

Business case ID Card

Name of the company: Alp' Grain

Country: France

Website: [See information on the follow-up project RestHAlp](#)

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Background

The beauty of winter sports in the alps draws millions of tourists and employs significant numbers of people. Nonetheless, sustaining the skiability of ski resorts involves important works to maintain ski lifts and skiing slopes. Impacts of these new installations on mountain grasslands can be seen very clearly: it often causes partial or total destruction of the vegetation.

In 2013, a group of French and Italian experts decided to address this problem together and investigated whether the local production of dedicated seeds to help Alpine vegetation recover and prevent soil erosion would be economically and socially interesting. In most cases, seeds for restoration of mountain grasslands come from the lowlands, and some of these seeds even come from New Zealand, but it appears that local seeds are usually more resilient to climate change and enhance biodiversity, while reducing greenhouse gases emissions from transportation. It also supports local farmers who invest in new activities such as seed production and collection, helping to develop a local circular economy in the region.

The project, launched in the framework of the Franco-Italian Interreg programme, had a duration of two years, and has inspired two follow-up projects: Sem'lesAlpes and RestHAlp. Irstea (Institut national de recherche en sciences et technologies pour l'environnement et l'agriculture), a French research institute, together with the Institut Régional de la Vallée d'Aoste were the lead partners of Alp'Grain. The Alpine Botanical Conservatory and several local partners were also involved in the project, some of them already active on the topic of local seeds, but also the French ski areas union, as end-users of the solution, as well as farmers and local mountain development and agriculture organisations. Beyond project partners, public authorities have also been very supportive of the concept, which also benefitted from the help of several research centres.

Main activities

Since its creation, the objective pursued by the Alp'Grain project is to develop the production of local seeds in the Northern Alps. Production includes the development of a whole value chain, from the harvest in an original mountain grassland, and the multiplication of seeds, to their preparation for commercial applications, including a drying process to produce and sell the seeds locally. At



least five organisations are currently producing or collecting local seeds in the region, but the quantity is not enough to cover total production.

Market

The Alp'Grain project is developing the production of local seeds in the French Alps, but the market is not yet well developed in the region. Nonetheless, the project offers promising opportunities for the region: a similar initiative was launched 20 years ago in Austria, and today 80% of the seeds used are local, with around 100 farmers selling their seeds.

Irstea estimates that the production of local seeds is economically interesting for farmers cultivating at least three hectares of permanent meadow, or 8 hectares of pasture. They should already be equipped with a tractor and a vehicle for the transport of equipment, as well as a barn that they can use during the harvest period. Two workers are necessary for the harvest season. For this activity to become viable, a whole value chain around the production of local seeds still needs to be developed in the Alps. This value chain should also include seed companies that have suitable equipment and facilities to dry the seeds and produce seed mixtures, who would thus distribute the end products among local users. To increase margins for farmers, farmer organisations can also make their machinery available for the harvest, and even manage the production and sale of seed mixtures if their buildings are properly equipped.

Irstea conducted a study demonstrating that, contrary to current opinion, local seeds are only slightly more expensive than non-local seeds, taking into account initial investments which is more costly and lower operating costs over in the medium to long term. The price is based on production costs which rely on the type of mixture offered. If the production is managed by a group of farmers, they might be able to offer more attractive prices than seed companies, since there would be no intermediaries. At this time, sale prices for local seeds are estimated between 25 and 30 Euro per kilogramme for permanent meadows, and 40 to 50 Euro for pastures.

Challenges and solutions

To build a new value chain, all actors must be convinced of the future benefits. Getting all local stakeholders to support their concept is still a challenge for the Alp'Grain team, despite continuous communication efforts to explain the economical and environmental added value related to the production of local seeds.

On the side of producers, farmers are still very attached to tradition. Their families have been raising cattle for milk and breeding for years, so they are reluctant to change activities, even if the alternative is more profitable. Some alpine ski stations have already shown a great interest in the use of local seeds, but farmers nearby were not interested in changing their activity. Studies have shown that it usually takes ten years for a result to be adopted by farmers, so the Alp'Grain



team is still hoping that their efforts will soon start to bear fruit. Irstea and their partners communicate very closely with local stakeholders through the distribution of regular newsletters, the organisation of meetings, as well as the publication of reports demonstrating the economic and environmental added value of local seed production. For any farmer interested in launching the production of local seeds on its land, an individual assistance of three days was offered by the partners during the Alp'Grain project to help the farmer implementing the project.

From the consumer side, there is an increasing pressure from environmental authorities pushing for the use of local seeds, but this is perceived more as a constraint than an opportunity. For the last 40 years, local actors have been using foreign seeds and managed to optimise their costs throughout the years. In that sense, the perception local seeds would be more expensive persists despite a recent study from Irstea proving that in the short to medium term, local and non-local seeds are in the same price range. Continuous promotion and education should help deconstructing misconceptions related to the price of local seeds in the future, highlighting their additional benefits for local economies.

Moreover, some regulatory issues limit a wider use of local seeds in France. For instance, local seeds of species that are listed in the official seeds catalogue can currently only be used with a special approval. Hopefully, a close dialogue between Alp'Grain partners and administrative bodies should help overcome this challenge.

Funding

The Alp' Grain project was 80% publicly funded by the Interreg Alcotra programme. There are no specific grants available for farmers wishing to start the production of local seeds. Nonetheless, financial support could be provided from the regional agriculture management body if they purchase a machine to harvest local seeds with an organisation of farmers. Considering that the harvesting machine represents an important investment to develop the production of local seeds, this opportunity can be very interesting for farmers.

What makes this case innovative?

The production of local seeds for alpine meadows could have tremendous environmental and economic benefits for the region. As the seeds are currently being purchased outside the region and even outside the country, bringing production back into the area would help consolidate farmers' revenues, while contributing to the restoration of healthy ecosystems and preventing soil erosion in the Alps. The project can be easily replicated in other areas across Europe where the necessary knowledge regarding local biodiversity is available. In the future, the development of similar projects could support the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions linked to the transport of regenerative seeds.



Lessons learnt

The key ingredient to succeed in the development of a new value chain is the engagement of all actors in the process. For this, close and regular communication with local actors is essential to get the support of farmers, and overcome their inertia and attachment to tradition. The production of local seeds is still at its very beginnings in the Alps, but the knowledge developed by Alp'Grain partners during the last years will act as a real cornerstone to raise awareness about the environmental and economical benefits of local seeds production in the future.

