

# FOCUS

## - Strengthening competitiveness of agri-food SMEs through transnational Cluster

### FOCUS PROJECT OVERVIEW

Strengthening competitiveness of agri-food SMEs through transnational Clusters – FOCUS- is a project implemented by a consortium of four Balkan – Mediterranean countries representing seven (7) partners from Greece (Region of Peloponnese, lead partner; National Technical University of Athens, Agriculture University of Athens) Cyprus (Cyprus Chamber of Commerce & Industry), Albania (Local Economic Development Agency of Vlora) and Bulgaria (Business Support Centre for Small and Medium Enterprises of Ruse and Agriculture University of Plovdiv).

FOCUS aims at establishing transnational agri-food cooperation links among agri-food businesses and research institutions, promoting at the same time technology transfer and food innovation in order to facilitate the upgrade of the competitiveness and extroversion of agri-food SMEs. Its main objective is to advance the capacity & competitiveness of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in order to deliver innovative, novel & improved food products in national, regional and global markets. This will be achieved through implementing a robust set of activities, accelerating the 'Quadruple Helix' collaboration and resulting in innovation & technology transfer in the agri-food sector, but also through the exchange of experiences and analysis of good practices in the field. FOCUS project will follow a methodological approach involving three main phases: (1) mapping the agri-food ecosystem in the partners' countries, (2) design and operation of innovative regional agri-food Clusters, (3) creation of an ICT platform including a key supportive toolbox that will be properly designed by the 4 agri-food regional Clusters in order to provide an innovative service mix to Agri-Food SMEs. This toolbox will be accessible by all participating SMEs & stakeholders and will act as a key market–technology intelligence & technology transfer tool during the pilot implementation. In parallel, the Clusters will offer a mix of innovative tailor made support services, for instance (a) auditing & validation of the technological, technical & economic viability of innovative ideas of targeted agri-food SMEs, (b) assistance in developing their feasibility business plan,, (c) capacity building through seminars and (d) partner search through matchmaking. Last but not least, 4 regional agri – food policy recommendations roadmaps for RIS3 strategies will be elaborated.

The project duration is two years (November 2017 - October 2019) and is co-funded by the European Union - ERDF and IPA II - and National funds of the participating countries under the Cooperation Programme Interreg Balkan Mediterranean 2014-2020.

The project consortium together with the Federation of Hellenic Food Industries (SEVT) that has an observer status will join forces to ensure the durability of the project's results in other regions. Moreover, the 4 regional innovative agri-food Clusters that will be established during the project's lifecycle are expected to be the starting point for bringing closer for the first time farms, food business, research institutions, universities and policy bodies in the Balkan Med region.

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## KICK OFF MEETING, TRIPOLIS, GREECE



The FOCUS project held its Kick-off Meeting on the 12th and 13th of December 2017 in the Region of Peloponnese (REGPEL) premises in Tripolis, Greece. During the first day the Lead Partner, the Region of Peloponnese, welcomed all partners in Tripoli and the partners presented their organization and their roles relevant to the project. In addition, there was a presentation of the objectives, the consortium structure, the work plan and the work packages. The Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) presented an overview of the project Communication Plan (contents, activities, deliverables and programme's communication guide). On the second day of the meeting, a presentation of WP3 was made by the Agriculture University of Athens (AUA) followed by a presentation of the project's thematic WPs by AUA, NTUA and REGPEL.



The meeting was concluded by an exchange of opinions and further discussion on the management and the implementation of the project's activities where answers to many questions and clarifications were given.

## LOCAL OPEN DAY EVENT, RUSE, BULGARIA

On the 19th of April 2018, the Business Support Centre for SMEs (BSC SME) – a partner in the FOCUS project -, organized an Open Day event in Ruse, Bulgaria. The main focus was on presenting the project and the opportunities for the SMEs to join and receive advanced free of charge services. The programme also included useful presentations for the companies in the agri-food sector.

A HACCP specialist presented the new requirements of Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers, providing advice and practical examples for various product fields. The experts from the Agricultural University of Plovdiv, also a partner in the FOCUS project, provided valuable input to the event through very useful presentations that supplied more information on the biological pollutants in foods, as well as on the scientific approach on PCR-based detection and quantification of biological objects in the analysis of food products and ingredients.

All presentations were very stimulating and were delivered in a lively manner. The participants were really interested and commented on a lot of points raised by the experts. Moreover, they stated their readiness to be part of the project's activities and shared their views in the informal chats during the breaks, expressing at the same time their satisfaction about the organization of the event.



## 2nd TRANSNATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING, PLOVDIV, BULGARIA

The 2nd Transnational Steering Committee Meeting held on the 8th to 9th May 2018 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. The Agriculture University of Plovdiv was the hosting partner, of the 3 days meetings. During the 8th and 9th May the meetings was focus on the 2nd Steering Committee. On the 8th of May an opening speech from the Rector of the Agricultural University Prof. Hristina Jancheva took place, followed by the presentations from the AUA of the WP3.1- *Mapping & Benchmarking Methodology* and then each partners country presented the WP3.2 - *Mapping Agrifood Clusters in Balkan Med* and WP3.4 - *Policies and Regulatory Framework*. Upon the 2nd day REGPEL presented WP3.5 Regional agri-food profiles & technologies and followed with academia partners (AUA and NTUA) presentations of WP 4 in relation with *Design and operation methodology of FOCUS Clusters*, as well as the FOCUS collaboration platform. There was an interactive discussion among partners on the first day. Moreover, upon the 2nd day a small workshop in two groups elaborated in order to specify the sectors, needs/ trends, and technology services per county. In the afternoon of the same day, there was a preparatory workshop for the 1st focus group so all partners could provide suggestions.



## 1ST FOCUS GROUP MEETING, PLOVDIV, BULGARIA

Agricultural University of Plovdiv hosted the First FOCUS Group meeting on the 10th May 2018. Mainly academia was invited to participate from agriculture and food processing fields. Ms Petkova welcomed the participants on behalf of AUP and the consortium of the project. REGBEL gave a detail presentation of the objectives and the progress of the project. Ms Petkova provided a set of questions in order to start the discussion. The seminar was held immediately after the 2nd FOCUS Steering committee meeting. Following discussions from the 2nd FOCUS SC meeting, the

consequent questions arose for consideration and further clarification. Among the questions that were discussed was to share their expertise on agri-food cooperation in Bulgaria, what kind of support and services (labeling, packaging processing etc.) do the local SMEs need, their value-chain, related clusters, sectors and SMEs selection, Capacity Building workshops, trends/ needs and technology (innovative practices/ideas) to be considered.

Five Bulgarian experts in the field of agrarian sciences and food technologies were invited to take part in the meeting and discussion was held with the FOCUS partners. The Bulgarian experts shared personal experience and observations on the issues identified in advance for discussion.

The discussion mainly expanded through the main hubs of the three sectors in Bulgaria (dairy, oil-producing industry, and wine) that it could be positioned in Plovdiv. Another suggestion was of the establishing of a “Clean food” Cluster. Equal important was the fact that this can be achieved (i.e., ingredients, processes, packaging, distribution) and must take into consideration the structures/functions/mechanisms. The coordinator of the 1st Focus group Mrs Mariana Petkova - Asis. Prof. of Microbiology and Environmental Biotechnology, AUP, she proposed a plan to



to select key players and policies to build an example cluster in the dairy industry. Dr. Sofia Karma, from the NTUA presented the strategy for building an internet platform of the project and training tools. Interactive discussions and valuable opinions were exchanged.

**PARTNERS**

Greece - **Region of Peloponnese**



Greece - **National Technical University of Athens**



Greece - **Agriculture University of Athens**



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AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS

Cyprus - **Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry**



Albania - **Local Economic Development Agency of Vlora**



Bulgaria - **Business Support Centre for SMEs, Ruse**



Bulgaria - **Agriculture University of Plovdiv**



**LOCAL OPEN DAY EVENT IN VLORA, ALBANIA**



On May 14th, 2018 in Vlora, near 'Three Racat' square, it was realized with local businesses within the Focus-Med Balkans Program the LOCAL OPEN DAY event.

AULEDA - Local Economic Development Agency of Vlora Region, invited the local businesses operating in the field of agro-industry. The businesses

had the opportunity to promote the local products, to represent their local identity.

Municipality of Vlora, Regional public actors, Public Agriculture and agri-food institutions, Research Institutions, NGO-s operating in the Agri-food sector, Universities, Chambers of Commerce, SME-s and Cooperatives were the main participants of this day.

The fair was attended by businesses, farmers, and other stakeholders operating in the field of agro-industry such as wine, olive oil, fruits, vegetable and handmade products.

The participants showed great interest for the event and the products presented, also they enjoyed the quality representation of the local producers and enterprises.



**More Information for the project and related events**

<http://www.focusproject.com>

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*The Project is co-funded by the European Union and National Funds of the participating countries*