

Growth in Transition, Thursday, 28 January 2010

Afternoon session “Regional Aspects“

Christian Steiner

The extension of Lower Austria does not only make it a diverse federal province – I would say it is the most diverse federal province in Austria. Lower Austria is situated at the gateway of prominent regional landscapes – the Bohemian Massif in the North, Alps in the West and South, the Pannonian lowlands in the East – all of which determine the distinct differences in climate, diverse soils and terrains. This rich diversity of the landscape is also reflected in the wide variety of agricultural production, ranging from grassland management, farming and viticulture to horticulture and vegetable gardening.

Lower Austria is significantly influenced by its regions. More than two thirds of all Lower Austrians live in the country and, according to the population density criteria used by the OECD, only the districts in the regional hinterland of Vienna (Baden, Mödling, Vienna’s surrounding area) have an urban character.

The strong sense of regional identity within Lower Austria is also expressed in various regional divisions:

- 5 main regions
- 18 leader regions
- More than 70 small regions in a total of 573 communities

Lower Austria claims responsibility for its regions and their sustainable development as living areas, economic areas and recreational areas. This position is applied in practice in the Charter for rural areas.

The Charter for rural areas describes seven main points: land husbandry, location and economy, soil/air/water, culture and knowledge, dwelling and living, living together and involving citizens.

The Charter is implemented by the land development department as part of the rural area platform, which consists of the federal authorities concerned, rural associations (e.g. village renovation, environmental consulting, climate alliance) as well as

regional organisations (e.g. leader regions, small regions, regional managements). Twice a year, networking events take up current topics, discuss comprehensive steps and incorporate the results into the regions.

Examples:

Land husbandry

As part of the Austrian agri-environmental program OPÜL, the federal province of Lower Austria is offering an Eco-points scheme. Farmers participate in the Eco-points scheme with their whole business and receive a payment for providing their services through an environmentally friendly subsistence strategy and for maintaining and fostering elements of the countryside such as hedges, fruit trees, escarpments or meadows.

Eco-points is the regional answer to safeguarding the Lower Austrian cultivated landscapes, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Location & economy

Regional products reinforce one's identity, elevate one's image to the outside and secure the added value locally. An important initiative for raising the awareness of regional and seasonal products is the campaign "So schmeckt Niederösterreich" ("This is how Lower Austria tastes"). The aims of the campaign are as follows:

- short transport routes mean fresh goods and proximity to the customers. You can make an important contribution to climate protection by saving fuel.
- added value in rural areas contributes to safeguarding agriculture and to maintaining regional jobs in the downstream area.
- food stuffs from the region create a sense of home and identification with the producers; regional food stuffs cannot be exchanged for other products.

"So schmeckt Niederösterreich" ("This is how Lower Austria tastes") was launched by Provincial Governor Pröll and Provincial Councillor Pernkopf in 2006 and supports the following actions:

- realisation of and participation in events which focus on regional food stuffs such as wine tasting sessions, trade fairs, Christmas markets, product awards.
- decorating events with advertising medium such as serviettes, table cards, flags and banners.

Soil, air, water

Example of the Lower Austrian Countryside Fund

The use of the countryside through the exploitation of materials such as gravel, sand and stones is imposed with a tax in Lower Austria, the so-called countryside tax. This tax is transferred from the companies to the province of Lower Austria and flows into the earmarked Lower Austrian Countryside Fund. The aim of the Countryside Fund is to foster, maintain and reconstruct cultivated landscapes in Lower Austria. The regional diversity and the variety of landscapes are therefore the main focus of the project.

As the Countryside Fund is not exclusively a nature protection fund (which is not the case in many other federal provinces), the scope of the project is relatively large and ranges from agriculture and forestry and hydraulic construction to tourism and nature protection. In this way, all kinds of regional matters and problems can be dealt with in connection with cultivated landscape.

In practice the Countryside Fund projects take the following regional requirements, among others, into account:

- when planting orchard trees the emphasis is on the traditional orchard regions in Mostviertel in the south west of Lower Austria.
- The humid biotopes system is particularly enforced in the comparably dry regions of Weinviertel in order to achieve small climatic improvements by connecting expanses of water.
- The reactivation, i.e. recreation, of grassland areas in Weinviertel and Waldviertel revives the grazing management which existed originally.
- The renewal of alpine and grazing areas in alpine spaces on the one hand complies with business, but above all, scenic and touristic considerations.

Culture and knowledge

- Culture networking “Kulturvernetzung NÖ”

Important objectives are:

- the safeguarding of the cultural diversity in due consideration of local and regional structures and

- the improvement of the quality of regional locations by increasing the attractiveness of the cultural offer

The culture networking has regional contact points in all four quarters and undertakes national and regional projects and events such as:

- the Lower Austria open studio days and
 - the Lower Austria “Viertelsfestival“ (festival of the quarters) which attracts an average of 50,000 visitors each year
- Lower Austria theatre festival
This is the matching component or addition to the cultural activities of the capital city Vienna, where approx. 250,000 visitors are welcomed every summer with opera, operetta, musicals, comedy, drama, the past and the present in 23 locations in the region.

Living together / involving citizens

Lower Austria should be developed into a social model region. Based on this standard, the head of government Dr. Pröll has commissioned the Lower Austrian village and city renovation team with the implementation of the so-called “social village renovation”. The potential of the 700 village renovation associations should be used to raise awareness of social activities. In practice, it deals with humane means of child care and care for the elderly and a development from family association to village association.

Dwelling and living

More than 20 years ago the campaign “NÖ gestalten“ (“design Lower Austria”) was founded in order to develop modern and high-quality building. The original objectives such as the implementation of new structures for housing developments and location expansions in a modern design were completed by the key areas solar construction and energy-saving construction.

Target groups for this are private customers and communities as well as planning experts.

Messages concerning “regional aspects”

- In order to maintain rural areas (small) urban centres are also needed within the region

It is not only provincial and regional capitals which provide impulses, small regional centres do this too (examples in Lower Austria are the city of Haag, Mank, Berndorf, Retz, ...).

- Sustainable regions are characterised by a high degree of autonomy, diversity and polarisation

Examples:

- Pielachtal >>> Dirndltal
- Mostviertel >>> Moststraße
- Wachau >>> Weinstraße

- Land husbandry and cultivated landscape are connected inseparably!

Example Moststraße:

This region provides a distinctive countryside and distinctive products.

Therefore we deal with a distinctive region

- The rural community is the centre of life

A sound local supply and basic services as well as an efficient infrastructure are important requirements for communities with a high quality of life.

Christian Steiner

Head of department of rural development

Office of the Lower Austrian Government

3109 St. Pölten, Landhausplatz 1/13

Tel 0043 2742 9005 16055

christian.steiner@noel.gv.at