SOCIAL ASPECTS

According to the farmers interviewed the low labour intensity in herb cultivation has a significant impact on their quality of life. This also means that he no longer has to take care of acqu...
HERB CULTIVATION IN THE PALATINATE

In the past, more than one hundred farmers have been cultivating tobacco in the region, but today only few remain. Many have switched completely or to a large extent to alternative crops: some are cultivating herbs, others have sold their agricultural crop land. But this development was not as fast or as clean as it might have been, as some farmers had to wait for several years before they were able to switch. Others again had sold their agricultural crop land even earlier, because the switch from tobacco to alternative crops appeared to them too complicated and financially risky after so many years of tobacco growing simply because it is more remunerative. Already before the termination of EU subsidies a working group of the federal state of Rhine- land-Pfalz examined potential options for the tobacco farmers in the region. But it was rather by coincidence that Palatinate farmers came across the potential alternative to tobacco growing in 2007. A processing company in Bavaria hadadvertised in an agricultural magazine and was looking for new farming land in order to meet the growing demand for herbs. The tobacco farmers of the Palatinate got alert and decided to send a delegation to Bavaria to investigate this option. Quickly, they came to a conclusion: instead of tobacco, farmers in the southern Palatinate should start cultivating parsley, dill, coriander, lovage and spinach. The first herb season started in spring 2008.

From 2008, they partly switched to the cultivation of herbs. At the beginning they devoted a small plot of the tobacco crop area to herbs and slowly increased the area. Farmers who in previous years had already sold their tobacco crop land decided to not go back to tobacco, because the switch from tobacco to alternative crops appeared to them too complicated and financially risky after so many years of tobacco growing. But it was different with tobacco: the required delivery quantities were agreed in advance between the companies’ representatives and the farmers do not obtain the desired orders, they are in risk to be stuck with (parts of) the harvest. Labour input in herb cultivation is also very different from tobacco. Tobacco needed additional labourers primarily during the harvest season. In contrast, the farmer and his wife can manage the cultivation and harvest of herbs alone. Furthermore, they are occupied with herb cultivation only from sowing in March until processing the harvest in November, whereas they were busy all year round with tobacco cultivation. If the herb processing companies or farmers do not obtain the desired orders, they are in risk to be stuck with (parts of) the harvest. It was different with tobacco: the required delivery quantities were agreed in advance between the companies’ representatives and the farmers do not obtain the desired orders, they are in risk to be stuck with (parts of) the harvest.

ECONOMIC ASPECTS

A key message from the interviewed farmer was: “Today, a farmer also needs to be an entrepreneur.” Until 2010, he grew Gaultheria plants on 8 hectares land annually. Additionally, he and his wife cultivated grain and sugar beet on about 30 hectares of land. The bigger part of their financial income was generated by tobacco despite the smaller crop area. From 2008, they partly switched to the cultivation of herbs. At the beginning they devoted a small plot of the crop area to herbs and slowly increased the area. However, it is important to them to consider a certain crop rotation. This requires change on areas which grain is being grown in the meantime, because herbs can only be cultivated in one to two years after tobacco. In combination with tobacco, herbs would have to be grown only every five years in combination with tobacco, because herb cultivation would take approximately three to five years to switch. Therefore, it is a system with high economic risk.

Herbs are annually cultivated, whereas the planting and the harvest of tobacco takes place every five years. Alternatively, tobacco can be harvested also every year, whereas herbs prove to be successful, they gradually abandoned tobacco in favor of the herbs. Today, they are the only farmers in the Palatinate that earn their living almost entirely from growing herbs. However, it is important to consider to them a certain crop rotation. This requires change on areas which grain is being grown in the meantime, because herbs can only be cultivated in one to two years after tobacco. In combination with tobacco, herbs would have to be grown only every five years in combination with tobacco, because herb cultivation would take approximately three to five years to switch. Furthermore, it is a system with high economic risk. Hence Metz company shifted its business model. Therefore, the company is able to directly market its herbs – without the need for an intermediate step of transporting the herbs to the site of Steinicke which is some hundred kilometers away. Thus, the reduced transport input saves money, uses less fuel and improves the carbon footprint of the company.

The remaining farms which have been growing tobacco in the past have mostly set up their businesses differently. Many switched to the cultivation of vegetables which is very different from tobacco. For instance, they are able to produce the vegetables year-round, whereas tobacco is only annually delivered.

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