

How digitalization in agriculture should take place was discussed at the "Field Days in Dobrudzha"

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Destroyed infrastructure of the irrigation systems and high price of irrigation water; lack of workforce; complex, unclear and constantly changing administrative requirements and regulatory framework; low purchase prices of agricultural produce versus high prices of plant protection products, fertilizers and land rents; lack of digitalization, innovation and communication with scientific units. These top 5 problems in Bulgarian agriculture were identified by coordinators and associates from across the country, members of the National Association of Grain Producers (NAGP), at a seminar in Dobrich during the second edition of the “Field Days in Dobrudzha 2023”.

The first training of 16 future regional coordinators, who will promote among farmers the activities of the European Digital Innovation Hub AgroHub.BG, approved under the “Digital Europe” programme with the AgroDigiRise project, began with a discussion and exchange of opinions.

The lecturer Katya Staykova, Director of “Cluster Trakia Economic Zone”, familiarized the attendees in detail with the project, whose main objective is to develop the potential of the agricultural sector by providing access to technological solutions and a set of services supporting digital transformation. AgroHub.BG functions as a one-stop shop for services aimed at agricultural producers, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and all participants in the agri-food sector, as well as the public sector in the South Central Region, with the potential to extend its services throughout Bulgaria. The focus is on precision agriculture – process automation, resource optimization, smart agronomy.

Fourteen companies and organizations are partners in the project. The coordinator is the Institute for Agrostrategies and Innovation; innovative solutions are offered by the technology companies ONDO Solutions, TechnoLogica and Bevine; the supplier of agricultural machinery is the BATA AGRO association; agricultural producers are represented by NAGP; science and universities – by the Maritsa Vegetable Crops Research Institute, the Agricultural University – Plovdiv, the Center of Plant Systems Biology and Biotechnology, the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; investment consulting is provided by the “Cluster Trakia Economic Zone” association, Cleantech Bulgaria, and the Applied Research and Communications Fund. The Municipality of Plovdiv is an associated partner.

“Together with Nataliya Shukadarova, Executive Director of NAGP, we explained to the attendees that they will be the people who will establish direct contact, organize events and promote the free project services not only to grain producers, but to all farmers and SMEs related to the sector,” stated Katya Staykova. The coordinators will have to generate interest in testing before investing through visits to the already functioning National Demo Center at the Maritsa Vegetable Crops Research Institute, as well as to another 15 Demo Points at agricultural holdings and scientific units that are in the process of being established. In this way, all interested parties gain easy access to real operating technologies that they can see in action and be convinced of the benefits of investing in technological solutions.

AgroHub.BG supports the acquisition and improvement of digital competences through individual training programmes – online or in person. It also offers business and financial consulting such as technological audit, assessment of digital maturity, technological implementation plan, support in finding investments, project development and management, business consulting and mentoring, market research, preparation of business

plans, market and marketing analysis, identification of business partners, etc. The project services are free of charge for users, who must belong to the target group – agricultural producers, SMEs, public authorities.

“Most farmers are of advanced age and this will be one of the stumbling blocks in the digitalization of the sector,” pointed out the participants in the seminar. A problem is also the distrust in innovations that has been built up over the years. The participants also recalled that our agricultural producers still receive several times lower subsidies compared to the “old” EU Member States. Applying under support schemes is extremely complicated, with discrepancies between the requirements of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the State Fund “Agriculture” and the Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS) and the Electronic Services System (ESS). The lack of good communication with the state administration, its weak competence, excessive bureaucracy and the requirement for unnecessary documentation, as well as the insufficient awareness of farmers about upcoming changes, were also highlighted. It was noted by the seminar participants that it would be useful if the guidelines, sample documents, etc. were published on the websites of the Regional Directorates “Agriculture”. Lecturer Katya Staykova reminded that all those who would like to benefit and be beneficiaries under the AgroDigiRise project can learn more on the AgroHub.BG website <https://agrohub.bg/>, the AgroHub.BG Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100088449301170>, and on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@agrohubbg>.

About “Field Days in Dobrudzha”

Field Days in Dobrudzha 2023 took place from 25 to 27 July. For the second year, the organizer was the Dobrudzha Union of Grain Producers, part of NAGP, chaired by Radostina Zhekova, who initiated this agricultural celebration. The Field Days are held after the harvest, when the crop has been gathered and producers have time to take stock and meet with friends and colleagues: to see each other, to exchange opinions and experience, and to prepare for the next campaign. This year again, in Golden Dobrudzha, farmers from all over the country, companies from the sector, science, education all gathered in one place, all of this complemented by a rich programme for quality entertainment.