SUPPORTING NATURA 2000 NETWORK THROUGH RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY, IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Natura 2000, the European Network of natural protected sites, is mainly aimed at halting biodiversity loss by long-term conservation of the most valuable and threatened species and habitats. By creating this network, we aim for both the conservation of species and habitats, and the parallel continuation of human activities such as agriculture, hunting, forestry, etc. The main objective of this paper is to analyze the link between the Natura 2000 network and rural development policy. Firstly, this paper attempts to explain how the Natura 2000 network is organized, what its current situation is and what are its strengths and weaknesses in Romania. Secondly, financing opportunities through rural development policy were analyzed. This paper's conclusions are a basis for discussions on how rural development policy could support the development requirements of the Natura 2000 network in the future.*

Key words: *rural policy, Natura 2000, sustainable development, Romania*

INTRODUCTION

Natura 2000 is a network for protected areas established in the Member States of the European Union, which aims primarily to conserve the vulnerable plant and animal species and habitats of Community interest (IEEP, 2011). Natura 2000 network covers not only species and habitats conservation but provides a social and economic balance in rural space by creating employment opportunities in sustainable activities. Natura 2000 network's goal is to protect the biodiversity in EU member countries, and implicitly in Romania, but also to promote economic activities beneficial for biodiversity conservation, such as manual mowing lawns, grazing, crop plants, and exploitation of natural forestry resources, fishing and hunting (Gaston et al., 2008). In Natura 2000 sites all activities are banned that may affect the conservation status of habitats and species of Community interest.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the link between the Natura 2000 network and rural development policy. Firstly, this paper attempts to explain how the Natura 2000 network is organized, what its current situation is and what are its strengths and weaknesses in Romania. Secondly, financing opportunities through rural development policy were analyzed. This paper's conclusions are a basis for discussions on how rural development policy could support the development requirements of the Natura 2000 network in the future.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

NATURA 2000 sites consist of SPA type (Special Protected Areas designated by the Birds Directive) and SCI type (Sites of Community Importance designated under the Habitats Directive). The ladder can be turned, with approval by the European Commission,

in SAC (Special Areas of Conservation), that have proven effective in maintaining and / or improving the species and habitats conservation status for which they were designated.

The Network size is given by 26,106 Natura 2000 sites covering a total area of 949,910 km2 in the European Union. The network's area distribution is not uniform - the share of the national territory of the member countries varies significantly from the value at EU level (17.5%).

In 2012, in Romania there were 383 Sites of Community Importance (totaling approximately 41,365 km2) and 148 Special Protection Areas (totaling approximately 36,944 km2). In Romania, the share of SCI represents 17.4% of the total area and the SPA 15.5% (MMSC, 2012). The declaration of Natura 2000 sites is an ongoing process, which will lead to the expansion of the existing network in the future.

Romania has one of the most diverse rural landscapes in the European Union, diversity that comes from centuries of different agricultural practices, which led to the emergence of semi-natural habitats rich in species. The share of land use with Natura 2000 sites is an important indicator that illustrates their importance in rural areas. The largest share of the total area with forests represents 64.59% of SCI's and 48.18% of SPAs area. In terms of land use, share of agricultural land (including about 45% pastures and hayfields), represents 18.62% of SCI's and 32.38% of SPAs area (Bodescu et al., 2012).

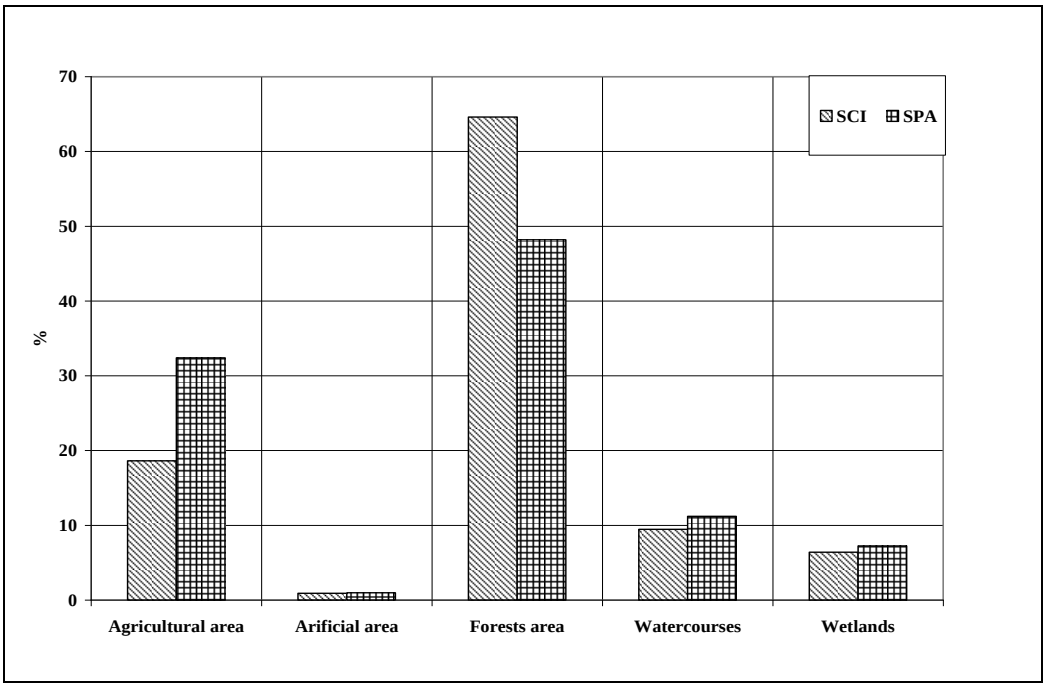

Fig. 1 The main land use types of Natura 2000 protected areas in Romania

Managing Natura 2000 sites is based on the principles of sustainable development. The aim is to find solutions to development of economic activities while protecting biodiversity in the countryside, not to prohibit such activities. **Natura 2000 management** implies the existence / use of financial resources that can cover both administrative costs and compensation payments, cost of sustainable development projects in rural communities, developing and improving institutional management mechanisms, etc.. In

Romania, the funding sources used to manage Natura 2000 sites are mainly governmental funds, European/international funds and, to a lesser extent, private funds.

European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) is a financing tool created by the European Union to support member states in the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy. EAFRD funding is a financing opportunity for the Romanian rural space, worth approximately 7.5 billion since 2007 to 2013. Accessing funds is based on the National Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

The Program priorities are reflected in four priority axes: i) Axis I - *"Increasing competitiveness of agriculture and forestry"* - 45% of the total EU funds, ii) Axis II - *"Improving the environment and the countryside"* - 25% of EU funds, iii) Axis III - *"Quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy"* - 30% of European funds iv) Axis IV - *"LEADER"* - 2.5% of amounts allocated to other areas.

Priority Axis 2 - *"Improving the environment and the countryside"* is dedicated to the management of Natura 2000 sites, and concerns measures for the sustainable use of agricultural land and forest by Natura 2000 payments and payments linked to Directive 2000/60/EC.

Natura 2000 payments are granted to users yearly per hectare to compensate for supported costs and lost income resulting from disadvantages of the implementation of 79/409/EEC, 92/43/EEC and 2000/60/EC Directives. Payment represents a maximum of 200 euro per hectare per year (maximum 5 years), with an initial payment of 500 euros per hectare for farmland and 40-200 per year per hectare for forestland.

The proposed EAFRD measures encourage farmers and foresters to manage the land according to methods that are compatible, with the need to preserve the natural environment and landscape, and to protect and improve natural resources. Among the factors to be considered, biodiversity and management of Natura 2000 sites are included.

Table 1

The use of EAFRD allocations

Measure	**Allocated sums**	**Level of use**
213 Natura 2000 payments for agricultural areas	The measure isn't listed in the National Program for Rural Development 2007-2013 (NPRD)	N
224 Natura 2000 payments for forestry areas	The content and financial allowance in concordance with the provisions of article 19 of the Council's (CE) Regulation no 1698/2005 will be established when enlisted into the NPRD	N
214 Agro-environmental payments	2008 – 145.97 mil. Euros	Absorption degree 78%

214 Agro-environmental payments	2009 – 181.40 mil. Euros	Absorption degree 78%
214 Agro-environmental payments	2010 – 191.19 mil. Euros	Absorption degree 78%
214 Agro-environmental payments	2011 – 219.11 mil. Euros	Absorption degree 78%
214 Agro-environmental payments	2012 – Authorized payments of 232,47 mil. Euros	Absorption degree 78%
225 Forestry-environmental payments	The measure isn't listed in the National Program for Rural Development 2007-2013 (NPRD)	N

Source: Bodescu et .al., 2012, p. 67

From the above table it can be noted that the total proposed measures for this axis, only Measure 214 – "agro-environment payments" were implemented. Total agro-environment payments amounted to 232.47 million euros, and there are no current statistics on their overlap degree with Natura 2000 sites.

EAFRD supports both the protection and management plans developed for Natura 2000 sites and other places of high natural value, environmental awareness actions and investments for maintenance, restoration and enhancement of the natural heritage, such as cultural features of villages and countryside.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions drawn from the analysis lead us to the idea that funding opportunities offered by the EAFRD to Natura 2000 network has not been fully exploited even though the network size is significant in Romania. In the period 2014-2020 the following priority actions for Natura 2000 habitats and species conservation from agricultural and forestry areas should be considered:

- improving farm management and implementing Community rules, in particular the cross-compliance requirements;
- introduction and development of new technologies and procedures, production diversification, adjusting the profile, level and quality of production to market requirements, including the ecological one;
- increasing number of forest owners that enhance the economic value of forests at forest farm level;
- improving direct payments for farmland biodiversity conservation in Natura 2000 sites;
- encourage the traditional use of grasslands and hayfields;
- increase crop diversity and establishment of protective belts between them, where agricultural work is abandoned or minimized;

- application of conservative management techniques to counteract abandoning traditional activities;
- conservation and restoration of habitats connected with agricultural landscapes;
- grazing monitoring and control and encourage extensive grazing forms when appropriate;
- prohibit the use of chemical fertilizers and various pesticides;
- use environmentally friendly techniques for forests logging;
- deforestation and fire control;
- parasites and diseases monitoring and control;
- improving communication with landowners, local authorities and other stakeholders.

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