Ecological modernisation through regionalisation? Understanding farmers’ and other rural stakeholders’ involvement in regionalised agri-environmental governance

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European agri-environmental schemes are being criticised for failing to facilitate a durable integration of ecological interests and values in agricultural practices and to meet public demand for agri-environmental reform. This paper explores if and how a regionalisation of agri-environmental governance contributes to overcoming these criticisms. Based on 42 qualitative interviews with farmers and other relevant stakeholders (governmental agents, nature conservationists, rural dwellers, consumers), the paper analyses three Flemish (northern Belgian) agri-environmental schemes. These schemes were organised according to three analytically distinct modes of regional governance: (i) devolving governance functions to local/regional levels; (ii) re-connecting places of production with places of consumption through information (e.g. product labelling); and (iii) re-creating producer-consumer relations in situations of co-presence. Building conceptually on ecological modernisation theory, the paper analyses to what extent and why the different regionalised governance arrangements enabled or constrained an internalisation of ecological rationalities in farming practices, and succeeded in meeting the culturally and geographically situated ecological interests and values of the farmers and other regional stakeholders who were involved in the governance of the schemes. The paper ends with a reflection on the implications of our findings for our understanding of the connection between regionalised governance and sustainable rural development.

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