The influence of a privatized agricultural extension system on farmers’ acceptance of agri-environmental measures: A case study in north-east Brandenburg, Germany.

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Abstract

Great efforts have been made to reduce environmental impacts of agricultural practices all over the world. Environmental targets are set, programs with manifold agri-environmental measures are developed and policies and regulations are implemented. This research explores the influence of agricultural extension, information transfer and communication on farmers’ acceptance of agri-environmental measures (AEM) and their attitude towards the agricultural environment within the research area of north-east Brandenburg. The Biosphere Reserve Schorfheide-Chorin (BRSC) is located within the research area. Agricultural extension is the application of new knowledge and scientific research to the agricultural sector through the education of farmers. Within this study extension or advisory will entail the service of advising the clients, product consultation, but also the provision of information as well as the provision of seminars and winter schooling. The federal state of Brandenburg has a privatized agricultural extension system, where farmers have to pay for extension services. However, the BRSC administration offers environmental extension to farmers within the BRSC on a voluntary basis and free of charge. Five interviews with two farmers operating within the BRSC and three farmers operating outside of the BRSC have been conducted, to evaluate the differences of the extension services and their influence on AEM acceptance. The interviews were standardized, semi-structured and followed a predeveloped interview questionnaire. The questionnaire was subdivided into three main parts: (I) Farm and farmer characteristics, (II) AEMs, (III) Agricultural extension. The interviews have been analyzed using a qualitative content analysis scheme according to Mayring (2014). The results indicate that farmers do have a positive attitude towards the agricultural environment and show an environmental awareness. AEMs are perceived as having a positive influence on the agricultural environment. Financial aspects, flexibility, suitability and the outlay of the application process, were identified as important influencing factors for AEM implementation. For an industry depending on fluctuating environmental and climate conditions a greater level of flexibility is requested by the participants of this study. It has also been criticized, that AEMs lack inclusivity and do not target intensive agriculture. General information sources of the participants have been the regional agricultural offices, other farmers, the internet and information events. However, the agricultural offices have the most significant importance for the participants. Due to the fact that they are exposed to nature conservation on a more regular basis, the farmers within the BRSC have a higher aspiration for good quality environmental extension services. They do know where to obtain information on the agricultural environment and make use of private extension services. All participants confirmed a lack of good quality agricultural extension. Furthermore, the information that is provided by public institution is evaluated as mediocre and barely sufficient. Agricultural offices, extension circles and a more flexible and inclusive program design pose great potentials for an increased acceptance and implementation of AEMs within the research area.