



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

**Policy Brief**

# STARA PLANINA | Public Goods from High Nature Value farmland



Photo credit: Koen de Rijk



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



# Stara Planina: Public Goods from High Nature Value (HNV) farmland

*Authors: Mark Redman (Highclere Consulting) and Vyara Stefanova (STEP)*

## Summary

Traditional High Nature Value (HNV) farming in the Western Stara Planina region of Bulgaria has created and maintained a diverse range of valuable semi-natural habitats that are important for the conservation of many rare plant and animal species. Well-designed policies, especially the effective implementation of EU-funded rural development schemes and measures, have great potential to reduce the loss of HNV farmland and to maintain the supply of biodiversity-related public goods they supply. For example, HNV grasslands have been eligible for agri-environmental payments under the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 Bulgarian Rural Development Programmes. Nonetheless, the supply of these public goods continues to be at risk due to various factors. Much greater attention needs to be given to more integrated and innovative approaches that more consistently address the profitability and overall socio-economic viability of the traditional HNV farming systems in the region.

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

## Key policy messages

- The continuation of HNV farming is essential for the conservation of valuable habitats for plant and animal species.
- Agri-environment payments have a key role to play and must be maintained.
- More integrated and innovative policy approaches are needed to support the profitability and overall socio-economic viability of HNV farming in mountain areas.



## 1. The Mountain Reference Region (MRR)

This policy brief relates to overcoming the constraints on the delivery of public goods (biodiversity) from High Nature Value (HNV) farmland in the north-western region of the Stara Planina mountain range close to the border between Bulgaria and Serbia. Similar constraints are also found in many other mountain regions of Bulgaria and neighbouring countries in south-east Europe. There are around 30 700 ha of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) in the Western Stara Planina, of which 65% are semi-natural grasslands plus 20% mixed cropping and 15% arable land<sup>1</sup>. Agriculture in the region is dominated by small-scale farming (small in terms of both physical and economic size) and many farms are below the eligibility threshold of 1 ha for CAP support.

Depending upon altitude, the local farming systems are typically small-scale extensive grazing (sheep, cattle and goats) and low input / semi-intensive cropping, including cereals, rapeseed, perennial crops (fruit orchards) and some vegetables. Over many years traditional farming practices in the region have created and maintained a diverse range of semi-natural habitats for valuable plant and animal species, including many rare plant and animal species included in the Red Data Book of Bulgaria and protected by international conventions. There are seven Natura 2000 sites designated in the region (5 SPAs and 2 pSCI), which contain significant areas of farmland. This highlights the importance of maintaining traditional local farming systems for nature conservation.

## 2. Nature conservation through policy innovation

The concept of “HNV farming” was developed in the early 1990s, from a growing recognition that biodiversity conservation in Europe depends to a great extent on the continuation of low-intensity farming systems across large areas of countryside. The HNV concept was officially acknowledged in Bulgaria with EU accession and the inclusion of agri-environmental support for the restoration and maintenance of HNV grasslands in the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 *Bulgarian Rural Development Programmes*.

This was a significant policy innovation at the time and established an entirely new mountain value chain involving the use of public money (EU funds) to secure public goods (biodiversity) from private providers (farmers and other land managers) via area-based compensatory payments for compliance with clearly defined management requirements. The payment rate for maintaining traditional haymaking on HNV hay meadows was €113.15/ha, and for maintaining extensive grazing on HNV pastures was €126.80/ha. Further policy innovation is now urgently needed to stop the continuing decline in HNV farmland, especially the ongoing abandonment of HNV grasslands in mountain areas such as the Western Stara Planina.

---

<sup>1</sup> 2016 data. It concerns the following 5 municipalities of WSP: Godech, Vurshetz, Berkovitz, Chiprovtsi and Georgi Damyanovo

### 3. Barriers and opportunities for sustainability and resilience

Local stakeholders have a clear vision for the future of the Western Stara Planina that involves managing the biodiversity-rich landscape as the basis for a diverse and vibrant local economy. However, barriers in four main areas need to be overcome in order to enhance the profitability and socio-economic viability of HNV farming in the region:

- **Social and institutional** – depopulation and increased average age of farmers is a major constraint upon the continuation of HNV farming.
- **Regulatory** – frequent changes in legislation and uncertainties regarding access to support measures is a big problem, especially for livestock farmers managing HNV grasslands.
- **Product and market** – there is huge potential to add value to the products from HNV farming, but farmers need more flexible legislation, accessible investments, and relevant training and advisory services.
- **Technological** – new forms of nature-friendly mechanisation, plus other technologies, are needed to improve the management of HNV farmland.

### 4. Policy relevant considerations

There are many deep-seated challenges in the Western Stara Planina (and other mountain regions of Bulgaria and south-east Europe) that require a more innovative and integrated approach to foster the profitability and overall socio-economic viability of the traditional HNV farming characteristic of the region. There are multiple levels of policy intervention which could be aligned to provide more coherent and consistent support for HNV farming in the forthcoming post-2020 programming period. For example:

- **At farm level** – every opportunity should be taken to develop effective and targeted support for HNV farming using all available CAP Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 interventions ranging from different options for area-based payments (including results-based incentives) to speeding-up innovation through cooperation and on-farm experimentation.
- **At community level** – HNV farms are predominantly small-scale, which do not exist in isolation but within communities. Well-facilitated and multi-funded community-led local development is a very powerful tool for improving the quality of life of HNV farmers, as well as addressing directly some specific agricultural needs.
- **At regional level** – regional branding and marketing schemes can be very effective if support for the necessary skills and cooperation is also provided.
- **At national level** - efforts are needed to strengthen the AKIS (Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System) for HNV farmers and to promote more joined-up policies and institutions. The aim is to develop sustainable food policies and systems that embrace biodiversity conservation as a top priority.



## Acknowledgements

This policy brief is based upon the knowledge and experience of the Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP) and their long-term engagement with farmers and other key stakeholders on the future of HNV farming in the Western Stara Planina, Bulgaria.

## References

Kazakova, Y., Stefanova, V., Yunakova, M. and Peneva, M. (2017). *Learning Area “Western Stara Planina” (Bulgaria) – A Baseline Assessment*. Available to download here: <http://www.hnmlink.eu/download/BulgariaBaselineAssessment.pdf>

Kazakova, Y. and Stefanova, V. (2021). *CAP Strategic Plans: Support to High Nature Value Farming in Bulgaria*. Available to download here: <https://www.arc2020.eu/support-to-high-nature-value-farming-in-bulgaria/>

## Authors

Mark Redman, Highclere Consulting, [mark@highclere-consulting.com](mailto:mark@highclere-consulting.com)

Vyara Stefanova, Society for Territorial and Environmental Prosperity (STEP), [v.stefanova65@gmail.com](mailto:v.stefanova65@gmail.com)