

THE BAIX LLOBREGAT AGRICULTURAL PARK (BARCELONA):
AN INSTRUMENT FOR PRESERVING, DEVELOPING AND
MANAGING A PERIURBAN AGRICULTURAL AREA

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ABSTRACT

The agricultural area of the Llobregat delta is situated little more than 5 km south of Barcelona. However, the high pressure from urban and industrial expansion in Barcelona and its adjacent municipalities creates problems for agriculture. A combination of these problems with the demands of farmers requires a clear and efficient solution for the preservation, development and management of this agricultural area. This solution was reached in 1997 in the form of the Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park. The concept of an agricultural park lays the foundation of an instrument for managing agricultural areas that are subjected to great urban pressure. The instrument is built up around three elements: a management body, a special protection and improvement plan for town planning (PE) and a Management and Development Plan (PDG). The specific aim of the Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park is to consolidate and manage 2900 hectares of high quality fruit and vegetable crops (open air and greenhouses) in the Llobregat delta near Barcelona and to promote professional agricultural activities in this area.



KEYWORDS: Agricultural Park; Barcelona; periurban agriculture; preservation, development and management

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1. INTRODUCTION

The agricultural area of the Llobregat delta is situated little more than 5 km south of Barcelona, nestled between the Garraf and Collserola massifs and the 700.000 inhabitants of the municipalities that surround this region. The high pressure caused by urban and industrial expansion in Barcelona and its adjacent municipalities creates problems for agriculture in this area. A combination of these problems with the demands of the farmers, voiced by the professional organizations (in this case the *Unió de Pagesos de Catalunya* – Farmworker’s Union of Catalonia - that has a majority in this region), made it obvious that it was necessary to provide a clear and efficient solution for the preservation, development and management of this agricultural area (Paül and Tonts, 2005).

A solution was reached in 1997 in the form of the Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park, a common project led by two supramunicipal bodies (the *Consejo Comarcal del Baix Llobregat - Council for Commerce in Baix Llobregat* - and la *Diputació de Barcelona - Barcelona City Council*), interested in the preservation and management of natural and agricultural areas, and the *Unió de Pagesos* itself. The 14 municipalities within the area of the Agricultural Park subsequently joined. The project started in 1996 by the EU’s LIFE-Environment program and was the driving force behind the creation of the *Consorcio del Parque Agrario - Agricultural Park Consortium* - as a management body.

2. PERIURBAN AGRICULTURE AND THE CONCEPT OF THE AGRICULTURAL PARK

The concept of an agricultural park lays the foundation of an instrument for managing agricultural areas that are subjected to great pressure due to the influence of large metropolitan areas and/or intense metropolisation. The instrument uses a model based on the balance between the values that need to be preserved and the functions that should be developed (Montasell and Roda, 2003).

The aim of the instrument is to consolidate and develop the territorial base and to facilitate the continuity of agricultural activity. The method of working is based on a cooperation network. This network is founded on the sensitivity and receptivity of the involved agents and their agreement to maintain contact with each other, coordinate activities and have joint responsibility.

The Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park is an implementation of the agricultural park concept (Sabaté, 2000). As well as being an instrument for preserving, developing and managing periurban agricultural areas³ (OCDE, 1979), it is the result of a long process of debate and reflection on the phenomenon of periurbanisation in Europe and of the search

³ According to the OCDE definition, periurban agriculture is that which is found within a radius of 20 kilometer surrounding urban areas with more than 200.000 inhabitants and 10 kilometer for urban areas with between 50.000 and 100.000 inhabitants.

for models for preserving and managing periurban agricultural areas. Synergies with other initiatives, projects and transnational networks involved in this phenomenon are looked after. These synergies can expand our knowledge of the effects of metropolisation in periurban agricultural areas and help to find suitable formulas for preserving, optimising and managing them (Paül, 2006).

All of this has led to the organisation of conferences and debates on periurban agriculture (Periurban Agricultural Conferences, May 2004, Viladecans, Barcelona) and to our participation in different initiatives and organizations. Among other things, we participated as experts in the drafting of the initiative report of the European Economic and Social Committee on Periurban Agriculture approved in July 2004 (EESC, 2004). We also became involved in the periurban debate on associative networks (Purple), the French Association *Terres en Ville* (Land in the City), the association of local second-level administrations *Arco Latino* and in organizations such as the Federation of Metropolitan and Periurban Natural and Rural Areas (FEDENATUR).

3. THE BAIX LLOBREGAT AGRICULTURAL PARK

The Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park is centrally located in the Barcelona metropolitan area. The alluvial plain of the delta and lower valley of the river Llobregat (Paül, 2004), which is on the outskirts of the Barcelona metropolitan area, is obliged to live alongside an extensive built-up-area, with the population pressure and environmental effects that this entails. The specific aim of the Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park is to consolidate and manage 2900 hectares of high quality fruit and vegetable crops (open air and greenhouses) and to promote professional agricultural activities. The starting point is a consortium of 600 agrarian holdings and 1.200 agrarian workers (70% full time) in the agricultural area of the Llobregat delta, whose farms are between 1 and 4 hectares in size. Although their agricultural produce was formerly exported to other European countries, the farmers now supply Barcelona's local markets and the central MERCABARNA market. Their fresh produce is also supplied to large commercial distribution chains. There are even producers that supply "ready-to-eat" products. It is worth highlighting the production of the Prat chicken that bears the EU's Protected Geographical Indication (PGI).

The consortium has its own distinctive quality brand: "*Producto FRESCO del Parque Agrario*" – "Fresh PRODUCE from the Agricultural Park". Farmers may use it after signing an agreement with the Agricultural Park. This brand was promoted by the Park on the principle that it offers the 2.000.000 inhabitants within the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona a local market quality and extremely fresh products from nearby land.

The agricultural park model is built up out of three main elements. The first element is the management body of the park, embodied by the Consortium.

The *Information and Management Centre for the Agricultural Park Consortium* is located at the heart of the Agricultural Park, at the Can Comas headquarters. The estate,

that bears the same name, extends over a total area of 4.5 hectares. On this estate, besides the plots dedicated to horticultural experimentation and educational activities, there is also an Arboretum with a collection of 62 varieties of 9 different species of fruit trees that are traditionally cultivated in the area of the Agricultural Park. The collected varieties and species constitute a valuable heritage of cultivated agrodiversity. These fruit collections were part of the Life-Environment program in 2000.

Although there is no direct participation in the management of the Consortium, an important socio-professional network exists, both in the field of training and in the fields of research, experimentation and consultation. The Consortium collaborates with the Higher Technical Agricultural College of Barcelona and the Institute of Agro-alimentary Research and Development (IRTA). They also developed a collaboration with a network of technicians who advise farmers on how to improve their production techniques (by implementing integrated and ecological production) through the Crop Plant Protection Association (ADV) and with hi-tech companies dedicated to in vitro cultivation.

The second and third element that complete the Agricultural Park model, along with the Consortium as management body, are the Special protection and improvement plan for town planning (PE) and the Management and Development Plan (PGD).

The PE (Consorti del Parc Agrari, 2005) is a document that defines the territorial limits of the agricultural park within which the Consortium can act and regulate land use. Within this demarcated area, the Consortium also has the possibility to establish town planning rules. These rules make it possible to manage the Agricultural Park in such a way that the aim of preserving and improving the agricultural and natural heritage of the area can be achieved. This lies in line with the sustainable development of periurban agriculture through achieving a balanced and harmonious co-existence of the three types of interest which come together in this area: the *financial and economic* interests of agricultural activity, the *ecological and environmental* interest of the natural and agricultural systems and the *cultural and social* interest of maintaining a dynamic quality landscape in which educational and recreational activities can be carried out in an ordered manner.

The PGD (Consorti del Parc Agrari, 2004) specifies the 5 strategic lines for managing the area as described in the PE. The contents of the PGD stem from the institutional agreement between the agents involved in the Consortium. The PGD tries to find a solution for the consolidation challenges of the agricultural companies by means of the efficiency of the infrastructures and general services, the promotion of production systems which respect the environment, the search for commercialisation channels that meet the needs of the market, and, in short, the modernisation of farms so that they can improve and reach their commercial viability. All these strategies must be carried out while guaranteeing the permanence and improvement of the environmental, social and economic system. Such a sustainability is possible if it is associated with the capacity of the agricultural system (agrosystem) to recover from disturbances arising from changes in the environment.

All of what has been described above is recapitulated in the general objective of the Agricultural Park, that is

“to consolidate and develop the territorial base and facilitate the continuity of agricultural activity, promoting specific programmes which preserve the values (productive or resources, ecological and cultural) and develop the functions (economic, environmental and social) of the agricultural space within the framework of sustainable agriculture which is integrated into the area and in harmony with the natural environment.”

This objective is based on five strategic lines:

1. achieve *infrastructural efficiency* (roads, irrigation networks, improving water quality, re-using regenerated water etc.) and *general services* (rural vigilance, supplies of diesel oil, etc.),
2. promote *efficient production systems* that respect the environment (integrated pest management and ecological production, zero residues, efficient irrigation systems etc.), and *commercialization* (quality brands, Protected Geographical Indication PGI) that boosts the increase in farm income,
3. encourage the *establishment of services* and the *modernization of farms* in order to improve their viability (standardisation centre for products, agreements with cooperatives and crop plants protection associations (ADV), improving the sale points at MERCABARNA etc.),
4. achieve a quality area integrated into the land and in harmony with the natural environment (centre for collecting plastics related to the greenhouse effect, monitoring environmental quality parameters, town planning and environmental discipline etc.), and
5. *consolidate and promote the natural and cultural heritage* of the Agricultural Park, without interfering in agricultural activity, (educational programme for schools, agro-territorial and environmental interpretation centre, Arboretum of traditional varieties of fruits etc.).

These general strategic lines are developed by means of 17 specific aims and a large number of actions that are specified in a bi-annual action plan.

In the Action Plan for 2008-2009, four points have been established as strategic management objectives:

1. improve competitiveness (*Parc Innova, Parc Actiu, Parc Acull*)
2. consolidate the territorial base (*Parc Aqua, Parc landscape, Parc endreçat*),
3. improve agricultural park's management (*Parc 24@, Parc informat*),
4. improve collaboration and cooperation on project development (*Parc coopera*)

4. CONCLUSION

In short, the Baix Llobregat Agricultural Park is a periurban agricultural area, with modern, developing agriculture in a high-quality area of land. The real protagonists of this area are the farmers that can generate an income from agriculture near their place of residence and from the resources that are available to them. These are the people who give meaning to the preservation, development and management of the Llobregat agricultural areas that is strived for by means of the Park's management body we are trying to develop.

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