

Notes from the field

(Inge in Wonderland)

Inge Nevelsteen

Field coordinator for hamster, Flanders (Belgium)

species-protecting programme hamster (SBP) from the Flemish government - ANB: agency of nature and forests.

field coordinator for hamster was commissioned to Regionaal Landschap Haspengouw en Voeren (RLHV)

RLHV is an NGO => projects which evolve around the typical landscape (the members of the NGO are all kinds of stakeholders who have an interest in this landscape/area: nature-organisations, farmersorganisations, huntersorganisations, municipalities, tourism,...) and that's an advantage => neutrality.

The tools we had at our disposal were two official CAP-measures especially designed for hamster and some measures designed for agro-biodiversity in general:

- Measure alfalfa
- Measure hamster-friendly aftercrop
- Measure fauna-foodcrop
- Measure graslandstrip-plus

Measure alfalfa (1831 euro/ha/year):

Popular amongst farmers and hamsters.

Problems: (for the farmer) thistles, (for the hamster) lignification, nutritional value \searrow

Measure hamster-friendly aftercrop (130 euro/ha => 760 euro/ha):

This was a management measure which rotated along with the early crops.

Problem: not one contract was closed.

Measure fauna foodcrop (\pm €1900/ha/year):

Designed with farmland birds in mind. It is a mix with seedbearing crops which had to be sowed in spring.

Problem: not dense enough

There is also a so called 'crop-rotation' version of this measure, half of the plot has to be sowed and on the other half of the plot, last year's crop stays on the field. In this version, a wintercrop is possible. This was slightly better for hamster

⇒ Extra seedmix for free

Measure graslandstrip-plus (\pm €2000):

Perennial grassland with herbs.

Hamsters like chickory

Free seedmix hamster-friendly aftercrop

- 35 kg/ha Japanese oats
- 2 kg phacaelia
- 2 kg fodder raddish
- 1 kg sunflowers

Harvesting with stripper header

From 2019 until 2021: special official CAP-measure, (360 euro/ha)

Straw standing on the field until September 26th.

Occurring problems:

- Plots lost for depositing manure
- If the farmer needs that specific plot to activate as an EFA (ecological focus areas) aftercrop, it has to be sowed September 30th the latest.

Lessons learned:

- Mixed crops work best (mix of grain & protein rich & fatty rich seeds, mix of structures: vertical stems, intertwining structures, big overhanging leaves)
- Alfalfa has to stay fresh

- Law is a labyrinth and laws that are beneficial for the environment still can be a burden when you want to protect species.

- To build a relationship with farmers is very important, it takes a while. Go open minded.
- Link benefits for the hamsters to benefits for the farmer (a healthier soil, solutions for erosion problems, functional agrobiodiversity,...)
- Make it easy for the farmers: have the free seedmix delivered at their door, organise a whatsapp group for the stripper header,...
- Voluntarily or not: I still find this a hard question. I tend to an intermediate.
- My opinion: farmers can be payed a bit extra for their efforts.

- Look through the eyes of a hamster and think as a farmer. Find the intersection. Think economical.

My wish for Christmas (and the next ones):

A more intense collaboration... I am convinced the hamster needs farmers, and farmers and society need hamsters (as a canary in the coalmines). I am also convinced it is possible to alter regular crop cultivation in a way it is beneficial for the hamster and agrobiodiversity. This is certainly cheaper than taking a plot out of regular crop rotation to put a classical management measure on the plot. But this needs another way of thinking. And a lot of trial and error and experimenting with other ways of crop cultivation.