

## CASE STUDY NL-4

### SKYLARK: INTENSIVE ARABLE FARMERS MOVING TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

#### BRIEF PROFILE OF THE CASE STUDY

Skylark is a national-level private initiative which aims to move arable farming in the Netherlands towards a more sustainable pathway. In 2015, the Skylark initiative gathered some 388 (mostly) conventional farmers which together manage 8.7% of the arable area in the Netherlands. There is a membership fee to be involved in the Skylark projects. Skylark participants are required to draft an annual individual sustainability plan for their farm, in which all 10 Skylark sustainability indicators need to be addressed within 4 years. Skylark is organised in 40 regional groups across the Netherlands, which have at least 6 meetings per year. In addition, there are supra-regional meetings for knowledge-building. Various companies along the food supply chain are also involved, requiring sustainability improvements.

Skylark is highly relevant for PEGASUS as it provides a successful example of innovative governance arrangement. The participation of members is based on personal motivation to improve, flexibility to choose measures, self-monitoring, social learning and peer-to-peer accountability.



*'Midden Brabant' group: nine arable farmers in the De Dommel area discuss soil and water issues*

#### KEY FACTORS IMPACTING THE PROVISION OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

In the De Dommel area in the Netherlands, intensive arable production has led to poor water quality. Arable farmers grow a limited number of specialist crops and cannot complete full crop rotations on their own land. Farmers spend the winter period on finding land for next season, including land of livestock farmers. As a result, 'land rotates' instead of crops. This has consequences for soil management: uncertain quality of hired land, only short-term investments in soil health, and low interest in multi-annual buffer strips. To improve water quality, a Skylark group in the region wants to layout buffer strips in exchange for water board land. According to the group, raising soil organic matter is important for soil fertility (better production), soil structure (less stagnant water) and storage of moisture in the soil (less irrigation needed). This would also result in less leakage of nutrients to ground and surface water. Barriers to raising soil organic matter, according to the farmers, are the practice of 'land rotation' and rules limiting use of fertilizer and especially animal manure (national legislation based on Nitrates Directive).



#### EMERGING FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Intensive arable production and the practice of 'land rotation' has resulted in poor surface water quality and concerns about soil health in the De Dommel area. Soil is becoming a 'common pool resource' for which collective action is required. Land seems a key factor in governance for sustainability. The Skylark approach seems effective in motivating farmers and building their knowledge and capacity. In the De Dommel area, the local Skylark group develops measures for improving soil health and water quality in interaction with officials from the Water Board agency. One of the weaknesses found is that effectiveness of the outcomes is unknown because in the Skylark approach, efforts are monitored but results are not. In the case study area, more fine-grained monitoring of water quality by the Water Board would be welcomed by the farmers of the Skylark group.

