

Quality standards and authenticity to foster competitiveness of agrifood SMEs



NEWSLETTER N° 5

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Partners meeting in Estonia (26-28 April 2022)

The first meeting took place in the afternoon. The Chamber received colleagues from the foreign delegations at the Estonia Briefing Center, in Ülemiste City. Participants were provided with practical information on the digitization process that has been implemented in Estonia since the restored independence, and the benefits of investments and projects in the country were shown.

Photo by Heikki Aven



On the second day the group left Tallinn to head to the region of county of Lääne-Viru in order to visit the Moe Distillery. They were greeted by a CO Liisa Luhaste, who explained the history of the distillery and the origin of the “Estonian vodka”, which has been given the PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) label by the European Union, which means that all the elements that make up the vodka produced at Moe Distillery come exclusively from Estonian territory.



The second company to visit was Freezedry OÜ, situated in Simuna village and commonly known as the “Meki” brand, that is the only one in Estonia that prepares the product using the process of sublimation – a process that expels the water from a frozen product in a vacuum environment, in this way the product passes from a solid to a gaseous state, avoiding the liquid one.



After that, in conclusion of the first day of visits, the participants headed to Würtzpagar, a bakery located in the town of Rakvere. The specialty of Würtzpagar’s bread is in its preparation, which is without the use of yeast, therefore it is only made from flour and water, both of Estonian origin.

Photo by Heikki Aven

The third day continued with a sensory training activity led by Kristel Vene, PhD and flavor scientist at TalTech. Kristel accompanied us on a perceptive journey, to activate the sense of taste.



Finally the partners discussed the status of the project activities, and the final steps that must be fulfilled regarding all partners action plans.

The last company visited was Purtse Brewery, which takes the name after the village in which it was founded. At the brewery different kinds of beers were tasted, whose components are only Estonian-originated. The technical steps of production in the brewery were explained to the participants.



Development of the Action plan in France

We have met on several occasions with the sector and the administration to identify their needs and include them in the action plan



Partners meeting in Bulgaria (1-3 June)

The first day of the meeting representatives of the Bulgarian food and safety agency were invited in order to present the System for fraud prevention and quality control in Bulgaria. Geography as an added value to food production - the Slow Food approach“, was presented by assoc.professor Dessislava Dimitrova, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. GS1 standards in Agroindustry, Steps in the process of traceability: From Farm to Fork strategy were presented by GS1 Bulgaria.



The second day was related to study visit in Bulgarian agrifood enterprises. A chocolate factory situated in Samokov was visited by the group. Then wine tasting tour at Domaine Bessa Valley, Ognianovo was organised. The visit included tour of the cellar with explanation about the technological stages of winemaking, terroir and wine grape varieties.



The third day of the meeting was related to the presentation of the Action Plans of the Partners and discussion on the implementation of the activities for the second phase of the project.



Seminars for the companies regarding the COVID pandemic

Two seminars were organised with the objective to present how to overcome the consequences of the COVID pandemic and how to apply good practices:

- The first seminar, organised on 19th of April, was for SMEs from the agroindustry
- The second seminar, held on 21st of June, was for the branch associations from the sector and the regional chambers of commerce and industry.



Action Plan

The Action Plan for Bulgaria was elaborated in close cooperation with the Bulgarian SME Promotion Agency (BSMEPA) – responsible policy organisation within the project. The AP includes the following measures that will be implemented within Programme for Economic Transformation within National Plan for Recovery and Resilience of Republic of Bulgaria and Operational Programme for competitiveness and innovations for SMEs 2021-2027:

Action 1 ICT vouchers grant scheme

Action 1.1 Development of ICT vouchers grant scheme

1st action Preparation of the grant scheme and announcement of the call for proposals

2nd action Submission of proposals, evaluation and signature of contracts

3rd action Implementation

4th action Monitoring, reporting and payment

Action 1.2 Public awareness campaign

1st action Organisation of information days, webinars and workshops

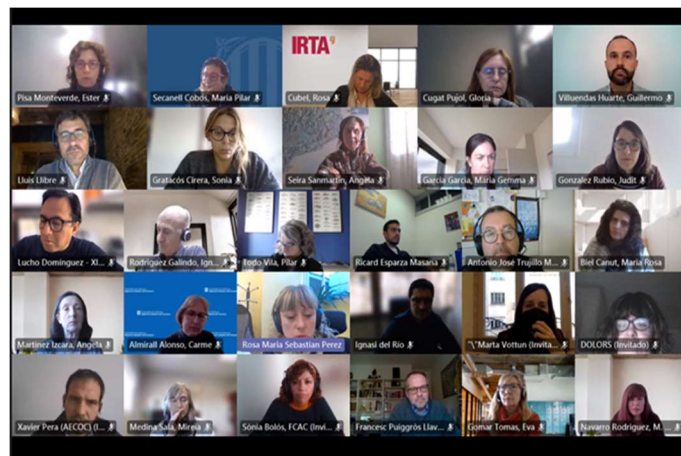
2nd action Allocation of dedicated to the grant scheme web space

3rd action Preparation of a clip with relevant steps for submission of application form

Catalonia's 5th Stakeholders Meeting

The 5th stakeholders meeting coinciding with the 4th meeting of the Strategic Committee of the Interreg Europe QUALIFY project took place on 26 January 2022. It was held jointly with the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), through the InnoHEIs project, which seeks to promote university-business collaboration to strengthen university resources and infrastructure, and which sees the agri-food sector as a key area.

This meeting aimed to share an initial proposal for the QUALIFY project Action Plan, led by the Ministry of Climate Action, Food and Rural Agenda. The Action Plan is the result of more than two years' work, and includes the initiatives to be carried out, framed within the Strategic Food Plan for Catalonia (PEAC) 2021-2026. More than 50 representatives of companies, agri-food sector professionals, research centres, universities, producers' associations and government took part in the meeting and have contributed ideas and suggestions for the Action Plan, which includes actions to improve the competitiveness of SMEs in the agri-food sector in the areas of the project: prevention of food fraud, quality self-monitoring and promotion of product authenticity and funding.



Approval of the Catalan action plan

After three years of partners' meetings, exchange of experiences, approaches, and intense collaboration with local stakeholders, the first phase of the project has culminated with the approval and presentation of the action plans, including the Catalan one, which was validated in April 2022. The second phase of the project, which will begin next August with the Action Plan implementation, will last one year and aims to achieve the main objective of the project: "Increase the competitiveness of Catalan agri-food SMEs, putting in value the authenticity and quality of his processes and products and fighting the alimentary fraud", through the implementation of the distinct actions that contemplates to carry out.

More specifically, the action plan consists of two main axes; one of them is focused on raising awareness and creating training and advisory networks, while the other is focused on innovation and digitalisation, applied to projects, both designed with a practical vision and aimed at Catalan agri-food SMEs. The action plan's main goal is to undertake effective, useful, and profitable measures linked to the project objective. The implementation of the foreseen tools, mechanisms, and instruments in the field of quality and food safety is expected to foster and improve the quality and competitiveness of SMEs in our sector.

Catalonia's 6th Stakeholders Meeting - 5th Strategic Committee Meeting



Projecte Interreg Europe QUALIFY PLA D'ACCIÓ - CATALUNYA

OBJECTIUS DEL PROJECTE
Incrementar la competitivitat de les PIMES agroalimentàries catalanes, posant en valor l'autenticitat i qualitat dels seus processos i productes, i prevenint el frau alimentari.

EIXOS DEL PLA D'ACCIÓ

EIX DE SENSIBILITZACIÓ I CREACIÓ DE XARXES	EIX D'INNOVACIÓ I DIGITALITZACIÓ
FORMACIÓ PER A PIMES - Autocontrol de la qualitat, prevenció del frau i promoció de l'autenticitat - Reptes tecnològics i d'innovació	IDENTIFICACIÓ REPTES I PROJECTES - Mats d'innovació - Seguiment de projectes
PLATAFORMA DIGITAL - Millora de l'oficina virtual de suport a la indústria agroalimentària a RuralCAT	EINES DIGITALS - Projecte pilot plataforma Blockchain per garantir l'autenticitat
ASSESSORAMENT - Creació d'oficina de suport a la innovació	INSTRUMENTS FINANCERS - Cupons d'innovació Innotrack - Grups operatius i projectes demostratius

Implementació de les accions entre agost de 2022 i juliol de 2023

Logos: Web oficial QUALIFY, Interreg Europe, QUALIFY Interreg Europe, Generalitat de Catalunya Departament d'Acció Climàtica, Alimentació i Agenda Rural, QUALIFY al DAAC

On Thursday, June 30, 2022, the fifth meeting of the Strategic Committee of the Interreg Europe QUALIFY project, was held in double format, online and in person. This is a project led by the Department of Climate Action, Food and Rural Agenda. Almost 50 representatives of the agri-food industry, universities, technology and research centers, consumer associations, producers, civil society, representatives of other departments of Generalitat de Catalunya and other public administrations, attended and actively participated in the event.

After five semesters conducting meetings with partners, exchanging experiences and knowledge, sharing and gathering a compendium of good practices, and doing an intense technical and communication work, this meeting closed the first phase of the project. The presentation of the Action Plan for Catalonia, framed in the Strategic Food Plan of Catalonia (PEAC) (2021-2026), included the actions to be carried out during the second phase of the project, which begins next month.

The Action Plan of the QUALIFY project consists of two main objectives, one of which focuses on raising awareness and creating training and assessment networks, and a second that is more focused on innovation and digitalization. In both cases, they have been and focused and planned to support the Catalan agri-food SMEs.

The session began with the institutional welcome words of Joan Gòdia, Director General of Agri-Food Companies, Quality and Gastronomy, of the Department of Climate Action, Food and Rural Agenda of the Generalitat de Catalunya.



Secondly, the Subdirector General of Agri-Food Inspection and Control, Glòria Cugat, made a brief presentation thanking the presence and collaboration of those participants attending the meeting. Then introduced the first speaker, María Larena Reino, internal coordinating technician of the QUALIFY project within the General Sub-Directorate for Agri-Food Inspection and Control, who presented the QUALIFY Action Plan for Catalonia.

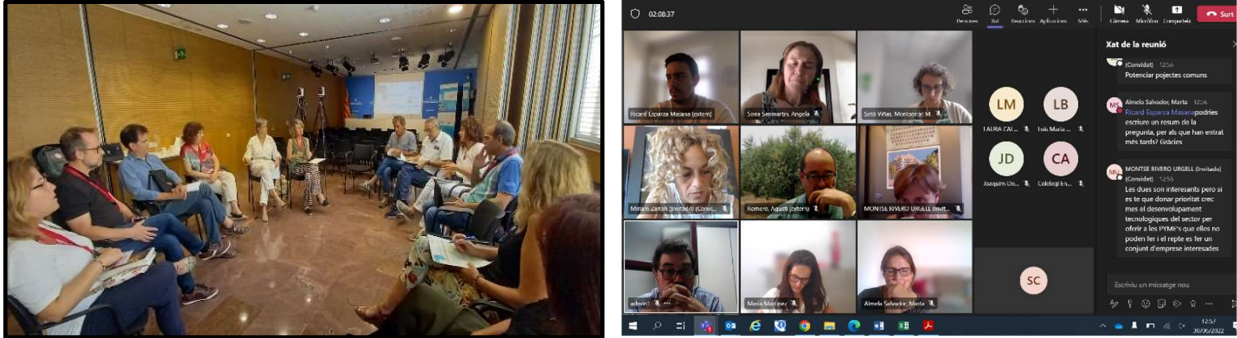


Mr. Ferran Ribas, partner and consultant of GHQ Assessors Company SL, made the first of the two technical presentations related to the central axes of the Action Plan. In this first case, the talk related to the axis of training was entitled: "Training as a tool to improve the quality and competitiveness of SMEs: New MUCAI (Minimum Applicable and Indivisible Competence Unit)".

Mrs. Núria Canela, director of the Unit of Omic Sciences of Eurecat (Technological Center of Catalonia), has been the second expert to show us her practical vision, concretely, on how the innovative technologies in the field of the quality and alimentary hygiene can become tools for improving the quality and competitiveness of agri-food SMEs. The title of her presentation was: "Omic technologies in the field of quality and food safety as a tool for the competitiveness of agri-food SMEs".



The last technical presentation was followed by a workshop session organized in working groups that aimed to bring together the opinions of all the actors when concretizing the actions proposed in the QUALIFY Action Plan for Catalonia. The session was organized according to the two thematic axes of the project. The workshop session in face-to-face format was led by M. Rosa Biel and Eva Gomar, inspectors of the General Sub-Directorate for Agri-Food Inspection and Control, and on the other hand, Ricard Esparza, professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and expert of the project, moderated the streaming group. In both cases participants made valuable contributions giving a practical and useful perspective on how to carry out the activities included in the Action Plan, and others related to how to strengthen the collaboration universities-research/technology centers-SMEs in the Catalan agri-food sector.



Finally, the Subdirector General of Agri-Food Inspection and Control, Glòria Cugat, presented some brief conclusions of the day, thanking again the presence and collaboration of those participants attending the meeting, and inviting them to join a networking session.



The second phase of the project, which will begin on August 1 and will last for one year, will involve the implementation and supervision of this Action Plan. It will be possible by carrying out the different actions set out to try achieve the main objective of the project: "Increasing the competitiveness of Catalan agri-food SMEs, highlighting the authenticity and quality of their processes and products and combating food fraud."

Once again, the results coming from the committee meetings have proven to be very positive, as the representatives' proactive participation and strong application to the sector provide the necessary tools to lead the project towards a direction where all the actors of the Catalan agri-food chain find answers to their challenges, where they collaborate in a multidisciplinary way,

and achieve the objectives within the areas of the project: self-control of quality, food fraud prevention and promotion of the products, and product/processes authenticity.

5th stakeholder meeting in Slovenia:

The fifth stakeholders meeting took place on Friday, 19 November, on Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia, in hall G. The participants of the meeting were agricultural inspectors, that are part of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food. At the beginning of the meeting Jana present them activities regarding food fraud and most common examples of frauded food products. After that, Barbara shortly presented them Qualify project activities.



Another topic of the meeting was public procurement of food. In the past year, agricultural inspectors got some extra authorizations to control how much of food products, that are included in pro-forma invoice, public institutions actually order, when they sign contract with selected food suppliers. In order to help them, the team members presented Catalogue for public procurement of food, and how they protect products from food fraud with quality schemes certificates. They also got access to the application to control correctness of information. At the end of the meeting we exchanged some examples of fraudulent activities.

Action plan for Slovenia:

Due to lack of resources in SMEs, the Chamber will try to enhance the competences of food companies with current information in the field of food safety, food fraud and other topics. They will do this with action Educating SME through seminars, work-shops and study visits. In the frame of this action, the following multiple activities will be performed:

- Slovene food safety and food fraud conference,
- workshop on available food fraud detection in Slovenian R&Ds and accredited laboratories,

- workshop managing (food safety, quality, authentically) hazards in food supply chain on risk and vulnerability assessment basis,
- three study visits of R&D institutions with SMEs,
- food fraud newsletters.

Region of Thessaly stakeholder meetings

The Region of Thessaly held the fifth stakeholder meeting on December 15, 2021. At the meeting participated the Deputy Governor of Thessaly–Responsible for EU Funds and Commerce, the project team of the Department of Development, Planning and Programming and the Department of Agriculture Development of the Region of Thessaly, the External Expert project team and representatives from the Association of Thessalian Enterprises and Industries, Larissa Chamber of Commerce and the Municipality of Larissa. The aim of the meeting was to present to the local stakeholders the proposed action of the Regional Action Plan “Support of local producers and enterprises for the certification of Protected designation of origin (PDO) and Protected geographical indication (PGI) products”.



The Region of Thessaly organized the sixth stakeholder meeting on January 28, 2022, in order to discuss with the local stakeholders the progress of the proposed action. The General Director of the Ministry of Interior (sector Macedonia and Thrace) participated also at the meeting and shared with the participants the experience of the Ministry during the preparation, the launch and the evaluation process of the relevant Call PARAGO.



The Region of Thessaly presented the project QUALIFY at the Transnational Meeting of the URBACT III “Food Corridors” project on November 16, 2021, which was organized by the Municipality of Larissa. The meeting gave the opportunity to the Region of Thessaly to disseminate the project activities to a wider network of local and regional authorities and enterprises of the agrifood sector.



Partner Meeting in Thessaly

The partners meeting of the QUALIFY project took place in Larissa (Greece) from 25 to 27 October 2021, organized by the Thessaly Region.

The mission to Greece consisted of meetings with heads of agriculture and food and European projects of the Greek regional administration and technical visits to the food industries listed below. The basic purpose of the meeting was to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences and to identify Good Practices carried out in other regions in the areas described to assess their possible implementation in the future action [plan](#) ([read more](#)).



Region of Thessaly stakeholder meeting Semester 6



The Region of Thessaly held the seventh stakeholder meeting on July 12, 2022. At the meeting participated the QUALIFY project team of the Department of Development, Planning and Programming and the Department of Agriculture Development of the Region of Thessaly and the External Expert project team. The aim of the meeting was to discuss about the progress of the action “Support of local producers and enterprises for the certification of Protected designation of origin (PDO) and Protected geographical indication (PGI) products and Traditional Specialities Guaranteed (TSG)”, which was launched on June 2, 2022 and will be open for the applicants until January 31, 2023.

Action Plan

As a result of the Region of Thessaly involvement in the interregional learning process of the QUALIFY partnership, the Action Plan includes one proposed action to be monitored during the Phase 2 of the project. The Action Plan addresses to the policy instrument the Regional Development Programme 2021-2025 (RDP) - Priority Axis 5 “Extroversion”: Enhance of Tourism, Culture, Agrifood and Entrepreneurship. The objective is the enhancement of the Agrifood sector for PDO and PGI products. The proposed action is the “Support of local producers and enterprises for the certification of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) products”.

Since most SMEs in the Region of Thessaly operate in the agri-food sector, it is necessary to take measures that boost quality processes and innovation for rural economy and Agri-food SMEs. In addition, SMEs in Thessaly are facing viability challenges linked to a low competitiveness result and consequently, there is a need to develop innovation and quality support services, so that SMEs can exploit new products, services, and models and access new markets. Towards this direction, the planned call for proposals will provide support to Social Cooperative Enterprises of Collective and Social Benefit, Producer Groups and Agricultural Cooperatives in the process of preparation, documentation and submission of technical files for the certification of traditional local products with the quality label of PDO and PGI, according to the Regulation 1151/2012 of the EU. The overall objectives of the action are related to the connection of the products and their special characteristics with the biodiversity of the area, the traditional way of production and processing, the culture of the local communities, the strengthening of mountainous, semi-mountainous, border areas as well as the protection of the intellectual property and social characteristics of the local communities in Thessaly. The time needed to implement the action is 1 year starting in June 2022 and ending in April 2023, while the foreseen budget of the action is 140.000€.

Project summary

QUALIFY has been designed to foster the competitiveness of the SMEs in the agrifood sector by tackling a challenge that affects the involved regions and the whole EU (as stated by the European Commission):

- The improvement of the quality processes of these SMEs.
- The fight against the fraud in the sector.
- The promotion of the authenticity in their products.

Overcoming the barriers related to these challenges is to foster the reduction of costs, better chain values, better processes, and better products that will allow the tackled SMEs to grow and be more competitive in the national and international markets, where they need to enlarge their presence in front of larger companies, which are much less challenged by the presented topics.

To work in this direction, the project tackles the ERDF funds devoted to increase SMEs competitiveness in 7 EU regions/states which are representative of the EU geographical dimension and which incorporate agrifood and SMEs as core aspects of their respective RIS3.

The project aims at ensuring that when the projects funded under these schemes tackle agrifood SMEs they introduce aspects of quality, fraud prevention, and authenticity, which must complement the existing financial and non-financial instruments, enlarging the desired outcome: the growth of these SMEs.

The project also aims at enlarging the capacities of the managing authorities, relevant SMEs representatives and other stakeholders to better tackle these aspects and develop better and more efficient projects.

The main project outputs are: 7 policy instruments enlarged and improved through 7 action plans + monitoring systems, setting-up of a course with materials on the project topics for managing authorities and SMEs to foster an e-learning process, 35 stakeholder meetings, 4 dissemination events, 6 partner meetings with study visits, a continuous contact with national and EU institutions working in these topics, and over 50 best practices learned/exchanged.

Partners



Further information in our web: <http://www.interregeurope.eu/qualify/>