco-system of the Baltic Sea. Thus, we need to take into consideration land based run-off as well as airborne and internal inputs of nutrients when evaluating loads affecting the bio-system of the Baltic Sea and forming the suitable remedies.

Concerning the long time it takes to heal the Baltic Sea to a Sustainable Sea one must also take into account of all the historic discharges of the last century and their long impact period on this enclosed brackish bio-system. It means that today the people and the Baltic Sea have to bear also the environmental burden of the past. Nevertheless, farmers are committed to work towards sustainability on a long term basis.

- The relevant goals towards sustainability have to be put in a realistic framework.
- The most urgent step will be cutting of the direct manure discharges.
- Taking care of the environment must be a part of the development of the farms and their production.
- There is a need for different production systems for different types and sizes of farms.
- The national implementation of the farm related EU-environmental legislation should not distort competition.