

**Can the success of a biodiversity advisory service be improved through cooperation with nature conservation actors?
An evaluation of the EIP Biodiversity Project Hellwegbörde of the NRW Chamber of Agriculture**

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The mutual understanding between agricultural and nature conservation actors is often characterised by disagreements which can be basis of conflicts. However, interpersonal disputes between actors have so far shown potential for a less conflictual exchange. Therefore, the EIP project Biodiversity Advice Hellwegbörde of the NRW Chamber of Agriculture relied on direct cooperation with nature conservationists from the Biological Stations when advising on specific measures. Based on this advice, the success of this advisory concept was evaluated in terms of acceptance and understanding of nature conservation issues from the perspective of participating farmers. For this purpose, the advisory service process was described, and the participation of farmers in individual process phases has been analysed as a characteristic of successful cooperation. In addition, the question of motivation to participate in the advisory process was asked to determine the prerequisites. Further, the extent to which direct cooperation between nature conservationists and farmers influenced the understanding and acceptance of nature conservation issues was analysed. Finally, general and project-specific influencing factors were identified. The questions were answered based on 12 interviews with participating farmers. They differed according to contact with the Biological Station during the consultation, farm diversity with arable farming, pigs and dairy cattle/cattle farming, and sideline and main occupation. The interviews were analysed with a combined method based on grounded theory. Results for the structure of an advisory year show a breakdown into initiation, situation analysis, planning and implementation. A joint evaluation did not take place but is recommended for the learning process of all actors involved. Concerning participation in the process, the following findings emerged: (1) Particularly during the situation analysis, but also in subsequent phases, it proved advantageous to let farmers take the lead in expressing wishes, ideas and problems that were to be fulfilled through participation in the program. (2) During the planning phase, it was shown that a clear definition of agricultural and nature conservation objectives to be

pursued by the individual farmers is conducive to meeting expectations. It also includes the communication of possible problems that may arise during implementation. (3) A deficit was found in understanding nature conservation developments from the farmers' point of view, which were seen as undesirable agronomic developments. In order to ensure a shared understanding for optimal development, the reciprocal exchange of knowledge is recommended, for instance, in the form of group events with actors from the chamber, the biological stations and farmers. (4) As far as the content of nature conservation aspects is concerned, mainly farmers with experience with nature conservation projects participated in various phases. Other farmers, however, participated with operational or economic content. Most farmers motivations were financial, primarily due to using uneconomic land and parts of the land. Aspects of nature conservation tended to be of secondary importance but were nevertheless crucial for participating in the advisory service. A primary interest in biodiversity was present, evident from the initial contact with farmers. In addition, the familiarity of the advisor and his practical farming background were significant factors in seeking advice. From the closer cooperation with biological stations, it became apparent that conservation successes on the farms or recorded by the project-accompanying monitoring were very conducive to the motivation and cooperation of farmers with the conservationists of the stations. As this was a very effective tool for successful cooperation and building understanding, it is recommended to communicate interim successes to farmers regularly. Furthermore, it became apparent that farmers who had already carried out projects with conservationists before the biodiversity advisory service and who had dealt with conservation issues in the longer term saw implementation problems in a much more differentiated way and showed more understanding of the conservationists' point of view. Therefore, establishing or maintaining longer-term cooperation between farmers and conservationists is recommended. As far as participation with actors outside the project is concerned, the exchange decreases the less the external actors are related to agriculture, whereby the exchange was overall relatively restrained. As exchange among colleagues can influence the acceptance and adoption of measures, it is recommended to set up exchange platforms for participating farmers among themselves and to support the project.

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