

AEGILOPS - The Greek Network for Biodiversity and Ecology in Agriculture

The Greek Network for Biodiversity and Ecology in Agriculture named AEGILOPS (after a wild wheat variety) has evolved from the original Network for the Preservation and Exchange of Local Plant Varieties and Indigenous Breeds of Animals of the Workshop of Ecological Practice, a NGO for ecological farming, which was based and active in Thessaloniki from 1986 to 2000.

AEGILOPS members are primarily ecological farmers but the organization is open to individuals, groups of scientists, educators and all those who strive for its mission. It also cooperates with other similar entities in Greece and abroad.

The main objectives of the network have as follows:

1. To reuse local varieties of agricultural plants/rear up local breeds of animals and preserve, irrelevant of productivity, those which are endangered.
2. To develop varieties of plants adapted to local conditions of production and to the organic way of production, and to highlight the value of locally adapted genetic material for the application of the ecological farming.
3. To succeed in reproduction and exchange of genetic material among its members, as well as useful information, experiences and traditional knowledge.
4. To highlight the role of ecological farming for the preservation of biodiversity in agriculture as well as the preservation and safeguard of farmer's profession itself.
5. To upgrade the role of the farmers to the preservation of biodiversity of the agroecosystems as well as their rights to take part in the management and benefit from genetic richness.

The priority to farmers, as members of the network, stems from the conclusion that conservation, preservation and sustainability are directly related to appropriate use.

Key to the effectiveness of our efforts is the re-introduction of the varieties and breeds to practice as appropriate and vital tools of the contemporary and future farming.

This approach incorporates the re-innovation of the future role of farmers as vital members of modern society. It is these ecological farmers who **need** biodiversity while industrial agriculture needs GMO's.

To date, the priority to plants and, more so, to wheat, despite of the main objectives of the network, resulted from the fact that for these areas of concentration, credible and knowledgeable partners joined the work of AEGILOPS.

Such partners were the National (Greek) Agricultural Research Foundation and especially its Gene Bank, the Aristotelian University and the University of Thessaly, national and regional agricultural ecological movements and groups, private agriculturalists and agricultural consultants, local governments and private farms.

Also international partners, such as Ms Sharon Rempel from the Garden Institute of Alberta, Canada and Mr Hans Larsson, Senior Researcher of the Swedish Agricultural Station, were very instrumental.

Given therefore the potential for similar partnerships in the area of livestock breeds, the Network will be very eager to activate its full mission.

So far, AEGILOPS activities include:

1. Studying and description of heritage wheat varieties of Greece, preserved mainly or exclusively in the Greek Gene Bank.
2. Selection of varieties with good quality characteristics, horizontal resistance to pests and diseases, good agronomical performance under organic conditions so as to become the proper genetic potential to support reliably the development of ecological farming.
3. Evaluation of selected varieties in the field and new selection of adjusted ones in every region.
4. Consulting and education of farmers on heritage conservation
5. Seed production
6. Networking and diffusion of knowledge and experience obtained through practice.

The above programs are implemented through "Regional Focal Points" which usually are private farms.

One of these Farms (AEGILOPS Focal Point - Thessaloniki) is the Demetris T.Litsas Ecological Farm in Thermi, Thessaloniki.

On the D.Litsas ecological farm we apply, demonstrate and disseminate knowledge, methods techniques, remedies and skills which support nature's processes resulting in adequate food, plants, animals and flowers which establish the health of all of us.

We base our work on an ecological approach, which does not fight enemies but rather strengthens the farm plants and animals so that their health disarms pests and avoids diseases.

Land, plants animals and people we all mutually cooperate so that our farm forms a complete ecosystem, part of which are rare breeds and varieties, cultivated and wild.

Our farm has a long history of initiatives which have contributed to the conservation of rare livestock in Greece, such as

- Late Forties: Sire Station for insemination of the region's cows
- Late Fifties: Chios sheep breeding farm and dissemination of rams to regional herds, through the Ministry of Agriculture. (The herd was eventually donated to the Thessaloniki Agricultural and Industrial Institute)
- Mid Seventies - Breeding Farm for Skyros Ponies (The herd was eventually donated to the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki)
- Currently Pigs, Goats, Sheep, Donkeys, Horses, Sheepdogs
Aromatic and other indigenous plants

Need of Action: Innovation in reintroducing rare breeds in farming

As authentic farming and farmers become more and more rare, the much needed innovation to re-introduce farmers to modern society should inherently include the re-introduction of rare breeds to farming. We must re-employ (give them a job) rare breeds because unemployed they will depend on charity, hoarding and GMO-exploitation.

Reference: AEGILOPS-Website: www.aegilops.gr