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Rural Development

During the last years the European rural areas have undergone far-reaching structural changes. The European Union emphasizes the importance of a sustainable, multifunctional, and competitive agriculture within the model of European agriculture. With the concept of Agenda 2000, the European Council established the promotion and the development of rural areas as the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Rural development is the key tool for the restructuring of the agriculture sector, but also to encourage diversification and innovation in rural areas. In all Member States rural development can help promote competitiveness in the agricultural and food processing sectors. Innovation as well as information and communication technologies (ICT) must play their important role.

Until 2006 the European Rural Development Policy was financed by the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund, Guarantee Section (EAGGF/Guarantee). At the same time there were measures financed by the structural funds, like the EU community initiative LEADER+, to create a link to a broader territorial approach to rural development. The rural development Programme for Austria aimed to promote a competitive and environmentally sustainable agricultural sector. Three sets of objectives were defined:

- compensation for special services by farmers,
- preservation of assets with regard to the maintenance of holdings and
- Improving competitiveness. For the period 2007-2013 rural development measures are being financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). They focus on three areas in line with the three thematic axes laid down in the new rural development regulation:

- Improving competitiveness for farming and forestry;
- Improving environment and countryside;
- Improving quality of life and Diversification of the rural economy. In this financing period Leader it is no longer an EU community initiative but is integrated as a methodical axis 4 in the rural development policy, based on the principles of the past periods:
 - Leader regions are geographically limited and have to be homogeneous areas from a social and economic point of view,
 - the bottom-up principle has to be respected as well as
 - the cooperation and networking with and the integration of the local population.

Leader is a tool, which contributes to the creation of new jobs, to the improvement of incomes and to the promotion of equal opportunities in rural areas. It supports diversification (on farm and off farm) and can play an essential role in connecting people to European ideas and encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship. The environment and associated tourism are a major source of income and employment potential in rural areas.

The Leader concept will therefore be an essential instrument to maintain, develop and strengthen the functioning of living and economic spaces in rural areas over the period 2007-2013. Leader is implemented by Local Action Groups consisting of a representative group of partners from different socio-economic fields of the specific Leader region. Those Local Action Groups are chosen by a special selection committee based on local development strategies presented by them.

Improved access to reliable and affordable energy services and to modern biomass technologies and fuelwood sources; commercialization of biomass operations in rural areas.

Access to energy services generally constitutes no major problem in Austria. Provision with electrical power is practically guaranteed throughout the country, leaving only very remote and only partly inhabited places (like alpine huts) to provide for their own electricity. Supply of natural gas is widespread especially in the major cities but also in part of the more rural areas.

The following diagram shows the development of energy consumption from 1970 up to 2004. Sustainable energy production and use has become a major issue in recent years following – among others – the European biomass action plan of 2006. Whilst Austria with its approximately 24 % share of energy production from renewable resources, primarily hydroelectric power, is at a comparatively high level, other renewable energy sources have become of increased importance.

This share has remained fairly constant over the last years as can be seen in the next diagram, meaning that there is an absolute increase in the use of renewables. Biomass use for energy production is thus in focus from the environmental, agricultural and climatic viewpoints. Following this, efforts to support energy production from wood and arable crops are increasing. Again, the Austrian Rural Development Programme is the major source for giving financial support to initiatives in this field.

Of the renewable sources of energy the share of wind and photovoltaic energy was at 1.12%, hydroelectric power at 43.7 %, 2.87 % ambient heat, 25.39 % organic combustibles and fuels, 20.24 % wood and 6.68 % combustible refuse (data from the Austrian Statistical Office, 2004). Heating from biomass has increased over the last years from long distance systems from cogeneration (approx. 1.5 mio. MWh in 2004), long distance systems with centralised plants (mostly using wood chips, approx. 3.6 mio. MWh) and for individual heating systems (using firewood, wood chips and wood pellets, more than 9.000 plants installed).

More information can be found at: www.biomasseverband.at; blt.josephinum.at; www.energyagency.at

The use of biofuels in the transport sector was boosted by the EU-wide obligation to substitute part of fossil fuels by biodiesel and ethanol with an estimated production capacity for biodiesel of 488.000 t and a large new plant for ethanol expected to be opened in autumn of 2007. It has to be mentioned, however, that the increasing demand especially for biofuels has spurred a debate on the sustainable production of the corresponding raw-materials, especially where they are produced at an agro-industrial scale for export to Europe and the US in countries where food security and bio-diversity are still unsolved issues.

Enhancement in sustainable tourism development.

Although tourism matters fall within the legal and executive competences of the federal provinces in Austria, the development of sustainable tourism is of special importance and strongly endorsed at national level by funding of selected tourism activities. Many of these projects are also co-financed by the European Union either within the framework of the Rural Development Programme or within the Regional Policy Programme. The projects support the creation of small-scale infrastructure, of recreational infrastructure offering access to natural areas and the development of tourism services relating to rural tourism. In this context "Farm Holidays" has proven to be a very successful initiative in Austria with regard to the diversification of the rural economy into non-agricultural activities. For many years Austria has taken over leadership in innovative projects concerning soft-mobility solutions in Alpine tourism destinations taking into consideration environment, transport and tourism issues. One of the key initiatives deriving from a single project is called "Alpine Pearls" - a brand

name for 21 municipalities in the Alps, offering their visitors an optimum synergy of soft mobility and tourist highlights.

Waste management systems in the rural areas – waste prevention and minimization, reuse and recycling, and environmentally sound disposal facilities

General

The Austrian Waste Management Act stipulates that waste management should be based on the precautionary principle and sustainability and be geared:

1. To prevent harmful or adverse effects on humans, animals, and plants, and on their basic resources and natural environment, and generally minimize other negative effects on human wellbeing,
2. To minimize air pollution and gases affecting the climate,
3. To conserve resources (raw materials, water, energy, landscapes, land areas, landfill volumes),
4. In the case of recycling, to ensure that the materials reclaimed do not present a greater risk than comparable primary raw materials or products from primary raw materials and
5. To ensure that only such waste remains as can be stored without danger to future generations.

These objectives are to be achieved according to the following principles:

1. The quantities of waste and their contaminants should be minimized (waste prevention).
2. Waste should be recovered only to the extent that it is ecologically sound and technically feasible to do so, and only if the resulting additional costs will not be disproportionate to other waste treatment processes, and if a market for the recovered substances or energy already exists or can be created (waste recovery).
3. Depending on its composition, non-recoverable waste should be treated through biological, thermal, chemical or physical processes. Solid residues should be as non-reactive as possible and properly stored (waste disposal).

Composting – Biogenic Waste

Both aerobic biotechnical treatment and anaerobic biotechnical treatment are important possibilities for an environmentally sound utilization of wastes especially in rural areas. In the last years the anaerobic biotechnical treatment of waste was increasingly used. Stabilization of organic materials as well as energy production (biogas, electric power) can be realised by anaerobic biotechnical treatment plants.

20 years ago first pilot schemes of separate collection and composting of organic household waste started in Austria. These 20 years now provide extensive experience in developing best practice in collection systems and infrastructure, economic tools, awareness raising and public relations, decentralised biowaste management including farmers, in composting and composting technology, in establishing a consistent legal framework and, last but not least, compost marketing and use.

With the “Regulation on the Separate Collection of Biogenic Wastes” the foundations for the collection of high-quality raw materials for material processing have been laid. The compulsory separate collection and recycling has been effective in Austria since 1995. The quantities of biogenic wastes covered by municipal organic waste container collections have tripled since the year 1993. The percentage of the waste recorded via organic waste container collection amounts to 71 % related to the share of biogenic wastes in households and similar institutions. In Austria the major part of the proper separately collected biogenic wastes are used for composting. Separately collected organic waste can thus be processed to high-quality compost and constitutes thus a valuable raw material by which nutrients can be returned to the soil without any risk.

The type-specific separation of biogenic wastes at the place where they are generated, and agricultural composting are core elements of the Austrian strategy to exploit biogenic wastes via composting as humus products in agriculture. Agricultural organic waste composting has developed into an important pillar of regional waste management and contributes decisively to the implementation of country-wide composting. As a rule this is possible with relatively low expenditure in technical equipment, with a high level of flexibility at the same time.

In order to ensure a perfect, controlled exploitation the Compost Ordinance has been enacted, which now pays more attention to the idea of a circular-flow economy, by means of regulating the basis for the utilization of waste by composting in a standardized way at federal level. The end of wastes and the waste property of composts have thus been clearly defined. This opens up safe utilisation and wide-spread marketing opportunities for non-contaminated biogenic wastes.

Waste Disposal

Concerning the disposal of waste a ban on landfilling of organic waste has been effective since 2004 (apart from certain exceptions). The total organic content of landfilled waste is limited to a maximum of 5 % by volume, thus production of methane and acidic leachate is prevented. As waste incineration facilities are not area-wide available the mechanical-biological treatment of waste has been additionally accepted as suitable pre-treatment before landfilling and this treatment option is commonly used in the countryside. In 2002 the Federal Ministry published the "Guideline for the mechanical-biological treatment of waste" describing the state of the art which is recommended to be used as reference in the plant approval process. It is envisaged to introduce a binding ordinance derived from this guideline.

Remediation in the Mountains / Eco-Labeling

The Austrian Alps Protection Association started in 2002 a project to survey abandoned landfill sites and suspected contaminated sites in the Austrian mountains and to elaborate a register for contaminated sites. Dozens of environmentally hazardous abandoned landfill sites have been cleaned up so far and an essential contribution for cleaner landscapes and water bodies could be realized. This year the Austrian Eco-Label (for tourist enterprises) shall be promoted in the Alpine huts.

Public Relations

Information work is also performed by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, through its project "Communication Network with Waste Consultants", which was created in 1997 with the Austrian waste consulting association, *Verband Abfallberatung Austria* (VABÖ), as the sponsoring organisation. Some 300 waste consultants throughout Austria belong to this network. It has proven to be a very effective platform and communication hub for waste management matters on the regional and municipal level.

The association magazine "VABÖ-Blatt" subsidised by the Federal Ministry communicates important news. VABÖ-Blatt is published six times a year. Since the start of 2005, the VABÖ has also publishing an electronic newsletter (VABÖ-Newsletter), which is also subsidised by the Ministry and reaches a still wider audience quickly and without red tape. The annual Waste Consultant Network Conference aims to strengthen the professional image of waste consultants and present and discuss current issues and developments or changes. The commitment and creativity of the waste consultants are rewarded at the annual award of the "waste consultant of the year" prize. The Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Environment and Water Management subsidises projects to implement sustainable waste management in municipalities and to raise the awareness of the citizens. Especially in rural

areas and in the mountains initiatives of cleaning actions have been made in Tyrol since 2003 aimed at reducing littering and improving the local waste management and the situation of water bodies.