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16.2 National rural network

The rural network consists of the main stakeholders involved in implementing the programme from both administration and among civic organisations. The authorities participating in the implementation of the programmes that are part of the rural network include officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Agency for Rural Affairs and, representing regional administration, the Government of Åland, Employment and Economic Development Centres, Environment Centres and municipal rural business authorities. Authorities responsible for the implementation of the Structural Funds and the EFF, as well as research institutes working in the fields of agriculture and rural areas, will also be invited to participate in the network.

A broad representation of NGOs will be invited to participate: it is hoped that representatives from all advisory and producer organisations and the main environmental, animal protection, rural and village development organisations and associations will participate in the network. In addition to these, organisations for women, youth and culture in rural areas will be involved in the work. Important local actors in the network include local action groups, village associations and other associations for rural development work.

The rural network will serve all the areas covered by the programme, key actors and their stakeholders and support regional networking. The aim of the activity is to increase information on the opportunities and results of the programme among stakeholders, potential beneficiaries and the general public, and to improve the transfer of information between the authorities implementing the programme and stakeholders. Exchanging experiences of the programme will improve skills. The rural network will be up and running during 2007 and will run for the whole programming period 2007–2013.

A rural network unit will be set up to coordinate the rural network, which will employ 5–8 people. Provisions on the party responsible for the activities of the rural network, the action plan and the approval of the action plan are laid down in the Act on the Management of the Rural Development Programmes (532/2006) and the Government Decree issued under it. The rural network unit is a unit of the Department of Agriculture in Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The rural network unit works in close cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Agency for Rural Affairs that will be set up. Unit's post is in Seinäjoki. The rural network unit will carry out the tasks assigned to the network in different ways: by performing them itself, by tendering for external services, or in cooperation with other actors and authorities. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry controls the financial performance of the rural network unit.

A steering group will be established to guide the work of the rural network unit and it will include representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Agency for Rural Affairs and the rural network. An action plan, which is processed by the steering group, is drawn up to plan the activities of the rural network. The action plan will be specified in annual plans that will be

processed by the steering group and the Monitoring Committee. The operations of the rural network will be reported on in connection with reporting on the programme and will be presented to the programme's Monitoring Committee.

All the parties taking part in the implementation and activities of the programme can belong to the rural network. A consultation was held on the rural network in May 2006, to which potential participants in the network were invited. Stakeholders will be widely consulted and an open consultation on the rural network will be held in 2007 before approving the action plan for the rural network.

The tasks of the rural network are:

- to communicate on the measures and aid schemes of the programme and related current topics e.g. via the Internet and various kinds of publications;
- to organise meetings and training sessions on rural development themes in, for example, national seminars;
- to compile and disseminate information on training and events related to rural development and programme implementation by, for example, maintaining a joint events calendar on the Internet;
- to cooperate with the Managing Authority and the local action groups in drawing up a training plan for local action groups and their stakeholders;
- to assist the authorities, where necessary, in the planning and organisation of training, seminars and events and in producing training material;
- to compile, analyse and disseminate information on rural development and good practices for the related aid schemes;
- to promote networking among rural actors and maintenance of the networks according to, for example, target groups or sectors;
- to promote cooperation in international and cross-border projects and the exchange of information;
- to maintain contacts with and disseminate information to the rural network of the EU and the rural networks of the other EU Member States.

The funding for the rural network is divided between setting-up costs and the costs of the action plan. Setting-up costs include the expenses incurred from maintaining the activities of the network unit, such as the expenses incurred from managing the staff, drawing up outsourced service agreements and preparing the meetings of the steering group. The annual work input of a maximum of two persons is included in the setting-up costs of the network unit. The preliminary allocation of public funding for administrative costs is EUR 1.000 million and for the action plan EUR 12.000 million. The amount of administrative costs is according to the conditions of Article 41(2) of the implementing Regulation.