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Policy Brief

ŠUMAVA - CESKY LES | High quality beef production in Šumava/Bohemian Forest

Photo credit: Jakub Husák

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High quality beef production in Šumava/Bohemian Forest

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Summary

Historically, the natural resources of the Šumava Mountains have been primarily utilized for agriculture and forestry. Over the past 30 years, following the collapse of the socialist regime, the agricultural sector in the region has undergone significant transition. The Šumava region is home to unique natural ecosystems, safeguarded by its status as a Natural Park. One of the key challenges is balancing ecological preservation with economic activities. These local ecosystems are now facing new pressures from global climate change, including bark beetle infestations and extreme weather events. Therefore, it is crucial to develop a comprehensive policy that addresses these emerging challenges to protect and enhance the cultural and natural heritage of the Šumava region

Figure 1: Extensive cattle farming on farm in Železná Ruda (Author: Martin Jedlička)

Key Policy Messages

- ☞ Facilitate Collaborative Farming Initiatives
- ☞ Promote On-Farm Food Processing and Sales
- ☞ Develop sustainable tourism infrastructure

1. Highland Harvest: Balancing Ecosystem Health and Beef Quality

The Šumava Mountains are among the oldest mountain ranges in Central Europe, with peaks ranging from 700 to 1400 meters above sea level. These mountains span the borders of the Czech Republic and Germany.

Historically, the region's natural resources have supported both agricultural and forestry activities. The area was sparsely populated by German and Czech communities. However, after World War II, the German population was displaced, leading to a significant loss of the region's traditional inhabitants. During the socialist era (1948-1988), the region experienced substantial economic decline. Industrialized agriculture, managed by socialist collective farms, paid little heed to natural conditions. Conversely, during this period, large areas of the mountain region were closed off due to the strictly controlled borders with Western Germany. This closure allowed the development of unique ecosystems that are now considered the region's most valuable natural heritage.

Over the past 30 years, following the collapse of the socialist regime in 1989, the agricultural sector in the region has undergone significant transformation. Socialist farms were privatized and their production methods evolved. The current approach to farming emphasizes the extensive use of natural resources, highlighting the high nature value of the mountain region.

The Šumava National Park, covering approximately 68,300 hectares, is surrounded by a Nature Protected Area of about 99,500 hectares. Consequently, all economic activities in the mountain region are regulated to protect the natural ecosystems.

Forestry has also been a traditional practice in the region, with forests predominantly consisting of spruce trees, along with some fir and pine. Recently, forestry has faced new challenges due to overpopulation of bark beetles and droughts, which have raised concerns about the sustainability of local forest ecosystems and the impacts of forestry practices.

2. Value chain contribution to resilience and sustainability

Currently, over 60 farms operate in treeless areas of the National Park, covering approximately 10,000 hectares, though these farms utilize less than 50% of the land. Ongoing discussions suggest that this area may be expanded in the future. Increasing farming activity in these high-nature areas, using sustainable approaches to protect and enhance the region's natural heritage, presents a significant opportunity.

Given agriculture's profound impact on local ecosystems, one of the primary challenges is striking a balance between agricultural activities and natural conservation efforts. Current strategies for natural protection often conflict with forestry practices, especially in areas devastated by the bark beetle.

It is increasingly apparent that mountain ecosystems are highly sensitive to global climate changes. Therefore, future utilization of natural resources, while respecting both natural and cultural heritage, will require sensitive and thoughtful regulation to balance the needs.

3. Policy experiences

Sustainable Visitor Management: Sumava has implemented sustainable visitor management by promoting "slow tourism" and improving communal transport to balance ecosystem preservation with agricultural needs.

Enhancing Cooperation: The region focuses on cooperation between farmers, conservationists, and tourism, promoting organic agriculture and highlighting its benefits for both productivity and conservation.

Adapting Subsidies: Subsidy programs are being adapted to support diverse agricultural activities and enhancing economic and ecological sustainability.

These policy experiences highlight the importance of integrated approaches that consider both environmental and economic factors, fostering a sustainable and resilient future for the Sumava region.

4. Recommendation for future policies

Enhance Cooperative Networks and Sustainable Practices: Foster collaboration among farmers, conservationists, and tourism operators to create synergies that benefit both agricultural productivity and environmental conservation.

Promote organic and sustainable farming through tailored subsidies and support programs, encouraging practices that enhance both economic and ecological resilience.

Develop Sustainable Tourism and Transport Infrastructure: Expand slow tourism initiatives by developing eco-friendly infrastructure and services, making tourism more sustainable and beneficial for local communities.

Integrate Ecosystem Services and Innovation in Policy Planning: Incorporate ecosystem service valuation into agricultural and tourism policies to ensure natural assets are preserved and managed sustainably.

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