



**MOVING**  
MOUNTAIN VALORISATION THROUGH  
INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND GREEN GROWTH

**Policy Brief**

# AUSTRIAN ALPS | Lamb from the region of Weiz

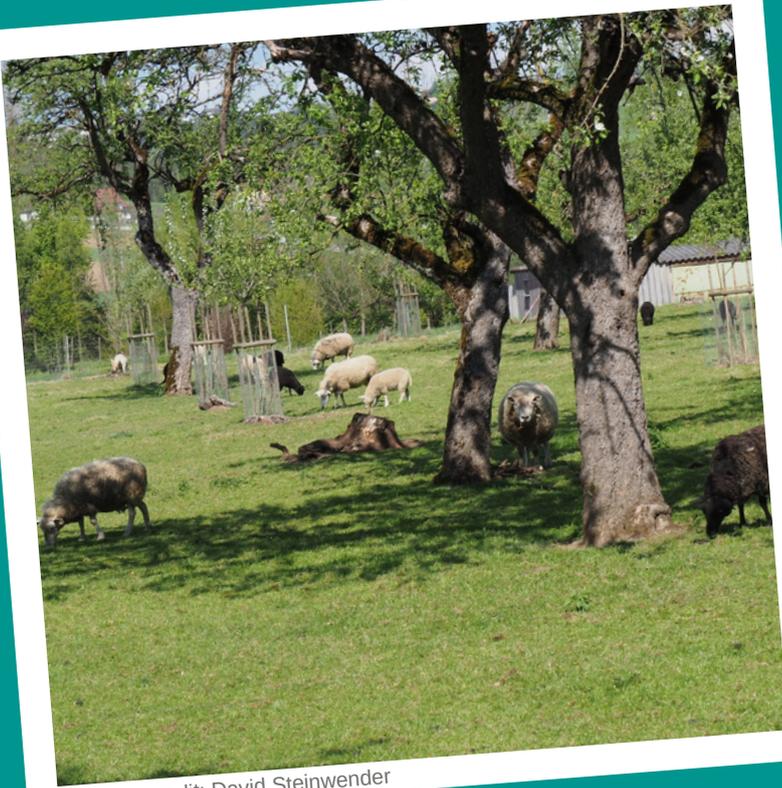


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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 862739

# Austrian Alps: lamb from the region of Weiz

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## Summary

Sheep farming on alpine pastures, which are not suitable for cattle farming, has a long tradition in the mountain farming areas of the Province of Styria.

After the value chain of sheep wool lost importance, innovative sheep farmers recognised a growing trend in demand for high quality lamb. They founded the cooperative 'Weizer Schafbauern' in 1994, and established a successful value chain for meat and dairy products. The cooperative now comprises about 300 farms.

While the marketing of meat and dairy products is well established through various channels and under a common brand, the wool is still underutilised as valuable product. Through the cooperation of sheep farmers with regional climate protection initiatives, research, and regional business actors, innovative products are developed, adding value to sheep farming and contributing to climate change mitigation strategies.

**Know more about the Austrian Alps Reference Region**, its selected value chain and the regional multi-actor platform (MAP), [here](#).

## Key policy messages

- Cooperatives strengthen the collective efforts and innovation capacities
- It is necessary to support:
  - Diversification of marketing and products.
  - Regional embeddedness and networking for integrated regional/rural development and climate protection actions.
  - Cross sectorial integration of value chains.

## 1. The Mountain Reference Region (MRR)

70% of the Austrian territory is defined as mountainous area ('Berggebiet'), mainly covered by the Austrian Alps. In 2016, 71.4% of total farm area (49,6% of agriculturally used area) was located in the mountain area (representing 58.1% of all farms). 66.6% of organic farms were mountain farms in 2019. The share of mountain area per federal states increases from east to west. Some federal states are 100% mountainous regions (Tyrol, Vorarlberg, and almost all of Carinthia and Salzburg). The MRR of the value chain is situated at the south-eastern edge of the Austrian Alps.



Some actors of the value chain (VC) are situated in areas with lower altitude or in the valleys. The selected VC, Lamb from the region of Weiz, is situated within the NUTS-3 region 'Oststeiermark' (AT 224) – political district 'Weiz' (no. 617; corresponding to LAU 1 definition).

The 'Weizer Bergland' extends from the Raab Valley in the west to the Feistritz - Anger area in the east and is bordered by the Passail Basin and the Fischbacher Alps in the north and by the Tertiary of the East Styrian Basin in the south. Karst is the predominant terrain type.

The region of Weiz is characterised by an Illyrian climate. Summers are mostly hot and dry with a very high propensity for (thunder-) storms. The latter are predicted to become stronger in the course of climate change, increasing the number of lightning strikes, hail and floods.

In the mountainous areas of the Weizer Bergland region prevails pasture farming with cattle and sheep for meat, milk and dairy production. The sheep are herded either on alpine pastures or on meadows at an altitude of 400 to 1270 metres above sea level. Some farmers refine herbs, sell fish or honey and other bee products, which are supported by the regional marketing of the LEADER region.

The valleys are characterised by agricultural landscapes. In addition to grassland and arable farming, fruit growing and wine production also play a role. The consequences of climate change are already noticeable.

## 2. Collaboration in the area

Sheep farming in the region of Weiz has been a tradition for centuries, with lamb serving as staple food until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until the 1950s, wool was the main product, later dairy and lamb meat products became increasingly important, while wool started to become a by-product. In the beginning of the 1990s, some innovative sheep farmers recognised the trend towards high-quality lamb and started to market lamb and sheep milk products together. When the local dairy closed down for failing to meet EU standards, the sheep farmers founded a cooperative to run this dairy by themselves. They also put back the local slaughterhouse into operation together with local premium beef producers, free-range pork farmers and two small local butchers. The Weizer sheep farmer [cooperative](#) consists of around 300 farms, most of them selling lamb meat. The number of dairy farmers is consciously limited to avoid oversupply and a subsequent drop in prices.

The foundation of this cooperative was crucial for the survival of the sheep farmers in Weiz for several reasons: a) the cooperative owned dairy and co-owned slaughter-house allows independence and a fair price for the farmers; b) the joint marketing and the introduction of shared branding increased their market power compared to the situation single independent farmers; c) the cooperative has a diversified marketing strategy, including the ongoing development of new products. Their products are sold directly to consumers, to the local gastronomy and through food retailers.



However, the wool is barely used commercially, and only some of the sheep farmers are ambitious enough to further explore innovative ways of generating value from the wool. Currently, a LEADER project on the use of sheep wool in palliative therapy is ongoing, which is accompanied by research partners, in order to explore its usability and therapeutic effectiveness.

The embeddedness of the initiative in the LEADER region 'Almenland & Energieregion Weiz-Gleisdorf' is fruitful for the sheep farming cooperative in several aspects. For instance, the Local Action Group (LAG) supports economic activities that contribute to climate action and adaptation as well as environmental protection and ethics. One example is the support in the marketing of food quality products, such as the label "Määh" of the sheep farmers from Weiz.

### **3. Value chain contribution to sustainability and resilience of the MRR: barriers and opportunities**

As ruminants, sheep emit more greenhouse gases per head than other livestock. Thus, and because of the relevance of the landscape to tourism in the region, sustainability is of high relevance for the sheep farmers from Weiz. Although only 10% of the cooperative's farms are certified organic, they are committed to high animal welfare standards and ecological sustainability characterised by extensive pasture farming, and genetically modified organisms GMO-free feed, which is mainly produced on-farm or sourced from the region. The cooperative has won several national competitions for sustainability, such as recently the 'Trigos' award for regional value creation. Moreover, their enterprise is also certified as a [Climate Alliance Austria business](#) ('Klimabündnis-Betrieb').

The use of wool for commercial purposes has been very limited since the 1950s. The wool is only marketed by one farmer on a large scale, with a few other farmers doing so on a very small scale. Wool is still seen by many of the farmers as mainly a by-product of the necessary sheep shearing. Thus most of the wool is either sold below the costs for shearing to the "Styrian Sheep and Goat Breeding Association", which further sells it to a Belgian producer for insulation material, or it is used for its own purposes (burned for heating, soil fertiliser).

Recently, interest has emerged within one of the two ['Climate and Energy Model Region' initiatives](#) ('Energieregion Gleisdorf-Weiz') within the LEADER region to explore the local potential for wool as fertiliser (e.g. vertical greening of buildings) and insulation material as climate change adaptation measures.

Thereby not only benefits concerning climate relevant aspects could be achieved, but better value could be created for the sheep farmers, and the regional economy as well. The founding of the Weizer Schafbauern cooperative had been an important initiative to secure the persistence viability of sheep farming, which is characterised by small scale extensive farming in the Weizer Bergland region. This also made an important contribution to the preservation of the cultural landscape, especially where cattle are unsuitable for grazing. The regional nature park



covers an area of 25.300 ha, and the specific soil and climatic conditions result in a flora that is characterised by a variety of alpine plants. On the one hand, this special biodiversity of grasses and herbs in the forage and hay of the animals provide the unique taste of the lamb. On the other hand, the extensive grazing of the sheep contributes to the stabilisation of the vegetation cover and to the improvement of the water storage capacity of the soil.

#### 4. Policy relevant considerations

There is substantial awareness about the role of sheep farming in the MRR, and its contribution to landscape conservation, which is linked to cultural heritage, the natural park and tourism as well. However, there is little reference to potential effects of sheep farming/management systems on other ecosystem services, such as biodiversity. This might be of interest to be further explored in the scope of [MOVING](#). That topic could be linked to actual policy strategies, such as the [EC Biodiversity Strategy 2030](#) (presented in 2020 as one of the central initiatives of the European Green Deal). That was considered in the [Austrian government program 2020–2024](#) as well. The goals and measures for biodiversity protection were defined in the [Biodiversity Strategy Austria 2030](#), and in order to support its implementation and the achievement of the goals a biodiversity fund was installed in 2021.

The second policy field of potential interest links to the very recent considerations for the use of wool as material for insulation, as soil fertilizer, and as growing substrate for vertical gardening and wall greening, which would be linked to regional climate protection efforts. Like in other European countries, in its government programme for 2017-2022, the Austrian Federal Government set out a [Bioeconomy Strategy in Austria](#) in order to encourage the potential of knowledge and expertise to be used and to decarbonise the economic system. Linking with this strategy could be of high relevance for the development of innovative products/use of wool. Moreover, the exploration of a circular economy approach might be relevant as well (referent to the [EC Green Deal](#) and [EC Circular Economy Action Plan](#)), as it is gaining attention in Austria as well.

#### Reference

Austrian Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions and Tourism (2020). Grüner Bericht 2020 – Die Situation der österreichischen Land- und Forstwirtschaft.

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