

EPD's comments on the draft National Rural Development Programme (2014 – 2020) and its SEA Environment Report

18th July 2014

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Environment Protection Directorate (EPD) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the National Rural Development Programme (RDP) for the period 2014 – 2020 and its SEA Environment Report. EPD's comments on the Scoping Report were provided in June 2014.
- 1.2 The Environment Report is an important step in the SEA process to ensure that any likely significant environmental impacts of the emerging RDP are avoided or suitably addressed at an early stage. Therefore, it is recommended that EPD's comments and the mitigation measures and recommendations in the Environmental Report are taken into account in the revision of the RDP and/or during the subsequent stages of its implementation, including at project selection stage and implementation of specific proposals.
- 1.3 Our comments on the draft RDP and its Environment Report are provided below.

2. General comments

- 2.1 Various measures of the draft RDP are aimed at improving specific aspects of the environment, including the restoration and preservation of biodiversity, Natura 2000 areas, high nature value farmland and the landscape, investment in organic farming, etc. If implemented sensitively, depending on the type of interventions envisaged and other site-specific issues, such measures could possibly have a beneficial impact on the environment. However, there is still concern regarding the extent and type of physical interventions that are likely to come forward under particular RDP measures (e.g. Article 17 and 19), mainly in view of their possible significant and cumulative adverse impacts on environmentally sensitive areas, biodiversity and important landscape features. At this stage, it is difficult to determine with certainty the extent of such potential impacts and therefore, continuous collaboration is required between the responsible authorities, including the new Environment and Resources Authority, to ensure that site-specific physical interventions within or close to sensitive environmental sites and landscape features, such as protected areas, valleys and watercourses, do not result in unacceptable environmental damage.
- 2.2 The probability and significance of these negative environmental impacts will depend on the location and nature of the proposed interventions as well as other relevant site-specific issues and their potential cumulative effects. Generally, the Environment Report highlights the most relevant issues and whether the possible negative impacts of the proposed measures could be addressed at project selection stage, through preliminary environmental assessments including site selection, through project design, detailed project-level environmental assessments, further engagement with EPD and/or during implementation stage. At this stage, EPD recommends that:

- (i) projects involving physical development and/or infrastructure should not jeopardise or adversely affect environmental resources which are targeted for protection and restoration under other RDP environmental measures;
- (ii) emerging environmental issues, particularly those of a strategic nature, should be addressed at an early stage of the RDP process, in order to avoid premature commitments on detailed projects which would result in unacceptable environmental damage; and
- (iii) any projects coming forward under the RDP should comply with Government's relevant environmental policies and plans, such as the National Environment Policy, the Water Catchment Management Plan, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, Natura 2000 Management Plans and related environmental legislation.

Strategic environmental issues and the project selection process

- 2.3 Relevant strategic environmental issues need to be taken into consideration during site selection and project design, before submitting fait accompli projects for the authorisation by the relevant authorities. Addressing strategic environmental issues at an early stage is important in order to prevent unacceptable environmental damage and avoid unnecessary delays at permitting stage.
- 2.4 EPD concurs with the recommendations in Chapter 8 of the Environment Report for the RDP, mainly: (i) the proposed hierarchy of mitigation measures; (ii) training and capacity building; (iii) the selection of projects during implementation; (iv) the siting of new buildings and infrastructure and engagement with EPD; and (v) most of the specific recommendations. Most of the issues and recommendations highlighted in the Environment Report reflect EPD's comments below. We also welcome the recommendation that additional weighting should be given to proposals addressing a number of environmental concerns. In particular, EPD considers that the project selection stage for projects under RDP should seek to give priority to environmentally-sustainable projects which:
- (i) make efficient use of existing legitimate buildings, structures and infrastructure, particularly those in built settlements (this would reduce unnecessary pressure on rural land as a non-renewable resource);
 - (ii) avoid conflicts with important environmental priorities in the first instance, before focusing on detailed design issues;
 - (iii) integrate detailed environmental measures into project design without jeopardising other important environmental priorities; and/or
 - (iv) are specifically intended to protect and conserve the natural, semi-natural and cultural environment (e.g. protection of important natural habitats, management of Natura 2000 sites, restoration of heritage, restoration of degraded land/habitats to their pristine state, ecological conservation of valleys, etc.).
- 2.5 Damage to non-renewable environmental resources and their unique characteristics, together with the unnecessary take-up of undeveloped rural land for physical development, is in most cases irreversible. Such environmental damage would also have consequential adverse impacts on other socio-economic sectors such as education, research, agriculture and tourism. Moreover, a clear distinction needs to be made between different types of environmental projects. Those involving environmental infrastructure (e.g. waste, water, renewable energy, etc.) are intended

to address a specific environmental issue, but these could also result in high-impact on-site interventions having unacceptable or irreversible impacts on sensitive and vulnerable natural and cultural assets, including the landscape. These issues need to be taken into consideration at project selection and project design stages.

- 2.6 Moreover, EPD considers that the positive effects of RDP's environment-related measures depend on:
- the successful uptake of funds for such projects and their proper implementation;
 - the effective protection of important environmental resources from inappropriate high-impact site interventions, including the proper siting of interventions that are positive in principle (e.g. PVs, water management infrastructure, waste facilities, etc.);
 - the detailed direction (or actual management strategy) adopted by the (positive) project, such as restoration vs. open-ended 'rehabilitation' possibly involving diversion to different uses; over-management of protected sites; formalisation of the rural environment; etc;
 - the quality of workmanship and detailed attention to methodology, such as rubble wall reconstruction projects; and
 - compliance with the respective environmental policies, including area-specific management plans (e.g. Natura 2000 sites), as relevant.

Project-level environmental assessment

- 2.7 Various detailed proposals would require project-level environmental assessment and in some instances environmental/nature permitting from EPD. In line with its responsibilities, EPD adopts a holistic approach to environmental assessment projects as part of the development permitting and environmental permitting processes. More detailed environmental studies, such as an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and/or a Habitats Directive Assessment ("Appropriate Assessment") may be required for particular interventions, depending on their location, scale, nature, etc. and the envisaged environmental impacts.

3. Farm and business development

- 3.1 With respect to farm and business development, EPD notes that:

"The overall aim is to utilise the cultural heritage of the islands, and the desire of some tourists to engage in more active holidays to create closer links between rural producers, processors, artisan, and tourism. Imported notions of agro-tourism (e.g. conversion of farm buildings, diversification into bed and breakfast, and other accommodation) developed in neighbouring countries such as Italy will not work on Malta due to the nature of the farming, and the location of farm buildings. There are opportunities and scope for developing a Maltese brand of rural tourism, however, which uses techniques such as establishment or promotion of 'trails' (e.g. religious, historical, food-based) to encourage tourists to explore the wider countryside..." (draft RDP 2014, page 114).

- 3.2 The draft RDP also highlights that land speculation is a concern for the sustainable future of agriculture. The SWOT analysis notes that from an agricultural point of view, rural tourism is not yet well-developed, there is a lack of marketing for rural tourism

and farmers do not see the benefits from rural tourism as yet. There is also an environmental concern that land speculation is competing with genuine agricultural investments and this risks having consequential adverse impacts on the quality of the rural environment, the islands' limited undeveloped rural land, opportunities of farming communities and the already vulnerable natural resources. Agriculture and genuine farm diversification depend on the effective protection of the natural environment, heritage sites and the traditional landscape, since these are unique assets that attract visitors to the wider countryside. In fact, essential agriculture-related development is ancillary to genuine farming rather than vice-versa.

- 3.3 Experience has shown that a thorough understanding of the different types of pressures and interests in rural land and the risks associated with the misuse of agriculture-related titles is essential to properly weed out possible speculative proposals from genuine ones which truly seek to implement the objectives of the RDP for the benefit of farming communities, the environment, society and other dependant sectors such as tourism.
- 3.4 Therefore, a clear distinction needs to be made in terms of the types of physical interventions which essentially require a rural location and those that are more appropriately directed towards built settlements and existing legitimate buildings. In fact, EPD notes that 46 out of the 68 localities in the Maltese Islands are considered rural areas under the RDP. It is also noted that the RDP's definition of rural areas clearly takes into account the connection between the function of certain built settlements, or their potential connection, to farming communities and farm diversification. Various built settlements (or parts thereof), including those within the Development Zone such as Mgarr and Bahrija, are located in a rural context; still have an important agricultural function for farming communities; and/or their historical areas (e.g. UCAs) have a traditional rural character reflecting their past connection to traditional agriculture.
- 3.5 Taking the above into consideration, EPD recommends that the RDP should adopt a clear locational strategy to direct most development-oriented projects away from the open countryside and sensitive environmental areas and towards suitable built settlements (or parts thereof), thereby improving uptake of RDP funds for farming communities, increase opportunities for the reuse and restoration of cultural heritage buildings in built settlements and enhance visitors' overall experience of rural locations and activities. Visitors will also benefit from the wide range of services already available in built settlements (e.g. public transport, shops, other attractions, etc.). Organised visits from built settlements to the countryside, such as for hands-on farm experience and countryside visits, would ensure that both farmers and visitors benefit without resulting in unnecessary damage of the environmental qualities of the countryside.

4. Detailed comments

Biodiversity

- 4.1 It is recommended that references to “National Biodiversity Strategy”, “Biodiversity Action Plan”, “New Biodiversity Strategy”, etc. in the draft RDP are amended to reflect the title of the approved policy, i.e. Malta’s National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2012-2020). References to NBSAP Measures and Targets should preferably be quoted to the actual NBSAP Measure Code and the actual NBSAP Target Number for clarification purposes.
- 4.2 Reference to forests and forest remnants in the draft RDP need to be replaced by wooded areas or woodland to reflect their status.
- 4.3 In various instances, the RDP refers to garrigue and maquis as semi-natural habitats. It is important to highlight that most garrigue and maquis habitats are natural habitats rather than semi-natural. This issue needs to be clarified in the RDP.
- 4.4 The RDP needs to highlight that activities involving the uprooting of trees could in certain instances require clearance or permission from MEPA under the Trees and Woodland Protection Regulations, 2011.

Ecosystem services

- 4.5 The final RDP should elaborate further on ecosystem services. Biodiversity and ecosystem services should be used and tied together throughout the document. Focus on biodiversity alone may not be sufficient to highlight the important interlinkages between biodiversity and agriculture, particularly when considering the provisioning, regulating and supporting services that underpin agriculture productivity and the important services provided by agro-ecosystems and agricultural biodiversity. These include nutrient cycling, decomposition of organic matter and maintenance of soil fertility; pest and disease regulation; pollination; maintenance and enhancement of local wildlife and habitats in their landscape; maintenance of the hydrological cycle; erosion control; climate change mitigation and adaptation; and carbon sequestration (see publication: “Ecosystem services and agriculture: tradeoffs and synergies” <http://rstb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/365/1554/2959.full.pdf+html><http://rstb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/365/1554/2959.full>).

- 4.6 It is also recommended that a specific section on the interlinkages between agriculture and ecosystem services could be included in the RDP under the section on “environmental context”. These important linkages are more understood and better communicated through ecosystem goods and services and hence, should also feature in measures regarding training and advisory services.

Afforestation

- 4.7 The revised RDP needs to take into account the relevant measures of Malta’s NBSAP and the Pan-European Guidelines for Afforestation and Reforestation. It is important to highlight that forestation should be carried out on land of low biodiversity value or ecosystems largely composed of non-native species (following appropriate removal of invasive species using established guidelines) and preferably degraded ones. Ecologically-sensitive forestation schemes, strategically located within the landscape, should be aimed at enhancing habitat connectivity.

Valleys

- 4.8 With respect to valley management, the draft RDP makes various references to the need for valley restoration/rehabilitation for water retention purposes whilst highlighting instances where permits for the restoration and maintenance are not issued on ecological grounds. EPD recommends that these statements should be revised. Whilst various rehabilitation interventions in valleys are permitted in view of their low-impact, high-impact interventions in valleys/watercourses of EU and national ecological and scientific importance could result in irreversible environmental damage and therefore, require environmental assessment on a case-by-case basis. The draft RDP should highlight the importance of valleys and watercourses for water-related ecosystems particularly in the context of the Water Framework Directive and Malta’s Water Catchment Management Plan.

- 4.9 Also see detailed comments below on valley retention systems, valley cleaning, valley partnerships and valley management plans.

Specific comments

| RDP Page | RDP section or reference | EPD comment |
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| 22 | Paragraph 2 | In accordance with the General Report compiled under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive 13.6% of the country has been designated as a Natura 2000 site. |
| 23 | “Geologist suggested that there would be a collapse.....estimate cost to be around €0.40 per cubic metre” | This statement needs to be confirmed by the MEH, since it could have repercussions on various aspects of implementation of the Water Framework Directive (such as exemption requests and Article 9 cost-recovery) and Malta’s recent communication with the Commission at a bilateral meeting on the implementation of the WFD. |
| 24 | Soil salinisation | Reference is made to problems arising from increased soil salinisation. Additional information reflecting the latest soil quality baseline surveys carried out by MEPA is available from http://www.mepa.org.mt/soil-monitoring . |
| 28 | Use of rainwater harvesting facilities and inefficient irrigation systems | Reference is made to the decline in use of rainwater harvesting facilities. In the previous Rural Development Programme and Water Catchment Management Plan, measures aimed at encouraging the construction of such facilities were prepared. Therefore, it would be important to inform the relevant authorities about any bottlenecks identified during the implementation of these measures, particularly since the second Water Catchment Management Plan is currently being drafted. |
| 34 | Conducting soil nitrate tests | Very few farmers have conducted soil tests to date. The LIFE+ project was aimed at all farmers, so that such soil tests could be carried out, it would be helpful to highlight what types of difficulties were encountered in conducting such tests. This is of particular relevance to the future take up of the proposed measure AEM 5: Measure for mitigation of soil erosion, enhancing organic matter and mitigating compaction through the introduction of an SMP (p. 272). |
| 35 | Increase in contamination of water resources by pesticides | It is agreed that nitrate contamination is a cause for concern. It must be clarified that monitoring data has indicated that there is no increasing contamination of waters with high levels of pesticides. Pesticides are not found in groundwaters or surface waters and therefore this statement could raise unnecessary significant concern. EPD notes that the manure generation table is based on 2008 figures. It is unclear whether this is referring only to solid manure or whether it also refers to liquid slurry. |

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| 39 | <p>“Rural tourism developments, as well as nature conservation imperatives, suggest the opportunity for new territorial (area-wide) approaches to biodiversity protection, including the need for ecological corridors to connect the fragmented habitats in the landscape, and the need to focus attention on particular areas in order to have sufficient numbers of farmers involved, to have an impact. These considerations point to the management of such initiatives through area- or valley-management partnerships between farmers and other stakeholders such as local municipalities.”</p> | <p>The context of both paragraphs on area-wide approaches also warrants reference to green infrastructure (GI), considering also the requirements of the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the Communication from the Commission on Green infrastructure. GI is also included in Malta’s NBSAP. GI is a landscape approach that not only contributes to biodiversity conservation but is also relevant to other challenges that are pertinent to the agriculture sector such as climate change and water regulation.</p> |
| 104 | <p>“Nature conservation suggests the need for cooperation and/or territorial (area-wide) approaches to biodiversity protection including the need for ecological corridors to connect the fragmented habitats in the landscape, and the need for focusing attention on particular areas in order to have sufficient numbers of farmers involved in order to have an impact. This is of particular importance on Malta where Natura 2000 sites are relatively isolated, and</p> | |

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| | farming can play a key role in enhancing connectivity. These considerations point to the management of initiatives through area or valley management partnerships.” | |
| 39 | “The Strategy also has targets to ensure forest and semi-natural cover does not decrease below the 2006 CORINE established baseline of 19.1%. In this respect, there are important opportunities to increase the resilience of the existing woodland habitat on Malta (Buskett), by targeted tree-planting and management on adjacent government land.” | <p>The paragraph refers to Target 5 of Malta’s NBSAP, i.e. that by 2020, the rate of loss of natural and semi-natural habitats of conservation value is at least halved, and degradation and fragmentation is significantly reduced. It is important to note that the percentage cover of “forests and semi-natural areas” has not decreased below the CORINE land cover data of 2006.</p> <p>Apart from Target 5, Target 13 is also relevant which states that by 2020, vulnerable ecosystems that provide essential services are safeguarded, with at least 15% of degraded ecosystems restored, while 20% of the habitats of European Community Importance in the Maltese territory have a favourable or improved conservation status. Any reference to habitats in this context should be tied to Annex I habitats of the EU Habitats Directive, also bearing in mind the requirements of the EU Biodiversity Strategy Target 3 and Actions 8 to 12. The latter requirements need to be integrated in the revised RDP since Malta has to report to the Commission on how it implements this target and actions within the agriculture sector and via its RDP.</p> |
| 39 | “The Strategy points to a lack of information on significant numbers of habitats listed under the EU Habitats Directive which hinders protection.” | For the latest status of habitats of EU Community Importance, kindly refer to Malta’s second report in line with Article 17 of the Directive rather than Malta’s NBSAP, since this scenario has changed due to acquired new knowledge. |
| 42 | Landscape and environment | The percentage land area covered by terrestrial Natural 2000 sites is 13.6%. |
| 43 | Agricultural biodiversity | The Convention on Biological Diversity, which includes a specific programme of work on agriculture biodiversity (http://www.cbd.int/decision/cop/default.shtml?id=7147) considers the term “agriculture biodiversity” as ‘a broad term that includes all components of biological diversity of relevance to food and agriculture, and all components of biological diversity that constitute the agro-ecosystem: the variety and variability of animals, plants and micro-organisms, at the genetic, species and ecosystem levels, which are necessary to sustain key functions of the |

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| | | <p>agro-ecosystem, its structure and processes'. It is noted that this section of the RDP focuses more on autochthonous varieties and breeds and agriculture genetic diversity. In this context, reference is also made to the Report from the Commission on Agriculture Genetic Resources – From Conservation to Sustainable Use” - http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/geneticresources/pdf/com-2013-838_en.pdf. This report warrants mention in relation to AEM 6.</p> |
| 47 & 56 | <p>Incorrect implementation of the Nitrates Directive</p> | <p>EPD considers that the identified need for 'Improvement of the Nitrates Action Plan for Malta' as being 'urgent' in order 'to make it more suited to Maltese conditions and prevent inappropriate Investment Decisions based upon unsuitable prescriptions' needs to be clarified further. In particular, it is recommended that the Nitrates Action Committee is informed on any inappropriate investment decisions.</p> <p>Moreover, the proposed European Innovation Partnership approach, that is recommended to test and amend the Nitrates Action Plan, should be elaborated further. It is recommended that this issue should be discussed further with the Nitrates Action Committee.</p> <p>EPD notes that this section of the draft RDP does not make reference to the nitrate issue in coastal waters which is leading to failure to adhere to the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive and the Water Framework Directive. Farm waste management is of crucial relevance to the RDP and therefore such an issue merits acknowledgement in this section. Any measures dealing with biogas generation should also be explained within this context since studies can be prohibitively costly and may discourage the take up of such technologies. Therefore, any feasibility studies required to assess which best technologies could be applicable (considering different combinations of animal wastes (pig/cow) or animal/municipal waste, or solid/liquid fractions) could also be funded by the RDP.</p> |
| 58, 72 & 73 | <p>Valley retention systems, valley cleaning, valley partnerships and valley management plans</p> | <p>The draft RDP includes various references to valley management or maintenance regimes, which require clarification and further discussion with the relevant authorities. Current procedures have been identified and agreed to by a number of authorities (MEH, MGoZ, MTI and MEPA (EPD)). It is also important to ensure that measures affecting valleys are implemented in line with Malta's NBSAP, Water Catchment Management Plan and within the overarching framework of the Natura 2000 Management plans.</p> |

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| | | <p>The demonstration of 'integrated valley management' was called for in Malta's first Water Catchment Management Plan as an overriding measure that considers land use and environmental management at the sub catchment scale. The Water Catchment Management Plan identifies the need to create individual valley management plans under the scrutiny of the Interministerial Committee for Water: valleys should be considered on their own individual merit due to their different functions (ecological, hydrological, cultural, recreational and agricultural importance). For this reason, in addition to the standard procedure and guidance for general clean-up and maintenance of valleys, management plans or 'plan of actions' are required to be drawn up on an individual level to take into account the unique function of each valley environment. The proposal for valley partnerships therefore needs to be assessed in the light of this procedure and any necessary consultations with the respective entities carried out.</p> |
| 81 | <p>Description of the Strategy: "The RDP for 2014-20 will not solve all the problems afflicting rural areas in Malta over a single programming cycle, as some issues (such as land fragmentation, permitting systems and water metering), require significant political will in other policy areas in order to change laws, customary practices, and behaviour (Environmental Protection Department, Comment on the RDP 2014-20)"</p> | <p>This comment was not made by MEPA's Environment Protection Directorate and therefore, needs to be clarified.</p> |
| 85 | <p>"The Strategy points to a lack of information on significant numbers of habitats listed under the EU Habitats Directive which hinders protection. It also points out that 44% of species on</p> | <p>For the latest status of species of EU Community Importance, kindly refer to Malta's second report in line with Article 17 of the Directive rather than the NBSAP, since this scenario has changes due to acquired knowledge.</p> |

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| | Malta and 64% of habitats to not have favourable status and require 'enhanced conservation action'." | |
| 85 | "The SWOT analysis identified the failure to address water problems as both a major weakness, and as a potential threat to future development. Many of the problems are institutional, stemming from a lack of metering and control over-abstraction (not just in agriculture but across all sectors of the economy), and include failure to maintain water retention structures, conflicting policy and action from different government agencies, and inefficient irrigation systems." | This statement requires revision in order to acknowledge current set ups intended to manage water resources holistically. The Water Catchment Management Plan and the National Water Policy sets the framework or policy coordination and synergistic action where the management of water resources is concerned. Moreover, several measures have been taken up to protect and regulate water resources. Therefore, any emerging issues or shortages need to be communicated to the respective authorities. |
| 86 | "As the new Biodiversity Strategy suggests, there is a need for joined-up policy in some areas, although not all of these problems can be solved by the RDP measures alone, some will require changes at the political and institutional level in order to ensure more efficient utilisation of water resources." | The main purpose of Malta's NBSAP is to mainstream biodiversity considerations into sectoral policies, plans and programmes as required by Article 6 of the Convention on Biological Diversity. It is recommended that rather than reference to "joined-up" policies, the revised RDP needs to refer to integrate or mutually-supportive policies. In the case of water resources, reference should be made to the Water Catchment Management Plan and Malta's Water Policy. |
| 90 | "Raising awareness of soil requirements will also enable more efficient utilisation of livestock manure, significant amounts of which | There is a significant environmental in-principle concern regarding the use of pig slurry for application on fields due to the increased significant risk of nitrate contamination of surface and groundwaters, health issues and odour problems. EPD considers that this should not be promoted in the RDP. |

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| | are currently wasted (e.g. pig slurry goes to the treatment plant).” | |
| 101-102 | References to the NBSAP Targets | Each NBSAP target has the timeline “by 2020”. |
| 112 | “Improved management of livestock wastes will also contribute to reductions in Nitrous Oxide emissions if bio-gas generators prove economically viable to operate.” | It is unclear whether economic feasibility studies to investigate best available technologies related to bio-gas generators will also be funded under the proposed RDP. |
| 169 | Reference to the description of the measure ‘Knowledge transfer and information actions’ and the list of topics that require increased knowledge and understanding. | The revised RDP should, apart from the development of skills regarding the requirements and operation of biodigestion plants, also consider funding the assessment of best available techniques for biodigestion. |
| 171 | “Improved understanding of the relationship between agricultural practice and natural processes and ecosystems, effective stewardship and management, and good practice in sustainable techniques”. | The improvement of understanding moves hand in hand with the implementation of the Natura 2000 management plans. Particular measures are overlapping and therefore, implementation of the RDP and Natura 2000 management plans requires effective collaboration between the responsible Authorities. |
| 171 | “Collective training for rural actors within the context of new area/valley management partnerships, covering landscape planning and management, ecological understanding, conservation, and practical skills, at various levels (e.g. basic, advanced, or specialised)” | Integrated valley management would also require specialized training for regulatory authorities (as also highlighted by the figure presented in the RDP on page 173). |
| 175 | Focus Area 4B: Improving water management | Training related to water management in valley environments needs to be taken into consideration together with valley management partnerships. The enhancement of water |

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| | <p>“Training to address Malta’s need will directly promote improved water management, reduced groundwater abstraction and enhanced efficiency in rainwater capture and use”</p> | <p>management in these areas requires an integrated approach and therefore, specialized training in this regard needs to be organized hand in hand with any training on valley management (also see comment above).</p> |
| 201 | <p>Measure 15 Advisory Services and information Actions “A number of core staff within the Farm Advisory services, cooperatives (such as the pig or dairy cooperatives), or the MA itself, need to develop a higher level of expertise in a specialist area.”</p> | <p>Training should be extended to professionals who do not necessarily work in farm advisory services or the MA. Such training would also be beneficial to professionals working on related areas requiring expert assistance identified by the RDP.</p> |
| 216 - 217 | <p>Measure 17 – “EU requirements on water and nitrates must be met. New equipment is required to help farms improve the efficiency of input use on farms (fertilisers, pesticides and water).” “Farm and land generated wastes require improved handling and management including collection systems for recycling of plastic wastes from polytunnels with limited lifetimes, and from plastic irrigation pipes.”</p> | <p>The need to improve slurry storage and management needs to be highlighted, in order to address current issues affecting the overall environment, surface water quality and the operation of water treatment facilities.</p> |
| 217 | <p>Measure 17 – “There is scope for much greater rainwater capture, reducing farmers’</p> | <p>The last sentence in this paragraph needs revision, since the construction of reservoirs, etc. does not address the problem of soil sealing.</p> |

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| | <p>reliance on boreholes; this requires new investment in infrastructure (reservoirs, gutters and other collecting equipment on buildings, surface channels between fields and new or restored reservoirs). This will also address in part the problem of soil sealing.”</p> | |
| 241 | <p>Measure 19 – Farm and business development, to support non farm businesses that can see opportunities to offer new services to farmers under this theme: “Support is provided for diversification of agricultural into a non-agricultural activity undertaken in rural areas, or for non-agricultural rural business development, which must be in line with the goals and anticipated outcomes of the Malta Partnership Agreement and Malta RDP strategy”.</p> | <p>EPD notes the definition of rural areas in the RDP. This definition clearly takes into consideration the function of particular settlements and their connection to agriculture, including interrelated socio-economic aspects of farming communities. In this context, EPD recommends further improvement to Measure 19 by including a locational strategy for rural development and farm businesses to ensure the successful uptake and implementation of this measure. EPD considers that there are opportunities to direct most of these projects to existing built settlements, thereby strengthening the existing connection of these settlements with farming (e.g. Mgarr, Bahrija) and/or increase opportunities for the reuse and maintenance of the historic built fabric in various Urban Conservation Areas having a typical rural character. Considering that built settlements already provide a wide range of existing services (e.g. public transport and other commodities), there is a better chance of implementing successful RDP projects under this measure. This will also direct pressure for the construction of new buildings and structures away from the sensitive environmental locations of the countryside, thereby protecting its openness, character, landscape qualities and agricultural land. Farmers could benefit further through organised visits from built settlements to their farms and surrounding countryside, which may include activities like visitors’ informal enjoyment of the countryside or direct on-farm experience. In this regard, EPD agrees that Malta needs to develop its own type of rural/agro tourism which should seek to protect natural, semi-natural and landscape resources.</p> <p>Apart from endorsement by MTA, EPD needs to be engaged proactively in these projects in view of its responsibilities regarding the protection and management of sensitive environmental locations and resources.</p> |

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| 247 | General description of Measure | Buskett is the largest semi-natural wooded area in Malta and it is already used for recreation. Although public access to Malta's woodland is not restricted, it requires proper management. |
| 253 | Description of the Operation | Important woodland areas, such as Buskett, are protected through various designations such as SAC, SPA, Bird Sanctuaries and Tree Protection Areas. Management Plans are also being prepared for all terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, including woodland areas, and these areas have or will have in the immediate future the necessary infrastructure to ensure their protection and conservation. Accessibility to these areas is not restricted, but requires management according to the relevant management plans and conservation objectives. |
| 255 | Measure 25 – Investments improving the resilience and environmental value of forest ecosystems Verifiability and controllability of the measures: “Any interventions approved must also carry the necessary endorsement of the competent authorities to ensure full compliance with all planning and environmental EU and National legislation” | Further discussions are required in order to establish procedures regarding engagement with EPD (new Environment and Resources Authority), including consultation, permitting and monitoring of such activities. |
| 262 | “Any activity that involves alien plant removal and/or native plant conservation translocation (such as a reintroduction) within a Natura 2000 site or other protected area requires prior authorisation from the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA)” | The removal of alien species and/or the planting of native plants within SACs would require authorization if the project is likely to have an impact on biodiversity and the SAC. It should be noted that the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations, 2006 (as amended) only controls the re-introduction of organisms which belong to an extinct or endangered native species which has declined or disappeared as a result of human intervention or a natural disaster. (Definition of re-introduction as laid down in Regulation 3 as the mentioned Legal Notice). |
| 262 | “When applying for this measure farmers must produce photographic | The photographic evidence should be verified through the use of MEPA's orthophotos. Past orthophotos would show whether the plants shown in the photos were planted recently. |

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| | evidence easily identifying the type of tree and it/ their location(s) on the holding.” | Farmers whose holdings fall within protected areas must also submit proof of MEPA’s written authorisation for such interventions. |
| 261-264 | Sections on Tree Planting Measures & Sub measure (A) re. Support for the replacement of Invasive Species with Endemic and Indigenous tree species | <p>Reference to invasive species should be changed to ‘alien invasive species’.</p> <p>Due to the eradication and management obligations that Malta will have once the EU Regulation on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species (IAS) is in force, it is suggested that eligibility should not be restricted to Annex III species and would be extended to cover relevant invasive alien species of EU and national concern. Invasive species will not necessarily be limited to trees and therefore, remedial action cannot be limited to the plants of Annex IV species of the 2002 Landscaping Guidelines. A direct reference to the upcoming EU IAS Regulation should be given in relation to AEM 2 (2a) since it will be directly applicable to Malta. Apart from the 2002 Landscaping Guidelines, the implementation of AEM 2 should be in line with MEPA’s 2013 Guidelines on managing non-native plant invaders and restoring native plant communities in terrestrial settings in the Maltese Islands available at: http://www.mepa.org.mt/file.aspx?f=9658.</p> <p>It should be noted that tree planting may not always be the desired remedial action and therefore such decisions should be case-specific and bearing in mind the ecological context of the area. In particular, no trees should be planted on garrigue, other important natural features and in important tree-less landscapes.</p> <p>Some species like Acacia require prolonged control since cutting down one tree will actually promote the sprouting of many others. The idea should be to tackle alien trees by area and farmers should be paid for controlling alien species in the area and not a single individual.</p> <p>Regarding the replacement of specified invasive species with 2 endemic / indigenous species, it should be specified that the endemic species may be either trees or shrubs according to the habitat in question.</p> |

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| | | The RDP states that this measure will apply to invasive species mentioned in Annex III. However, such annex was not included with the draft RDP. It is assumed that this refers to the 2002 Landscaping Guidelines. |
| 264-265 | Sub measure B): Support for the planting of Endemic and Indigenous tree species on terraced fields and sloping land | <p>This measure, regarding the planting of trees, needs to ensure that important natural habitats, species and landscape features are not adversely affected by tree planting initiatives. Moreover, the context and sensitivity of the affected/surrounding environment needs to be taken into consideration when determining the location and type of planting that should be supported under this measure.</p> <p>Apart from planting of trees, the measures should also include where appropriate shrubs which are typical of the natural habitat and landscape features of the area.</p> <p>Whilst the control of the <i>Arundo donax</i> may be deemed commendable, it is important to ensure that the control of this reed is covered by a MEPA's EPD permit, especially in sensitive areas such as Bahrija.</p> |
| 265-266 | Sub measure C): Support for the control of <i>Arundo Donax</i> in valley systems | <p>The MEPA 2013 Guidelines need to be appropriately applied under this measure while noting that protected species may be associated with reed habitats. Removal of <i>Arundo Donax</i> in protected areas also requires a Nature Permit from MEPA's EPD.</p> <p>It is also recommended that the statement "The habitats which this measure would be targeting are protected by the EC Habitats Directive" should be revised to clarify that this measure aims to reduce pressure on protected habitats and species associated with watercourses.</p> <p>This section needs to make reference to MEPA's guidance document on alien species.</p> |
| 279 | Holm Oak/ Carob/ Mulberry | The Carob tree is also protected under national legislation. This tree is listed under Schedule II (Trees Protected in Certain Areas) of the Trees and Woodlands Protection Regulations, 2011 (LN 200 of 2011). |
| 282 | Measure 28 (Agri-environmental and climate measures): verifiability and controllability of the measures | EPD needs to be engaged in the control of activities related to planting of trees; removal of invasive species; planting of endemic and indigenous species; and support for control of <i>Arundo donax</i> . |

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| 311 | Mulberry | The Carob, Mulberry and Oak trees are all protected through the Trees and Woodlands Protection Regulations, 2011 and consequently the felling, uprooting or removal of such trees require vetting and pre-approval from MEPA's EPD. |
| 378 | Theme 4 (Landscape and the environment) | EPD is unclear how the "programme effects on the conservation and enhancement of landscape and biodiversity" and the "impact of the programme on restoring vulnerable areas" will be measured. It is important to highlight that the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 requires Member States to integrate biodiversity quantified targets in their RDPs. The evaluation of the effects on the RDP and whether they are truly benefiting biodiversity is an important consideration which is also mentioned in the SEA Environment Report: "Management of the implementation of measures will be an important factor in ensuring that potential positive environmental impacts identified do in fact ensue and are maximised." Therefore, EPD considers that the revised RDP should specify the type of output, results and impacts indicators that will be used in this regard. |