

Project

# SHEEP PASTURES IN THE VALAIS

## SUSTAINABILITY, MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES AND PROTECTION OF THE FLOCKS

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Since the wolf's return to the Swiss Alps in 1996, structures for sheep summering have been discussed in the Valais region, located in the southwestern part of Switzerland. The lost shepherd tradition and the difficult topographical conditions in high mountain areas pose additional difficulties for the pastoralists and farmers. Thus, the role of sheep grazing on alpine pastures has been strongly politicized. To account for the extraordinary cultural and ecological significance of sheep summering in this canton, sheep summering should be analyzed in detail in order to guarantee its sustainable management in the future.

After long and constructive discussions between all the stakeholders, a project was agreed upon: from 2012 to 2014 an in-depth analysis of the sheep pastures in the Valais should be conducted. In the context of an assignment by the federal and cantonal authorities, the team from AGRIDEA has visited and analyzed 150 sheep pastures with approximately 70,000 summered sheep. In the year 2012, 64 alpine pastures were visited and analyzed in the Upper Valais. The analysis of the remaining 90 alpine pastures in the Upper and Lower Valais was carried out in 2013.

The results will serve as the basis for the disqualification of the non-suitable pasture areas according to the "Summering Subsidy Ordinance" ("Sömmerungsbeitragsverordnung", SöBV). This legal frame gives positive incentives to replace the free grazing system with a systematic management of the flocks

by shepherd and dogs. The long term goal is to make possible herd consolidations resulting in the development of an efficient and effective protection of the flocks. The project will be completed in the spring of 2014. The baseline report should give the federal and cantonal government a basis for the implementation of legal provisions (Direct Subsidies Ordinance and the Swiss Hunting Ordinance).

The project is organized in two stages:

**Phase 1: Analysis of the alpine pastures with pasture managers and shepherd, to create a management plan for improving the management and the protection of the flocks**

1. Cartographic records of all sheep pastures of the canton;
2. Creation of a pasturing plan for each alpine pasture unit/summering farm;
3. Optimization recommendations for herd management regarding the available food and the sensitive vegetation types;
4. Delineation of areas suitable or unsuitable for grazing (according to the summering subsidy ordinance);
5. Creation of a plan for pastures and herd consolidation;
6. Recommendations for the implementation of herd protection measures for each sheep pasture.

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**Phase 2: Implementation of a collective management plan with farm managers and community representatives, to discuss structural changes and infrastructure investments**

1. Each pasture report will be written in the farm-managers' languages (French or German) and handed to them after completion to give them the opportunity to comment it and eventually to change it;
2. Evaluation of the individual pasturing plans with managers and pasture owners;
3. Classification of the alpine pastures for possible structural changes;
4. Planning meetings with selected alpine pasture owners for herd consolidations;
5. Composition of a final report as a decision basis for the cantonal administration;
6. Accompanying and coaching with the agricultural consultation to implement the measures.

The project illustratively shows how the cooperation between researchers, consultants and administrative bodies can combine both technical-analytical and participative methods, to work on a complex theme within a dynamic process. The management of alpine sheep pastures is not only a traditional agricultural use, but is also rooted within a socio-cultural background. Incorporating these two roots plays a crucial role in the selection of methods and the procedure for planning the alpine management. Thus, communication and systematic exchanges with pasture managers is a central success factor to accomplish long-term improvements. Accompanying the process of change becomes the central challenge for agricultural consultation, in order to bridge the gap between science and rural everyday life.

