

Sheep farming systems in Italian Eastern Alps and their relationships with agroecosystems

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Traditional pasture-based Livestock Farming Systems (LFS) play an important role in the management and maintenance of mountain agroecosystems (pasture and meadows), and they can generate a series of Ecosystem Services (ES) and public goods. This study presents preliminary results of the project Sheep Up (Rural Development Plan, Veneto Region). The aims of this project are: i) to recognize and promote the link between local sheep breeds and mountain agroecosystems and landscape; ii) to valorise the ES guaranteed by animals' grazing and the management of pasture and meadows; iii) to develop new territorial marketing strategies, considering the sustainability which characterizes this kind of livestock systems. The project Sheep Up considers 4 local breeds of Veneto region: Alpagota, Lamon, Foza and Brogna. Data were collected through surveys and involved 45 farms (14 for Alpagota, 14 for Lamon, 4 for Foza and 13 for Brogna). Data regarded general information about farms (herds' size and management, land use, farm surface etc.). Moreover, the project provided focus groups, which involved the local stakeholders, to analyse the strengths and the threats in managing local sheep breeds in mountain areas. The total surface managed by the farms surveyed was 1220 ha (average farms' surface of 24.9 ha) of which 812 ha was covered by pastures and meadows (73% of the total). Half of farmers included the direct sale of their products; 30% and 20% of the farms which involved Alpagota and Brogna breeds provided, respectively, recreational services and agritourism. The majority of smallholders were part-time farmers because the livestock activity didn't supply to the family sustainment. The project would like also to encourage and support the conversion to organic farming (currently only 8 farms were organic due to the high costs). According to the Farm to Fork strategy, the European Commission support the conversion to organic farming. The result of this project can support consumers' choice through a sustainability food labelling framework which allow to develop new marketing strategies for farmers and which recognize their important role to manage mountain agroecosystems and their link with the landscape.