

1. Motivation to take part in the Divgrass project

The Flemish Land Agency (VLM) is a government organization that represents societal interests, and the importance of grasslands is often underestimated. As a bridge-builder, VLM aims to reconcile and connect different interests—environmental and economic. The Divgrass project integrates both aspects, making it highly relevant for VLM's participation.

Environmental values of Divgrass

1. **Carbon Sequestration:** Grasslands store significant amounts of carbon in their deep root systems, helping to mitigate climate change. Through Divgrass, we aim to encourage farmers to shift towards more herb-rich grassland parcels. Herbs typically have deeper and more diverse root systems than grass alone, which improves water infiltration and contributes to a more stable moisture balance in the soil. This makes the parcel more resilient to both drought and heavy rainfall.
2. **Biodiversity Habitat:** Grasslands support a wide variety of plants, insects, birds, and mammals—many of which are unique to these ecosystems.
In this project, we are piloting a bird monitoring technique that is new to VLM and about which we still have some reservations regarding its reliability. Bird detection based on sound—also known as acoustic monitoring—is a method that identifies and tracks bird species by analyzing their calls and songs. This technique uses software and mobile applications trained to recognize specific bird sounds, often through artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. While still emerging, this approach is innovative and shows promising potential but it can only detect birds based on sound saying nothing about the whereabouts of the birds (e.g. are they nesting in the area or just passing by).
Grasslands also provide habitat for bees and other pollinators that are essential for agriculture.
3. **Soil Health:** Grasslands prevent erosion, enhance soil fertility, and promote water retention. Healthy soil can efficiently retain and release nutrients and water to plants. It also has a good structure that allows air, water, and roots to move freely.
4. **Water Filtration:** Native grasses help filter rainwater and recharge underground aquifers.

Economic values

Grasslands support grazing for cattle, sheep, and other livestock, making them essential for meat and milk production. Divgrass focuses particularly on the relationship between different types of grasslands and milk yield.

In the project, we compare the value of various managed grasslands with different herb compositions. We have agreed on a sampling framework, and these samples will be analyzed. Through this, we hope to clearly demonstrate the added value for dairy farmers.

Grasslands also contribute to scenic landscapes and a sense of open space, which benefits mental well-being. Additionally, some local communities have cultural ties to grasslands.

2. Your task in the project is to identify policy action areas – at regional, national, and European levels. In your view, which levers are crucial to provide better legal support for biodiverse grasslands?

European Level – Relevant for Grasslands

- **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP):** Grasslands are included under greening measures and eco-schemes.
- **Natura 2000:** Focuses on the protection of biodiversity, including grassland habitats.

Advantages

- Provides uniform guidelines for environmental and agricultural policy.
- Offers subsidies and support through EU funds (e.g. CAP).
- Enables a cross-border approach to climate and biodiversity challenges.

Disadvantages

- Limited flexibility for region-specific solutions.
- Policies may be too general to address local needs.
- Decision-making processes can be bureaucratic and slow.

National Level – Belgium

- Includes nature management plans and agricultural transition strategies.
- Implements EU frameworks like the CAP through national strategic plans.

Advantages

- Better alignment with national priorities (e.g. nitrogen reduction).
- Allows adaptation to the country's specific agricultural structure and ecological context.

Disadvantages

- Potential conflicts with broader European objectives.
- Still relatively centralized, sometimes lacking flexibility for local needs.

Local Level – Provinces, Municipalities, Farmers, Nature Organizations

- Focus on agri-environmental and landscape management.
- Development of local pilot projects for species-rich grasslands or extensive grazing systems.

Advantages

- High degree of customization.
- Direct involvement of farmers, citizens and local stakeholders.
- Greater support and effectiveness at ground level.

Disadvantages

- Limited budgets and resources.

- Success depends on coordination and cooperation among various actors.

A Multi-Level Approach Is Essential An effective strategy requires a combination of all levels:

- **European level:** Sets the framework and provides funding.
- **National level:** Translates the framework into country-specific policies.
- **Local level:** Ensures tailored implementation and practical innovation.

3. Belgium has varying agricultural structures – for example, between Flanders and Wallonia. How do such differences influence the implementation of climate resilience measures in grassland areas?

Grassland policy differs significantly between Flanders and Wallonia, despite both regions being subject to Belgian and EU regulations. These differences are due to the high degree of regionalization in agricultural and environmental policy in Belgium.

Flanders

- **Responsible authorities:** Department of Agriculture & Fisheries and Department of Environment (VLM is part of the latter).
- **Focus:** Intensive agriculture with higher livestock density.
- **Approach:** Strong emphasis on administration, monitoring, and regulation.
- **Grassland use:** Primarily for productivity, less for biodiversity.
- **CAP:** Stricter rules on permanent grassland preservation.

Wallonia

- **Responsible authority:** Service Public de Wallonie (SPW – Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment).
- **Focus:** Extensive farming with larger areas of permanent grassland.
- **Approach:** Greater emphasis on agroecological practices and biodiversity.
- **Grassland use:** More natural and species-rich.
- **CAP:** Higher participation in agri-environmental measures.

Agri-Environmental Measures under the CAP

Flanders

- Lower participation in voluntary agri-environmental schemes.
- Policy focus remains on efficiency and productivity.
- Example: Limited support for herb-rich grasslands.

Wallonia

- Higher participation in agri-environment-climate measures (AECMs).
- Stronger appreciation for ecological and landscape values.

Conclusion

- **Flanders** follows a more technical, production-oriented policy with strict monitoring.
- **Wallonia** adopts a more ecological and landscape-focused approach, emphasizing voluntary measures and biodiversity.

Both regions adapt European guidelines to their own agricultural structures and policy visions, resulting in noticeable differences in how grasslands are managed and protected.

Grassland Management Characteristics

Aspect	Flanders	Wallonia
Livestock density	High	Lower
Grassland types	More productive (e.g., ryegrass-based)	More species-rich, mixed grasslands
Biodiversity policy	Strictly regulated (via conservation targets)	More voluntary (via management contracts)
Grassland conversion	Strictly controlled (permanent grassland rules)	Slightly more flexible

4. What are your expectations for the DivGrass project in terms of policy recommendations? Where do you see the greatest potential impact – e.g. in the CAP, in land management, or in funding instruments?

Species-rich grasslands can support key policy objectives in several areas:

1. **Biodiversity** – Enhancing the diversity of plants, insects, birds, and soil organisms.
We still have some doubts about whether herbs truly add value for insects and birds.
2. **Climate Policy** – Promoting carbon sequestration and improving resilience to drought.
3. **Water Management** – Enhancing water infiltration and reducing nutrient runoff.
This is a clear and measurable objective.
4. **Agricultural Policy** – Supporting more sustainable and resilient dairy farming systems.
5. **Nature and Landscape Policy** – Enriching landscapes and strengthening the link between agriculture and nature.

Policy recommendations could include:



- Providing incentives or payments for ecological grassland management.
- Including species-rich grasslands in eco-schemes under the CAP.
- Supporting education and outreach programs for farmers and advisors.
- Integrating grassland use into broader climate and biodiversity strategies.

5. Looking back at your work in the project and at VLM: What insight or experience would you like to share with others working at the intersection of agriculture, law, and environmental policy?

At VLM, we operate at the intersection of agriculture and nature. This position often leads to criticism—some say we lack a clear direction or fail to take a firm stance. However, this in-between role also allows us to act as a **platform for dialogue**, helping to reconcile conflicting interests and create added value for both agriculture and the environment.

As part of our innovation efforts, VLM has acquired a **drone**, and one staff member has been trained and certified as a certified drone pilot. We hope that drone imagery, combined with the development of a dedicated app, will allow us to **map grasslands into different categories**.

This would enable us to conduct **botanical mapping** more objectively and efficiently, providing farmers with more tailored feedback. Ultimately, this tool could support the development of **new compensation schemes**, for example under eco-schemes or agri-environmental measures (AEMs).

Our ambition is to create an **objective tool** that can be widely applied—allowing farmers themselves to:

- Inventory herbaceous species in their grasslands
- Assess both ecological and economic value
- Link this information to potential compensation through agricultural policy, implemented by the Department of Agriculture or VLM