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Peatland restoration of agricultural areas in Lithuania among measures of the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility

The investment for 16 mln. Euro has been earmarked for restoration of 8000 ha of drained peatlands in the Recovery and Resilience Facility plan of Lithuania. The measure aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculturally used peatlands by reversing negative impacts of drainage and paving the road for further upscaling.

On Monday, 17 th of May, the European Commission received the official Lithuanian 2,2 billion Euro plan named “New Generations’ Lithuania” for the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility. The aim of the plan is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions.

The Lithuanian Ministry of Finance highlighted that RRF support will be invested in *Green transformation, Digital transformation, Health, Social protection, Science and innovation, Education, Public administration*. Among proposed measures under *Green transformation*, 16 mln. Eur are scheduled for investments to increase the carbon store capacities by reducing GHG emissions from drained peatlands. It aims to restore peat-forming processes in 8000 ha of agriculturally utilized, currently drained peatlands until 2026. In addition, the measure will contribute to overarching environmental objectives as the conservation of biological diversity and sustainable functioning of ecosystems, reduction of nutrient runoff and increase water quality. Potential applicants can be farmers and municipalities, in case of state land property, prioritising applicants with most drainage affected peatlands and regions, where water quality does not meet environmental standards, e.g. mostly regions in intensive agriculture areas.

The investment will cover the services and instalments needed for rewetting, e.g. assessment of rewetting possibilities, preparation of a technical design, if needed planning the reconstruction of drainage systems, installation of dams, sluices, removal of woody vegetation, stone removal, stump mulching, surface levelling. Further maintenance of restored peatlands is welcomed, including traditional usage of wet peatlands for hay production and/or grazing or implementing paludiculture. The maintenance is supposed to be supported under measures still to be planned for the CAP strategic plan for 2023-2027. The monitoring and controlling of water level will be based the appearance of typical peatland plants as indicators of successful restoration.

The measure was proposed by the Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture based on the need to reduce agricultural GHG emissions. The communication about the problems of peatlands used for intensive agriculture (ploughing, deep drainage) and the possibility to mitigate climate change by reversing the impacts caused by drainage and changing land use was done already for some time by environmental NGOs (Lithuanian Fund for Nature, Nature Heritage Fund), showcasing rewetting pilots (e.g. Interreg “Desire” project in Zuvintas Biosphere reserve). However, despite quite diverse range of peatland restoration projects, and materials prepared, it was disappointing, that almost all restoration projects focused on rewetting in protected raised bogs, which is not helping in the agriculturally utilized fens. Therefore, the Foundation for Peatlands restoration and Conservation (FPRC) contributed to the elaboration of the measure by using the experience from rewetting project in agricultural land for carbon credits. The project is ongoing around the location of Baisogala in cooperation with landowner Animal husbandry institute and a partner in Germany the Succow Foundation, partner in Greifswald Mire Centre (<https://en.pelkiufondas.lt/klimato-kaita>). The rewetting in agricultural areas require completely different attitude, starting from more complicated planning, obtainment of construction permissions, agreements with neighbours, and technical damming solutions allowing farmer to regulate the water level¹. The targeted area is relatively small, but farmers community originally was opposing the proposed measure.

¹ The amount 16 mln Eur was calculated based on the assumption that 1 ha will cost 2000 Eur based on local experience of rewetting and other countries experiences, collected with the help of Greifswald Mire Centre. Therefore 8000 ha x 2000 eur equals to 16 mln. Euro. 8000 ha is 1.2 % of all Lithuanian peatlands, o 3-4 % of all agriculturally used drained peatlands

The director of FPRC Nerijus Zableckis says: “Such measure is a big step forward to prove the reliability of peatland restoration for climate change mitigation. It will help that such an important sector as agriculture will finally acknowledge the importance of peatland rewetting and paludiculture. Although it is just a start, targeting relatively small area, it can help to initiate upscaling in future.”

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