



LIFE19 NAT/SK/001069 LIFE SYSEL: Conservation of the European Ground Squirrel at the northwestern border of its range

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**LIFE PLATFORM MEETING Agriculture for the Benefit of Biodiversity
9th to 11th October, 2024, Leuven, Belgium**



European Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus citellus*) - souslik

- ground dwelling rodent, endemic to grasslands in central and southeast Europe
- common species in the past, now endangered (EU Red list)
- goal of the project – double the population in Slovakia by 2027
- in 2020 – 20 000 individuals in 42 localities (but 12 000 in one locality), in 2024 – 47 500 sousliks



Causes of endangerement

Loss of suitable **habitats and food sources** linked to agriculture such as:

- lack of grassland management by grazing and mowing (mulching instead)
- land abandonment
- monoculture planting
- over-fertilisation by manure
- use of chemicals
- conversion of grasslands to arable land

Direct threats - poisoning, poaching, considered agricultural pest





LIFE SYSEL

Restoration of
European Ground
Squirrel habitats in
Slovakia

- target 185 ha
- clear cutting of
trees and
shrubs in
abandoned
localities
- setting up
grazing and
mowing
- So far 156
restored

- Restoration of food supply – flowers, seeds, fruit, insects
- Increase of biodiversity - creation of small wetlands, burning small spots, leaving ungrazed vegetation and unmowed strips, installation of boxes for birds and small mammals or preservation of rock formations – to reduce predators pressure and provide food supply for sousliks
- Improvement of genetics – translocations between colonies
- Restitution of extinct colonies
- Long term solutions based on intensive cooperation with farmers and other stakeholders, increase of awareness



Agri-environmental scheme on EGS

Expert recommendation by project partners BROZ and State Nature Conservancy

Not part of the project, it was existing before, but several problems:

- In the past 2478 hectares covered – cut down to 2000 hectares
- A-e scheme overlayed with habitats a-e scheme with unsuitable conditions for sousliks in many localities, no possibility to combine – a-e habitat scheme paid more, therefore was usually chosen by farmers
- Not suitable methods and results for target species – e.g. 20 cm high grassland cover for mowing, not clear how many times the mowing is necessary, mowing till 31st May...
- Silage making, mulching, ploughing, removal of non-grazed vegetation - now prohibited



Agri-environmental scheme on EGS

- Lack of consultations with farmers, meetings...quite difficult scheme, farmers not willing to participate, low payment calculation (calculated for 445 €, only 125 € approved)
- Not all expert recommendations were accepted (e.g. higher number of animals for intensive grazing in spring, earlier mowing dates, 10 cm high grassland...) – practical reasons to control farmers
- Evidence based scheme (not measure based scheme) was discussed - could be the first experiment in Slovakia – was not well received by Ministry of Agriculture





Thank you for your attention!