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Network of extension service and Grassland Society toward an effective grassland management in Estonia

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Abstract
The key feature of the Estonian extension scheme is building private advisory services directly through the open competition of advisors, giving the responsibility for quality control of the services to farmers themselves from the very beginning of the process. The system of certification of advisors has been introduced, and a registry of advisors has been created, as well as the eligibility criteria have been developed.

The most serious problem for the agricultural knowledge and information complex is the fact that the system is not oriented enough to the changing needs of the society, and often it cannot provide adequate solutions for emerging problems. The relationship between the organisations, producing the information (research institutions, incl. Universities), and those applying it (advisors and producers), is still weak. The research projects, which are focused on farmers and rural society needs, are usually not financed at the Agricultural University where the fundamental research projects are preferred.

The Estonian Grassland Society belongs to the extension complex with the aim to combine research, advisors, rural people and decision-makers from the Ministries. The mechanism for adequate response to the feedback, coming from the farmers, has also been established. The EGS activities should engage not only dairy farmers, but also the whole rural environment, and its role should be increased in influencing the agricultural policy.

Keywords: advisors, Estonian Grassland Society, extension service

Introduction
As Estonia was passing through the period of restoration and regaining its independence during the late 1980s and early 1990s, many reforms were introduced, and several among them such as Law of Peasant Farming, Property Reform, Land Reform, Agricultural Reform, and Currency Reform, were related to agriculture. The case in Estonia is a good example of a country in transition that has been trying to build up its private agricultural advisory services, experiencing need identification, problems, achievements and shortcomings in the process, that could be valuable lessons for other countries of the region (Kreel et al., 1999).

Together with the development of the advisory services, the need to develop the necessary support structure for advisors was also recognised. The Estonian Grassland Society (EGS) is one part of the extension service complex in Estonia. EGS activities are focused on grassland environment, and its main mission is to develop the exchange of knowledge and information between the interdisciplinary research and the society.

History and development of the Estonian Grassland Society
The Estonian Grassland Society has a rather long history. The idea of founding the Estonian Meadow and Pasture Development Society was initiated by the forward-looking dairy farmers and cattle breeders of that time, Th. Pool and E. Harpe, as well as by the breeder of forage legume and grasses, J. Mets. The foundation meeting of the society was held on January 31, 1930 in Tallinn. Although the activities of the Society were stopped in 1940 by the Soviet authorities, in ten years of its operation a strong basis had been laid for the development of
grassland culture even in the conditions of occupation lasting for the next fifty years. The activities of the Estonian Meadow and Pasture Development Society were started again in Tartu on April 16, 1993 under the name of the Estonian Grassland Society. At present, more than 100 interdisciplinary researchers, advisors, plant breeders and active farmers are engaged in the work of the society.

The role of the Estonian Grassland Society in the Agricultural Knowledge System

The general concepts of the advisory services in Estonia were completed in 1996 and after that the structure of extension complex has been in constant development. The national rural advisory programme has been financed increasingly from the state budget. A system for certification of advisors has been introduced. A registry for advisors has been created and eligibility criteria have been developed. The Estonian Association of Rural Consultants and Advisors as the umbrella organisation for advisors has been established. Several support systems and information services are available both for farmers and advisors, mostly provided by state-owned institutions.

So, the restructuring of the extension system had its influence, to smaller or larger extent, on all the institutions, participating in the process of agricultural policy, research, training and education, advisory service and information flow. Much has been done, but there is no reason to be satisfied. It is a permanent process of development of the exchange of knowledge.

One of the most important shortcomings is the fact that the information flow from the research to extension is still not sufficient. One of the reasons is that although the advisors have the umbrella organisation of their own (the Estonian Association of Rural Consultants), they still have not been able to make the researchers appreciate their needs. The agricultural research institutions publish the results of their studies mainly in scientific journals, seldom in newspapers, practical magazines and newsletters. However, they also organise training days and seminars for interested advisors and farmers. Unfortunately, the written and oral information, they provide, is not always ready to be used by the advisors and needs to be adapted to the real situations. Especially the researchers from Universities are not very keen on conducting applied studies, as their most donor organisations (the Ministry of Education and Science, the Estonian Science Foundation) do not show any interest in supporting such research. This means that the advisors need to spend quite a lot of their valuable time in search of the information they need for their everyday work.

In the above-mentioned situation, the role of the Estonian Grassland Society, and of other non-profitable organisations, is very important. Interdisciplinary researchers from different research institutions, advisors, farmers and people from the rural environment make up the membership of the society. The society acts as the meeting point for the different parties of the society. From one hand, different interests, goals and needs cross there, but on the other hand it is a proper place for finding solutions to problems and integration. All together it is possible to shape a striking message, which will influence also the political agenda.

The role and activities of the Estonian Grassland Society in transferring knowledge, interdisciplinary research and influencing policy

The activities of the EGS are not changed a lot in the period after Estonia regained its independence in 1991. The changes, caused by the restructuring extension service in Estonia, have had a positive influence on the operation of the society, and created a wide multi-functional range of activities. The mission of the EGS is to develop the flow of grassland-based knowledge and information between the multidisciplinary research, advisors and the society. The EGS works in close co-operation with the different research institutions, as well as with advisory and farmers organisations. The EGS joins the professionals of different fields, and has a steady position among cattle farmers and the growers of grass seeds.
The board of EGS is planning, leading and supporting the regular activities as the seminars, workshops, field-trials days, visiting advanced farms etc. The frequency of activities depends about the target group needs. The results of farmers' feedback, obtained by the EGS, form the base for evaluating and planning the activities of the EGS. The target group needs are changing constantly and the key point for success is to follow them. Nowadays the novel topic for Estonian producers is integration with EU and the special activities are focused to adaptation with EU rules and supporting system for farmers. Also the interdisciplinary activities of producers, advisors and researchers become more and more attractive for all interest groups / stakeholders.

The activities organised by EGS are popular because the issues of current interest are discussed and farmers are involved into solutions finding process together with the best experts (mainly researchers and advisors). Every producer should have a solution for own question or problem(s).

As the Ministry of Agriculture supports group and mass activities, a number of the EGS grassland advisory projects were subsidised through the open competition. The feedback from the monitoring, organised by the EGS, is a useful tool for decision-makers. Several grassland applied research topics, financed by the Ministry of Agriculture, are being previously discussed and accepted by farmers during the workshops organised by the EGS.

The future activities of the EGS should engage not only dairy farmers, but also the whole rural environment, for developing the multi-functionality of grassland systems. The research groups and Societies who are engaged to management and restoration of semi-natural and natural grasslands (coastal meadows, wetlands, wooded meadows and pastures etc) should be involved to EGS activities as well. The quality and beauty of a landscape is not reserved for farmers only. Other people living in the area or visiting the area for pleasure or recreation benefit from this landscape. The binding together of researchers from different fields, advisors and farmers, should increase the role of the EGS, and its influence, through the Ministry of Agriculture, on the agricultural policy.

Conclusions

1. Despite of relatively short history, the Estonian advisory service has been considerably successful. The demand for advises is increasing very rapidly.
2. The main mission of the Estonian Grassland Society is to develop the exchange of knowledge and information between the interdisciplinary research and the society. The EGS initiates interdisciplinary activities between researchers, advisors and producers.
3. The feedback obtained from farmers forms the main base for evaluating the EGS activities. The farmers are involved into solutions finding process together with the best experts.
4. The feedback from producers, advisors and researchers is a valuable tool for the decision-makers from the Ministry of Agriculture.
5. The EGS future activities should engage not only dairy farmers, but also the whole rural environment, for developing the multi-functionality of grassland systems.

References