



An analysis of the subjective opinion of farmer stakeholders to implementation of the EU Nitrates Directive in the Republic of Ireland.

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The 1991 Nitrates Directive is one of the earliest pieces of EU legislation aimed at controlling and improving water quality. The Directive aims to minimise surplus phosphorus (P) and nitrogen (N) losses from agriculture to the aquatic environment and requires each member state to introduce a programme of measures through a National Action Plan (NAP). However, these NAPs have not met with universal acceptance by farmer stakeholders across the EU, none more so than is the Republic of Ireland where there was considerable political opposition. The Irish NAP was not transposed into national legislation until 2006 through the Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) regulations (S.I. No. 378 of 2006).

The GAP regulations in the Republic of Ireland are implemented on a whole country basis and in operational terms limit nutrient application according to soil P status, crop type and livestock intensity and restrict chemical and organic fertiliser spreading and ploughing to periods of the year with typically lower exposure of nutrients to runoff and leaching. The regulations also require buffer zones between fields and water courses when applying organic or chemical fertilisers. Additionally, an upper base limit for livestock manure loading of 170 kg ha⁻¹ organic N also prevails except where a specific derogation to 250 kg ha⁻¹ is sought based on farm conditions.

Farmer stakeholders across the Republic of Ireland have voiced opposition to operational elements of the GAP regulations. Farmer acceptance of the legitimacy of the measures is a key element of compliance. The efficacy of the NAP measures is being evaluated holistically in the Republic of Ireland by an Agricultural Catchments Programme through intensive bio-physical and socio-economic monitoring in six representative small scale river catchments dominated by moderate to high intensity grassland and arable enterprises across Ireland. This paper aims to investigate the subjective attitude of farmer stakeholders towards implementation of the GAP regulations using Q methodology.

Q methodology is a technique which encompasses a distinctive set of psychometric and operational principles that when combined with the statistical application of factor analysis provides the researcher with a systematic and robust means of examining human subjectivity (McKeown and Thomas, 1988). Q methodology is expressly aimed at identifying different patterns or shared ways of thinking on a topic.

Reference

McKeown, B. and Thomas, B., 1988. Q Methodology. Sage Publications Inc., Newbury Park, CA.