

# Conservation and restoration of grasslands in Strandzha and Sakar mountains for restoring local biodiversity and endangered bird species



For the last several decades former pastures in the Strandzha Mountain has been turned into agricultural land, thus destroying important breeding and feeding grounds for endangered bird species. The contract is between the Bulgarian Society for Protection of Birds and farmers for implementing conservational practices on pastures and restoration of the natural habitats.

## Summary

The project started in 2015 and is still ongoing. The main goal was to restore former high-value pastures that have been turned into farmland and in this way to restore the natural habitats of important species – the European Soudlik as a main food source for Imperial Eagle, Booted eagle, Lesser spotted eagle, Long-legged buzzard. The contract is land-based and it includes around 20 farmers in the Strandzha Mountain. The leading organization is the Bulgarian Society for Protection of Birds, which is an NGO. Under a project financed partially by the LIFE + program the association purchased and leased out over 600 ha land to farmers with requirements to restore and maintain the pastures in environmental way.

### Objectives

1. Protect the local biodiversity in the area
2. Restoration of the natural mosaic nature of the habitats in the region
3. To encourage the involvement of farmers into contracts for biodiversity conservation



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### Problem description

There is a tendency to plough and convert some of the most important grasslands for endangered bird species into arable land, vineyards and orchards. The main driving force for this contract was the high percentage of tilled pastures, which were turned into arable land in the Strandzha and Sakar mountains. The restoration of former high-value pastures will contribute to the conservation of endangered vulture birds and will also allow the restoration of the mosaic nature of the habitats – an important biodiversity feature.

### LAND TENURE



practice-based – leased out- environmental – conservation

### PUBLIC GOODS



Farmland biodiversity



Landscape and scenery

### INDIRECT EFFECT

One of the ecosystem features of the pastures is the retention of water (water quantity), regulation of surface runoff and decreasing of soil erosion in hilly terrains (soil quality and health)

### LOCATION

### BULGARIA



Strandzha Mountain and Sakar Mountain (Southeast region, municipalities of Stara Zagora, Yambol and Bourgas)

## CONTRACT

The contract is for the whole land provided to the farmers from the Bulgarian Society for Protection of Birds. The financing party in the contract solution is LIFE + programme for biodiversity.

NGO – private

**Contract conclusion:**  
written agreement



**Payment mechanism:**  
No payment but access to land



**Funding/Payments:**  
Part of the financing is for purchasing of former pastures that should be restored and conserved. The farmers are also eligible for governmental support for maintaining pastures in conservational manner (practice-based subsidy) for which the subsidy is 324 euro per ha.

**Length of participation in scheme:**  
7 years/ongoing



**Start of the program:**  
2015

**End:** ongoing

## Data and Facts – Contract

**Participation:** 20 farms are involved in this contract solution. The area of implementation is around Strandzha Mountain and Sakar Mountain, Southeast region, municipalities of Stara Zagora, Yambol and Bourgas.

**Involved parties:** The contracting parties are the Bulgarian Society for Protection of Birds (an NGO) and the farmers. The role of the NGO is leading because they manage the project, coordinate it, and perform the monitoring activities. Farmers mainly benefit from maintaining pastures by providing grazing space for their animals and for using the haying for fodder. By covering the specific requirements set into the contract with the NGO they also can apply for government subsidy.

**The benefits for the NGO:** Financial compensation for managing the project; fulfilling their mission and vision for biodiversity conservation and bird protection which are the core of their activities.

**The benefits for the farmers:** Farmers cultivate the land without paying rent. By meeting certain environmental requirements they also become eligible for government subsidy (compensations for practice-based efforts).

**Funding/payments:** The funding organization is LIFE + programme who granted the Bulgarian Society for Protection of Birds for restoration and sustainable management of the Imperial Eagle's habitats. Part of the financing is for purchasing of former pastures that should be restored and conserved. The Bulgarian society for bird protection therefore leased out the lands to farmers in the region for activities that aim at restoring and maintaining the pastures. The farmers are also eligible for governmental support for maintaining pastures in conservational manner (practice-based subsidy) for which the subsidy is 324 euro per ha.

**Management requirements for farmers:** The main requirements for participation are for conservational maintenance of the pastures, incl. restoration of bushland pastures; removing some of the unwanted vegetation to maintain mosaic habitat; sustainable management of grassland through livestock grazing or mowing; restoration of grassland by restoring grassland naturally or by sowing native grass species.

**Controls/monitoring:** The monitoring is done by the Bulgarian Society for Protection of Birds.

**Conditions of participation:** The condition is to maintain and restore the pastures in conservational manner, as all requirements are defined precisely in the contract.

## Framework conditions

**Landscape and climate:** The climate is transitional-Mediterranean with a strong Black Sea influence, which is confirmed not only by the high average January temperatures (from 2 to 3.2 °C), but also by the significant average annual precipitation (from 500 to 1000 mm). The typical habitats are grasslands, bush shrubs and mixed oak forests



- a good breeding ground and predatory place. Bird diversity is very rich: 221 species; 59 of them are included in the Bulgarian Red List, and 96 have conservation significance on a European level. Here can be found the biggest part of the Bulgarian populations of the Imperial Eagle, Booted eagle, Lesser spotted eagle, Long-legged buzzard.

**Farm structure:** The targeted type of farming is pasture and grassland agriculture with special requirements for conservational management. The total land includes over 600 ha of pastures leased out to farmers. The ownership of the lands is by the Bulgarian Society for Protection of Birds

## SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

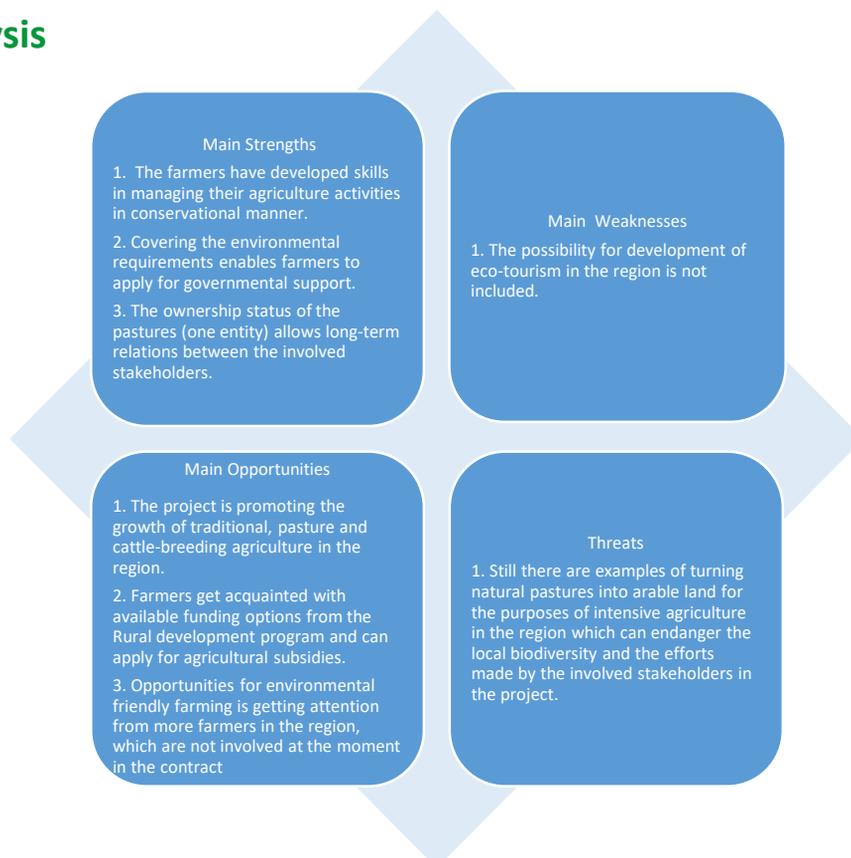


The project involves 20 farmers operating in high-nature value sites with ornithological significance. The agreement between the partners is very effective from an environmental point of view and it highly meets the targeted public goods. The collaboration between an NGO and farmers is a good example for a win-win scenario for both nature conservation and agricultural development.

### Reasons for success:

- The ownership of the pastures can be a prerequisite for longer contractual relations between the farmers and the NGO.
- The contract provides a win-win situation for both sites – by preserving the ornithological significant species (core goal of the NGO) and by providing land for livestock farming.
- Local farmers trained in sustainable grassland management in areas with breeding endangered birds.

### SWOT analysis



# Main external factors influencing success



Political/governance, economic/market, social, technological, legal and environmental factors can all have a strong impact on the success of contract solutions. In this case study an in-depth analysis found that the following, selected factors were of specific importance.

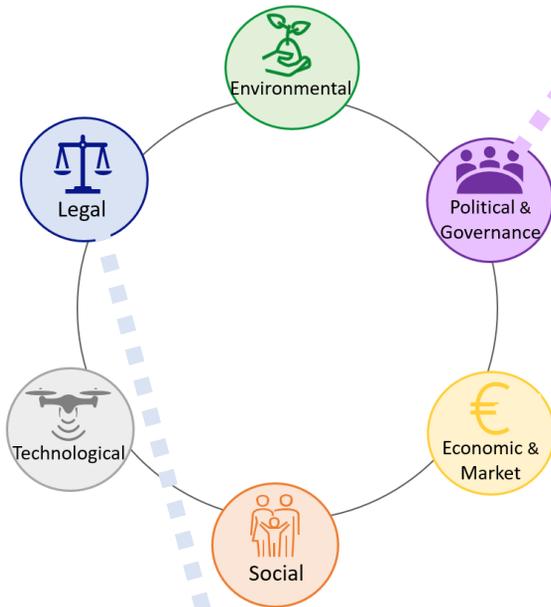
## Previous contracts supported the contract solutions success:

Previous efforts (before the start of the contract) of **biodiversity experts, ecologists and farmers** have led to the development of different **conservational measures** that can be applied on farmland.

Some of these measures were integrated into the Rural Development Program (after 2015), which later on gave an opportunity for farmers in this region to apply for governmental support for maintaining pastures in conservational manner.



>> *The contract serves also as an example for environmental stewardship of the farmers involved, which can secure the good public acceptance for this type of initiatives to be implemented in other parts of the country* <<



## Economic advantages for the farmers:

By meeting certain environmental requirements within the leasing contracts, farmers become eligible for a governmental subsidy (compensations for practice-based efforts). The payments they receive cover their costs, while additional benefits for example providing a feeding ground for their animals are also received.

## Conservation of endangered species -> high priority on the environmental policy agenda

One main legal condition which can be directed to this contract is the national legal framework regarding **biodiversity protection** and **bird conservation** (incl. Biodiversity Act, Protected Areas Act, etc.).



Their influence is mostly positive as the conservation of endangered species is a national goal and has **high priority on the environmental policy agenda**.