

Farming communities effectively involved in nutrient reduction measures

Three environmental NGOs from Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova received a joint grant of USD 34, 987 from the UNDP/GEF Danube Regional Project (DRP), supporting cross border initiatives within the Danube Basin. The large regional granting program, now in its second phase, assists trans-boundary cooperative efforts for restoration and protection of the Danube. The DRP grants program in the Danube Basin countries is managed by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) through its head office in Hungary and in cooperation with the REC country offices in the Danube countries. The project addresses nutrient pollution of surface and ground waters from agriculture in the Lower Danube Basin. It is expected to enhance the transboundary perspective and involve the rural communities in the implementation of pollution reduction measures and exchange on environment friendly farming.

The 12-month project 'Best Agricultural Practice in My Farm' is based on the cooperation among three partner NGOs: the Black Sea NGO Network (Bulgaria), Earth Friends (Romania) and the Eco Counselling Center of Cahul (Moldova). Each NGO coordinates the project activities in the home country and BSNN acts as main coordinator.

The partners started project activities in early 2006. "Our approach is to directly involve the farming communities in the process of applying the Code of Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) thus protecting the waters from nitrate pollution", says Emma Gileva, project coordinator. "For Bulgaria and Romania it is a stepping stone to EU accession. Environmental baselines, such as GAP are gaining importance as minimum standards for agricultural support payments or entry conditions for participation in agri-environment schemes, less-favored area schemes, quality assurance etc. So farmers in the two countries are motivated to learn and be aware of future obligations and opportunities. Moldova, chairing the Danube Commission in 2006, is developing its own Code in line with the country's commitments to the Danube Convention and increased involvement with EU policies".

The term Best Agricultural Practice in the Danube Regional Project is applied to farming practices that reduce the risk of pollution from agricultural non-point sources. It is used to describe the conscientious effort on the part of farmers to integrate more environmental concerns in the day-to-day management of crops, animals and agricultural land, so as to reduce the risk of pollution from multiple small scale discharges. Therefore the project partners involve the farming communities in taking measures to improve the environment and promote environment friendly farming.

In the first phase the partners have been involved in the exchange of information about the progress of adoption and enforcement of the Codes in their respective countries. The project focuses on training the local rural communities in the application of the rules. It is an important step highlighting the significance of waters and rivers for habitat and human health and putting agricultural activities within the wider framework of human impact on the environment. The approach also includes preparation and distribution of simple readily comprehensible brochures about the rules in order to serve as reference materials and raise awareness among the farming population about pollution problems and their consequences to the region.

The media play an active role in the overall process of informing the public of the environmental aspects of farming and the efforts to protect waters from pollution. A media competition launched to highlight Danube Day added interest and local color to the cooperative effort.

Of special interest to the stakeholders are the two cross border visits to Bulgaria and Romania with itineraries featuring Danube project investment sites and environmental farming activities. Partners from the three countries toured Silistra Region and other agricultural areas in Bulgaria in June. They met local stakeholders and visited farmers taking steps to implement and promote the good agricultural practices. Some organic producers received the visitors and shared experience in the application of the ecosystem approach. The trip to Romania is planned for September.

During the second phase the project aims to get local stakeholders from the rural areas, such as farmers, farmers' associations, local authorities, agricultural experts and journalists involved in promoting the Codes of GAP and also in elaborating voluntary charters of good practices. The commitments are expected to reflect the local agricultural, environmental, social and economic context and the preparedness of the rural communities for the application of environmental friendly practices in agriculture.

Black Sea NGO Network