

Report of the meeting with the Slovenian stakeholders for the Sustainable Farm Animal Breeding and Reproduction Technology Platform

Report by Anne-Marie Neeteson, European Forum of Farm Animal Breeders

The meeting with the Slovenian stakeholders of the Sustainable Farm Animal Breeding and Reproduction Technology Platform was held in Domzale near Ljubljana on 22nd May 2007. The meeting was hosted by the Zootechnical Department of the Biotechnological Faculty of the University of Ljubljana

Professor Dragomir Kompan, the head of the Department of Animal Science acted as the local contact to organise the meeting. Representatives of the Slovenian farmer's organisations, the Ministry of Agriculture and from the University and research organisations were invited to attend the meeting. A total of 22 people attended the meeting.

After a word of welcome by prof.dr. Janez HRIBAR (dean of Biotechnical faculty), prof. dr. Dragomir Kompan gave a short introduction about the goal of the meeting and the programme of the morning. Anne-Marie Neeteson presented the Technology Platform in the subsequent presentation: the reason of the set up of the platform, its activities so far, and an invitation to the audience to critically contribute to the Strategic Research Agenda and indicate the needs and special items of interest for Slovenia. The powerpoint slides were put on the screen in the Slovenian language. Thereafter, Prof. dr. Milena Kovač gave an excellent overview of the animal breeding prospective in Slovenia. The audience got involved in a good discussion on Slovenian circumstances and on exploring the possibilities to set up a Slovenian National Platform.

An overview of Slovenian characteristics and the major discussion points:

1. Slovenia is a relatively small country, with small animal populations in a variety of different conditions.
2. The agricultural area is less suitable for farming – the family farms are small, providing low levels of income.
3. Farmers in Slovenia are not organised – there is no tradition of breeding organisations, and there is a tendency to adopt foreign technologies and import breeding stock rather than to develop the local breeds and products into higher level high quality breeds and specialties. The level of knowledge is low, and a lot of the production is still taking place according to 'old habits'.
4. It is remarked that honeybee production and honeybee breeding are important for Slovenia.
5. The typical Slovenian farm animal is the pig.
6. The research is organised along small research groups, both in animal breeding (agricultural department) and biotechnology (veterinary department) characterised as follows: most topics are covered, the research equipment is limited, cooperation between the groups could much improve, individuals are recognised for their (high quality) results, but the output in international journals could be higher.
7. Currently 150 people are working in animal science, amongst them 12 in pigs, 5 in sheep, cattle and poultry breeding. There are some 25 young PhDs, 50 people working in research and education, 25 technicians developing and working on the breeding programmes. Slovenia is running breeding programmes and developing genetic evaluations for pig, sheep and goat. This is paid for by the government. The legal entity to run the projects is the University of Ljubljana.
8. There is an agricultural institute doing research on meat quality, nutrition, environment (e.g. methane), breeding (e.g. genotype environment interaction cattle). A specialist on honeybee is also working for this organisation.
9. Transfer to the Slovenian practice is missing, as it is not organised enough and the education of the farmers is not specialised enough. Furthermore, the 'industry' is not able to support research financially. Science is taking place for the art of the science.
10. The government has undertaken a good effort to adjust the Slovenian practice to EU regulations. They are not in favour of intensification of the production, as a large proportion of the countryside is covered with woods. Currently, the financial support for extension service and

research in animal production is decreasing, while the topics are being broadened to molecular genetics, agro-economy.

11. A good discussion took place on the opportunities for Slovenia to take care of its indigenous products and breeds, while developing them further in a sustainable, yet economically viable way. This would not be a possibility for the agricultural ministry nor the agricultural community only. It is an issue that should concern society at large. It was decided to explore the possibilities with various ministries to take up the building of a sustainable range of typical high level Slovenian products linked to breeds, and at the same time to other uses of the countryside: nature preservation, tourism.

12. The general public require high production and safety standards, while animal products should be cheap. However, the level of trust of Slovenian producers is still to be improved (history, some scandals). The image of farming in the country is not high at the moment.

13. Slovenian producers have had a tough job to adjust to EU regulations. Breeders are in the first place looking to improve and optimise production, in order not to go bankrupt. This includes imports.

14. Ideally, animal breeding, in order to develop and be able to serve Slovenian breeds and breeders, should:

Cater for new breeding objectives (robustness, survival, longevity, competitiveness, disease resistance)

Develop (better) testing procedures (crossbred information, incorporation of molecular genetics, covering various environments)

Develop knowledge and expertise to support the (economic) viability of small populations and genetic diversity

Improve genetic evaluation, selection schemes, efficiency analysis

15. This will not take place automatically, due to the

(1) low level of education and organisation of farmers

(2) lack of breeding organisation.

Therefore, a Slovenian National Breeding Platform, including various ministries, breed organisations or larger farmers, scientists, could be very useful to develop a strategic development and action plan on animal breeding and reproduction

a. identification of low cost production (to cater for daily products) and typical production (to link with environment, landscape, tourism)

b. set out development strategies

c. organise commitment amongst government, farmers, research and education

d. organise/develop training and education (also lower level education)

e. widen extensions service to farmer's information service?

f. improve breeding value development, including better software, inclusion of molecular genetics, efficiency analysis, genetic diversity strategies

g. link the various research groups, and set up strategic cooperations with foreign research groups (e.g. between the EADGENE veterinary faculties)

h. investigate which parts can be organised jointly or in cooperation with neighbour countries, e.g. Croatia.

16. Major conclusions:

- To set up a national breeding platform including the various stakeholders and various ministries, e.g. initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture

- Closer cooperation is desirable

- Transfer of knowledge is important

- There is a need for information about various funding mechanisms

- Make animal breeding production, breeding and science again attractive for young people