

The 9th International Conference "ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING"

22-23 May 2014, Vilnius, Lithuania

SELECTED PAPERS

eISSN 2029-7092 / eISBN 978-609-457-640-9

Available online at http://enviro.vgtu.lt

Section: Environmental protection

Environmental and Natural Heritages Investments in Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) Functioning in the Warmia and Masuria Region

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Abstract

In this article the main attention will focus on investments in environmental protection implemented under Sustainable Development of the Fisheries Sector and Coastal Fishing Areas Operational Program for 2007–2013. Briefly, the level of program implementation during the current period were shown and also the prospects of its development in 2014–2020. Conclusions are drawn from Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) surveys operating in the province of Warmia and Mazury. Unfortunately, in the current programming period, the number of funded projects aimed at protecting the environment and natural heritage in the areas dependent on fisheries in order to maintain its attractiveness and restoring the productive potential of the fisheries' sector is with an exception of FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie highly unsatisfactory. It seems that in the next programming period there is a necessity to introduce minimum financial limits of the resources allocated to Local Development Strategies for Fisheries Areas (LDSFA) operations related to the protection of the environment (especially in areas where a significant role plays NATURA 2000).

Keywords: Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs); Local Development Strategy of Fishing Areas (LDSFA); environmental protection policy.

1. Introduction

According to Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union[1], it shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment. The Treaty on European Union thus indirectly formulates the objective to protect the natural and environmental heritage. This regulation is a prelude to the introduction of the particular objectives of EU policy in the field of environment, which has been specified in Title XX of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [2]. These regulations were also clause a for rules, which will be the base for European Union policy in this issue. The Guidelines on EU policy in the field of environment is article 11 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which states that environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of the Union policies and activities, in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development. The wording of Article 11 states so clearly the consequences to be drawn from the general plane of EU law to the protection of the environment, imposing an agent environment, not only at the stage of policy formulation, but also during the implementation phase. According to article 191 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Policy on the environment should contribute to achieve the following objectives:

- preserving, protecting and improving the quality of the environment,
- protecting human health,
- prudent and rational utilisation of natural resources,
- promoting measures at the international level to deal with regional or worldwide Environmental problems, and in particular, combating climate change.

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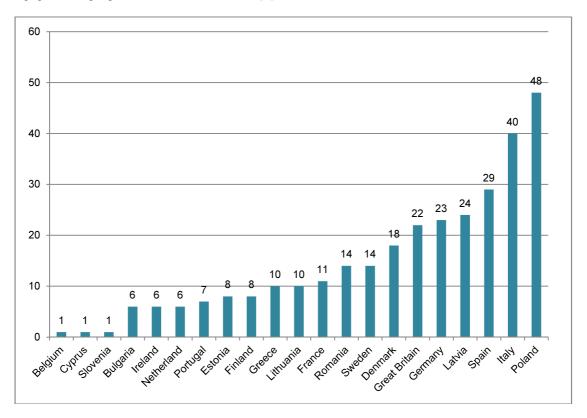
EU policies on the environment can be divided into general Treaty principles of EU law directly related to the environment, i.e. the principle of subsidiary and proportionality (Article 5 TEU) and the principle of integration (Article 11 TFEU), and special rules of EU policy on the environment, ie. the precautionary principle, the principle of preventive action, the principle that environmental damage should be rectified at source and "polluter pays principle" (Article 191 TFEU).

In Poland, the EU's assistance to the environment protection is multidimensional and focuses mainly on Operational Program Infrastructure and Environment. Most investments in environmental protection are subsidized thanks to this Program. Expenditure on environmental protection is 18% of funds earmarked for activities under the program - a total of around 4.7 billion euros. In implementation of the Operational Program Infrastructure and Environment 2007-2013 more than 36 billion euros will be allocated. The funds will come from the European Union 27.9 billion (including the Cohesion Fund – 21.6 billion (77%) and the European Regional Development Fund – 6.3 billion (23%). Infrastructure and Environment Program consists up of 15 priorities. Their description, however, is not the responsibility of the focus of this article, because the main attention will be focused on other programs whose task is also to support projects related to environmental protection, also important, but having a primarily local dimension. Main attention will focus on investments in environmental protection implemented under Sustainable Development of the Fisheries Sector and Coastal Fishing Areas Operational Program for 2007-2013. It includes four priority axes, i.e. measures for the adaptation of the fishing fleet, aquaculture, inland fishing, processing and marketing of fishery and aquaculture products, measures of common interest and sustainable development of fisheries' areas. The authors focus on the fourth axis (sustainable development of fisheries areas), for which implementation associations known as Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) were established operating in accordance with the principles of the LEADER approach and based on the Local Development Strategies for Fisheries Areas (LDSFA). Priority Axis 4 has led not only to improve living conditions in the areas of fisheries, but the equally important objective of this priority axis is to develop initiatives and entrepreneurship among local communities. Priority Axis 4 aims to encourage people in the local areas for a variety of initiatives, overcoming local barriers and encourage collaboration in joint projects, including those related to environmental protection. In this paper, the main attention will be focused precisely on this kind of projects, whose role in such detail is presented in the Treaty on European Union. Briefly, the level of program implementation during the current period were shown and also the prospects of its development in 2014-2020. Conclusions are drawn from Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) surveys operating in the province of Warmia and Mazury. A set of research methods used in the examination have a complementary character. For example, desk research studies were used, internet surveys sent to each of the 4 Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs), computerassisted web interviewing (CAWI) with FLAGs, quantitative research CATI (questionnaire carried out by telephone) with the beneficiaries of Sustainable Development of the Fisheries Sector and Coastal Fishing Areas Operational Program for 2007–2013 (fourth axis), audit visits in region FLAGs, in-depth interviews with representatives of institutions involved in the management and implementation of Axis 4 program. The data obtained in this way involved the large number of activities carried out by FLAGs in the area of environmental protection, opinion on the ability of the individual instruments to support the creation of social capital in rural areas and socio-economic network building at the local and regional level, as well as formal and legal barriers in the implementation of planned activities.

2. The results

As mentioned above the main objective of Priority Axis 4 is to minimize the loss of the fishing sector, reconversion of areas affected by the changes in the sector and improvement of quality of life in fishing communities also through investments in environmental protection. Disbursement of funds of the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) under Priority Axis 4 is characterized by the fact that through associations with the status of the Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs), operations to be financed from its resources are implemented. Fisheries Local Action Groups and its decision body consist of representatives form social, economic and public sources. Priority axis 4 has a territorial dimension, and it may include measures which aim to establish Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs), establish partnerships and draw up Local Development Strategies for Fisheries Areas (LDSFA), implement LDSFAs and promote cooperation between FLAGs. Axis 4 of the Sustainable Development of the Fisheries Sector and Coastal Fishing Areas Operational Program for 2007–2013 focuses on two priorities: development of fisheries' areas and support for inter-regional and transnational cooperation. Measures initiated as part of the first priority focus on increasing the competitiveness and maintaining the attractiveness of fisheries' areas, restructuring and reorienting business activities diversifying employment in fisheries' areas by creating new jobs outside the fisheries' sector, increasing the value of fisheries' product and promoting the development of community services to maintain the attractiveness of fisheries' areas, environmental and natural heritage protection in the areas of fisheries in order to maintain its attractiveness and restoring the productive potential of fisheries damaged by natural disasters, running FLAGs, skills acquisition and community animation. The second priority gives support to measures which promote inter-regional and transnational cooperation. The Priority Axis 4 has a budget of 313 million euros, which represents 32% of the Sustainable Development of the Fisheries Sector and Coastal Fishing Areas Operational Program for 2007-2013.

In two contests completed by Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development 48 Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) were selected (the biggest number in Europe) among which 1,2 billion zlotych were allocated. The total area of selected FLAGs is 70,5 thousands square kilometres (22.56% of the whole country), and the total number of 3.5 million (9.37% of the population) people live in the FLAGs areas [3].



 $Fig.\ 1.\ Number\ of\ FLAGs\ in\ the\ individual\ EU\ Member\ States-as\ of\ 11.2013\ (www.ebgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/cms/farnet/tools/flags)$

In the Warmia-Mazury region, there are four Fisheries Local Action Groups that have received funding for the implementation of the Local Development Strategy of Fishing Areas. They are: FLAG Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie, FLAG Mazurskie Morze, FLAG Zalew Wiślany and FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie, FLAGs Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie and Mazurskie Morze and LAGs which operate under the same names have an identical territorial scope. The group with the largest budget in the Region of Warmia and Mazury is FLAG Mazurskie Morze (PLN 36,216,496.29) and its calculation was based on the number of permanent residents on 31 December 2008. The amount of funding for LDSFA implementation is additionally determined by Ratio Fish Employment, i.e. the number of persons detailed in §2 section 1 of the Regulation of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of 29 September 2009 (Dz. U. 2009 nr 162 poz. 1292) per 1000 permanent residents in the area covered by a given LDSFA [4]. This means that the more residents to the area and the higher the Fish Employment ratio the greater the budget of individual FLAG. For the FLAG Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie and FLAG Zalew Wiślany size of the budget remained at a similar level and amounted to 27 341 671.46 zł and 26 138 633.95 zł. In turn, the lowest budget, due to the low Ratio Fish Employment, has FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie (16 508 166.01 zł). It is worth noting that only in the case of the FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie; size of the budget significantly differs from the national average, which is 27 million złotych. In the case of the FLAG Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie, its budget was significantly above the national average. From the environmental protection point of view, it is very important for the funds' distribution process among the different activities in different FLAGs operating in the region. Each group performs four basic activities that will focus on increasing the competitiveness and maintaining the attractiveness of fisheries' areas, restructuring and reorienting business activities diversifying employment in fisheries' areas by creating new jobs outside the fisheries' sector, increasing the value of fisheries' product and promoting the development of community services to maintain the attractiveness of fisheries areas, environmental and natural heritage protection in the areas of fisheries in order to maintain its attractiveness and restoring the productive potential of fisheries damaged by natural disasters. It is important at this point to emphasize that for the first operation, and the component associated with the protection of the environment, the beneficiary may be both public sector and socio-economic. Unfortunately for activities related to environmental protection in all contests conducted, the financial envelope was the lowest and in all four Fisheries Local Action Groups achieved less than 17%. By far most of the funds were allocated to the operation associated with t increasing the competitiveness and maintaining the attractiveness of fisheries' areas. In all conducted contests, the allocation for these types of activities in all Fisheries Local Action Groups reached as much as 47% of all funds at disposal. For the other two components associated with the restructuring and reorienting business activities diversifying employment in fisheries' areas by creating new jobs outside the fisheries' sector and increasing the value of fisheries' product and promoting the development of community services to maintain the attractiveness of fisheries' areas allocated respectively 17.9% and 18.4% of the total financial envelope, which is little more than an investments in environmental protection and much less than for the first component. Such a large disparity in the distribution of resources may loom large. This may be due to the fact that in competitions for the operation of the first component the public sector can take part. The research conducted by the authors of this article shows that both the Local Action Groups operating in the region and Fisheries Local Action Groups have clear dominance of the public sector in the implementation of both strategies. It is a highly disturbing phenomenon [5]. The public sector's dominant role is confirmed by the legal status of applicants in projects related to village renewal and development, 95% of whom were local authorities [6]. The dominance of the public sector, and especially of local government in the LAGs of Warmia and Mazury shows the status of the applicant in projects related to the Renewal and Rural Development for Axis IV of the RDP (Rural Development Program). In more than 95% of cases, the applicant was the municipal government, the remaining few percent of the affected parishes as project applicants. In LAGs (Local Action Groups) which are heavily dependent on the local government, strategies are developed to pursue the local authorities' goals, and they often fail to account for the results of analyses or social consultations. A similar situation was reported in FLAGs operating in the Region of Warmia and Mazury, although in this case, the applications submitted by the public sector was smaller in comparison with LAGs. In FLAGs so much dependent on local government Local Development Strategies for Fisheries Areas (LDSFA) are prepared to meet its objectives not the objectives of local residents. Besides that the Fisheries Local Action Groups dependence on local governments makes many of the employed persons to be indicated by the local authorities which mean they are not always adequately prepared to fulfill their duties. It seems that such a state of things in the new programming period must be radically changed. The process of creating Fisheries Local Action Groups should be bottom-up, involving all three sectors on the same footing. Public-private partnership must be genuine and democratic, and all members must have clearly defined rights and responsibilities. The partnership can in no way be dominated by one sector and mean that the funds available to the Fisheries Local Action Groups are allocated primarily to finance investments or projects implemented by local governments. This disparity also recognizes the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, which in the Regulation of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of 10 March 2010 amending regulation on detailed conditions to be met by the local development strategy fishing areas, criteria for the selection of local fishing groups to implement this strategy and the agreement requirements to be met on the conditions and how to implement this strategy in the framework of the Operational Program "Sustainable Development of the Fisheries Sector and coastal Fishing Areas 2007–2013" clearly indicates that the financing operation under LSDFA by public entities is not more than 35% of funds calculated according to the method specified in paragraph 5 of the Regulation [7]. Interestingly, in the action associated with the protection of the environment the public sector can as well be a beneficent, but it didn't cause the shifting of funds in that direction. As you can see, the public sector, primarily carries out projects related to the component associated with increasing the competitiveness and maintaining the attractiveness of fisheries' areas, and in accordance with the aforementioned regulation can no longer significantly involved financially in this type of project. Undoubtedly, this is a positive signal that the legislator in accordance with the bottom-up approach to the implementation of the Program Leader leaves the individual groups a relatively high degree of freedom in determining the distribution of the funds allocated for the implementation of the strategy in terms of four basic components. The management of Fisheries Local Action Groups must only pay attention to a few basic rules, i.e.:

- measures to promote inter-regional cooperation between local and international fishing groups (second priority), in
 the provisions for the procedures and conditions for granting and payment of aid for the implementation of the
 measures covered by priority axis 4 is not more than 5% of the funding,
- funding of the Fisheries Local Action Groups and the acquisition of skills and activation of local communities in the provisions for the procedures and conditions for granting and payment of aid for the implementation of the measures covered by priority axis 4 is not more than 10% of the funding,
- financing operations under LSDFA by public entities is not more than 35% of funds calculated in accordance with the method set out in paragraph 5 of Regulation (operations 1–4 in the first priority).

Unfortunately, investments in environmental protection do not enjoy too much interest in determining the level of financial resources allocated to meet the objectives of each Fisheries Local Action Groups, especially in the FLAG Mazurskie Morze and the FLAG Zalew Wiślany.

Diversification of funding for activities related to the protection of the environment was quite large. For example, the FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie up to 32% of the pot measures in all carried out competitions have been allocated for this type of project. Furthermore, in the FLAG Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie resources allocated to these components were significantly above average for the region (almost 25%). In turn, in the other two FLAGs environmental protection and natural heritage in the areas of fisheries hasn't played big part in the budget and totaled barely 7% and almost 12% for FLAG Mazurskie Morze and FLAG Zalew Wiślany. We can conclude that in the case of two FLAGs investments in environmental protection occupy an important place in the budget, while the other two are of marginal significance. According to the Regulation of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development dated 23 November October 2011 on the detailed conditions and procedures for granting, payment, and return financial aid for the implementation of the measures covered by priority axis 4 – sustainable development of areas dependent on fisheries concluded in Sustainable Development of the Fisheries Sector and Coastal Fishing Areas Operational Program for 2007–2013 assistance for the implementation of operations involving

environmental and natural heritage protection in the areas of fisheries in order to maintain its attractiveness and restoring the productive potential of fisheries damaged by natural disasters, include:

- investment drainage remediation, including the re-naturalization and maintenance, water reservoirs, flood
 protection, water retention control capabilities through the implementation of small retention program, the rational
 management of water resources, shaping the regulatory route shoreline,
- The construction, rehabilitation or protection of waterways,
- Conservation of biodiversity and protected species of fish or other aquatic organisms,
- Preserve and protect the areas covered by the specific forms of protection, including NATURA 2000 sites,
- Renovation, protection and marking bathing
- Protection and labeling of natural monuments,
- Repair or reconstruction of buildings or structures, including installations and technical equipment, related to the conduct of fishing activities, damaged or destroyed by a natural disaster,
- Treatments for removal of damage caused by natural disasters in inland waters and marine and restore the original state of the environment in these areas.

As you can see catalog of measures is very diverse and, importantly, assistance for the implementation of operations involving environmental and natural heritage protection in the areas of fisheries in order to maintain its attractiveness and restoring the productive potential of fisheries damaged by natural disasters is granted in the form of reimbursement of eligible costs up to 100% of their value. During the program period, the limit is 2 000 000 zl per beneficiary, except that aid in one operation cannot exceed 1 000 000 zl. In the research, a lot of attention was paid to the way of financing the disbursement of funds owned by Fisheries Local Action Groups. As mentioned above they were divided into four groups of components, including project investment in environmental protection, which were at our interest. The focus of the authors of this article was to analyze the individual calls for proposals and the amount of interest from potential beneficiaries of activities related to environmental protection. So far, in all call operations carried out in the province 725 proposals were submitted, of which the grant received slightly more than 43%. Only 10.6% of all submitted applications were projects related to environmental and natural heritage protection in the areas of fisheries in order to maintain its attractiveness and restoring the productive potential of fisheries damaged by natural disasters. Among the applications that received funding, they accounted for only 16% of the total (which is worth emphasizing funding received 64% of the applications submitted under this component). By far, the most popular activity was linked with increasing the value of fisheries' product and promoting the development of community services to maintain the attractiveness of fisheries' areas. They accounted for over 45% of all submitted projects. So much interest in this action may be because each project was characterized by a relatively small value, and in accordance with the regulation, their amount was fixed at a maximum of 600 000 zł per beneficiary, provided that aid in one operation cannot exceed 300 000 zl. In addition, this action was characterized by a very large variation, which could include projects related to, inter alia, the creation and development of systems of direct fisheries' product selling and development of widely understood business. Unfortunately, for the beneficiaries in the financial envelope in all four FLAGs they accounted for only 18.4% of the resources (see Fig. 2) and resulted in the fact that among the applications that received funding accounted for just over 30%. As many as 229 out of 329 applications submitted did not receive funding because of the lack of adequate measures dedicated for this component. A great interest was related to projects, especially among public sector, associated with competitiveness and maintaining the attractiveness of fisheries' areas. Among all applications, they accounted for less than 33%. In contrast to operation 3, the financial envelope for this component was large enough that out of 236 applications submitted, subsidy received more than 47% of them. Importantly, of those applications that did not receive funding under this component as many as 83% were applications by the social and economic sector. Only 17% of the applications submitted by the public sector did not receive funding. So this allocation of resources may raise many questions. In the case of the component associated with the restructuring and reorienting business activities diversifying employment in fisheries' areas by creating new jobs outside the fisheries' sector a number of applications were only slightly higher than those made in the context of environmental investments (11.4%). What is interesting in the 83 submitted applications under this action subsidy received 57 of them (69%). Differentiation of submitted applications in the field of environmental protection investment in each Fisheries Local Action Groups was quite large. For example, in FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie and FLAG Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie, respectively 19 and 15% of those applications were for just that component. In both groups, the number of funded projects of this component in the total number of funded applications reached in FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie as much as 41 % and for the FLAG Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie almost 24%. In turn, as already mentioned above in the text, the other two FLAGs operating in the region, investments in environmental protection treated marginally. In the case of FLAG Mazurskie Morze only 6% of those applications were for activities associated with environmental and natural heritage protection in the areas of fisheries in order to maintain its attractiveness and restoring the productive potential of fisheries (the result obtained may loom large, as territorially FLAG Mazurskie Morze covers an area extremely valuable). For Zalew Wiślany FLAG the result for this action were only slightly higher (less than 10% of submitted applications related to activities associated with environmental protection). Subsidy application in both groups was also at a low level and amounted to 9 and 14% of the total number applications that received funding.

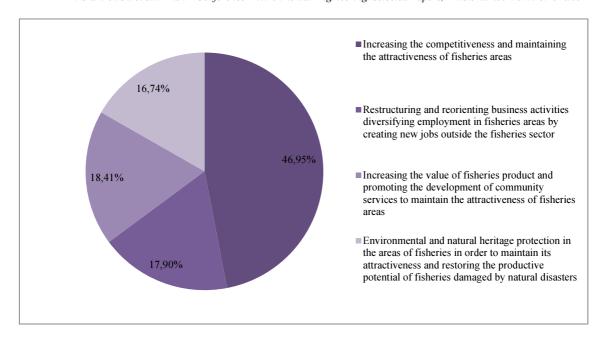


Fig. 2. The structure of the budget for the implementation of the Local Development Strategy Fishing Areas in Fisheries Local Action Groups in the Warmia-Mazury

A very important element of the study was to determine funds excess of the financial pool in the different activities carried out in the FLAGs in the Warmia-Mazury region. This resulted in very interesting conclusions. For example, in LGR Pojezierze Olsztyńskie, despite the high financial involvement of the association in environmental investments (32% of all funds) the possible financial resources to obtain were exceeded by over 100 %. In contrary, the FLAG Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie, which was also financially heavily involved in investments in environmental protection (25%), the financial pool was exceeded only by less than 21%. In this case the financial pool almost entirely covered the demand for this type of project. In the case, of the other two FLAGs where the share of the funds for these activities were very small, 7% for FLAG Mazurskie Morze and 12% for FLAG Zalew Wiślany pool of funds in all applications were exceeded only by 52 and 62%. This means that these two associations did not pay attention to this type of action, and at the same time it didn't attract much interest from applicants. Based on the results of research we can conclude, that the most common reason of not choosing the application by individual FLAG was exceeding the financial pool. Very rarely applications that did not receive funding were not in line with the objectives of Local Development Strategies of Fishing Areas. At the same time, it is difficult to assess whether the conditions of eligibility set by FLAGs make the projects receiving the highest scores indeed the best projects. Especially in projects aimed at environmental protection it is very difficult to enable for objective grading system to compare with each other. At the same time it is very difficult to answer the question why the performance of environmental protection especially in the two FLAGs operating in the region attracted so little interest. Perhaps this is related to a small pool of funds allocated for this activity; perhaps you can point out the problem of poor communication between the FLAG and the applicant from the economic and social sectors in particular. In fact, the theoretical framework of this action seems to be formulated in Regulations in the correct manner which emphasizing the role of such projects in local development. The results clearly showed that the greatest interest of applicants attracted actions associated with increasing the value of fisheries' product and promoting the development of community services to maintain the attractiveness of fisheries' areas. For example, the limits of funding for this activity in the FLAG Zalew Wiślany were exceeded by almost 300%, in the FLAG Mazurskie Morze by 192% (FLAG Wielkie Jeziora Mazurskie by 120%). Merely in the case of FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie it exceeded the limit by "only" about 79%.

3. Conclusions

To summarize preliminary observations on the functioning of FLAGs in Warmia and Mazury region in the current programming period, it should be emphasized that their contribution to the environment protection can be very large. Related objectives adopted in Local Development Strategies of Fishing Areas remain valid and correspond to the primary needs of the inhabitants and the whole region. Unfortunately, in the current programming period, the number of funded projects aimed at environmental and natural heritage protection in the areas of fisheries in order to maintain its attractiveness and restoring the productive potential of fisheries damaged by natural disasters is with the exception of FLAG Pojezierze Olsztyńskie highly unsatisfactory. The vast majority of applications submitted within the FLAGs operating in the region concerned operations associated with increasing the value of fisheries' product and promoting the development of community services to maintain the attractiveness of fisheries' areas and increasing the competitiveness and maintaining the attractiveness of fisheries' areas. It seems that in the next programming, it will be necessary to introduce minimum limits of the financial resources allocated to LSDFA operations related to the protection of the environment

(especially in areas where a significant role plays NATURA 2000). This will attract more than the current number of potential beneficiaries of the program, as of today the allocation of resources and an interest in action with few exceptions is highly unsatisfactory.

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- [2] Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 9.5.2008 PL Dziennik Urzędowy Unii Europejskiej C 115/47.
- [3] Operational Program Sustainable Development of the Fisheries Sector and Coastal Fishing Areas for 2007–2013.
- [4] Rozporządzenie Ministra Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi z dnia 2 marca 2010 r. zmieniające rozporządzanie w sprawie szczegółowych warunków, jakim powinna odpowiadać lokalna strategia rozwoju obszarów rybackich, kryteriów wyboru lokalnej grupy rybackiej do realizacji tej strategii oraz wymagań, jakim powinna odpowiadać umowa dotycząca warunków i sposobu realizacji tej strategii w ramach programu operacyjnego "Zrównoważony rozwój sektora rybołówstwa i nadbrzeżnych obszarów rybackich 2007 2013", Dziennik Ustaw Nr 36, poz. 200.
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