

conservation association

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

Katarína Tuhárska

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 gazing 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





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Restoration of European Ground Squirrel habitats in Slovakia

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

#### LIFE SYSEL

- 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:

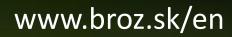
- In the past 2478 hectares covered cut down to 2000 hectares
- A-e scheme overlayed with habitats a-e scheme with unsuitable conditions for sousliks in many localities, no possibility to combine – a-e habitat scheme paid more, therefore was usually chosen by farmers
- Not suitable methods and results 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 nongrazed 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!