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The EU Mountain Product Voluntary Quality Term as a Valorization Tool for Livestock Farms: Challenges and Opportunities in an Alpine Context

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Abstract: European mountain areas have experienced a persistent loss of agricultural land and economic activities over time, with negative effects from both an environmental and a cultural perspective. In 2012, the European Union devised the mountain product (MP) quality term to provide to mountain producers a tool to better market their products and thus increase their income. In this article, we tried to understand what the current challenges and opportunities are concerning this quality term, focusing on meat products in the Italian Alpine context. To this end, interviews were conducted with producers who are allowed to use the term on meat in this area and with regional persons in charge of the food quality policy. The SWOT analysis performed on the results of these interviews highlights that the lack of stringent requirements and simple bureaucratic procedures are the main strengths of this tool, while the interest of consumers in mountain products is a factor that can stimulate the spread of its use. However, four crucial needs should be addressed, namely increasing consumers' awareness of MP, providing information on MP to producers, increasing the protection of the term and developing a more collaborative approach among producers.

Keywords: mountain product; meat; EU voluntary quality scheme



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1. Introduction

Mountain areas cover nearly 40% of the territory of the European Union (EU) [1]. The climatic and morphological conditions that characterize these areas limit the economic profitability of agriculture. Compared to the lowlands, yields in the mountains are usually lower, production costs higher and farmers are forced to choose what to produce among a smaller range of crops [2]. The main effects of this lower economic viability are land abandonment and rural migration [3,4]. In the European Alps, around 40% of agricultural land was abandoned between 1980 and 2000 [5,6]. In addition, for 70% of farmers in these areas, farming is a secondary source of income [7].

The loss of farming activity and abandonment of agricultural land produce undesired effects at different levels. Several authors observed that these phenomena are closely connected to a loss of animal and plant biodiversity [8–10], cultural heritage [11,12] and landscape diversity and attractiveness [13,14]. Yet, biodiversity and landscape beauty are usually recognized by consumers to be important ecosystem services provided by mountain agriculture [15].

In this respect, agricultural policy has affected the EU mountain areas in relevant ways. The original Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), mainly based on price support, penalized less productive areas, whereas in 1975 the EU introduced a support specifically devoted to less favored areas (LFAs), which include mountain areas. This support has been maintained in the following CAP reforms, including the new 2023–2027 CAP proposal. In addition to direct support, the EU also tried to improve farmers' conditions in LFAs through market instruments. Quality schemes, such as geographical indications (GIs), are assigned a role

by the EU legislation in improving farmers' income in rural areas, despite not being created specifically for LFAs. In 2012, the mountain product voluntary quality term (hereinafter referred as MP) was added to the array of EU quality schemes, also in response to the long-term commitment of Euromontana (the European association of mountain areas, a not-for-profit and scientific organization, established in 1996). MP aims to specifically communicate to consumers the mountain origin of products and thus allows producers to better market their products. The importance of quality schemes as a means to strengthen the position of farmers in the supply chains is stressed by the European Commission also within the Farm-to-Fork strategy, in accordance with the New Green Deal [16,17].

Given that MP was introduced more recently than other EU quality schemes, research on this tool is still scanty. While the literature on MP is presented in the next section, it is worth noting here that most of the studies focus on consumers and on a few types of products (mainly milk and cheese). Studies dealing with producers are rarer and usually conducted at a regional scale.

To contribute to filling these gaps, we decided to focus this study on meat products and to consider, as a case study, the entire Italian Alps area. Specifically, the objective of the study is twofold: (i) To assess the extent to which MP is used by meat producers in the Italian Alpine context; and (ii) to understand which factors stimulate or hinder its adoption. This choice aims to provide a more extensive and thorough overview of the MP dynamics in a sector (i.e., livestock production) of primary importance for mountain areas.

To this end, a SWOT analysis is proposed, based on the results of interviews conducted with MP producers and regional institutions. Given that Italy is one of the first countries to have implemented the EU MP regulation in a comprehensive way, the challenges and opportunities identified by the SWOT and the resulting policy implications are valuable also for other Member States that are still in the process of fully implementing this quality term.

In the next section, the limited MP literature is reviewed, in Section 3, a brief overview of the MP legislation is provided, while Section 4 details the methods used in the analysis. Section 5 briefly illustrates the main characteristics of the Italian Alpine agriculture and the results of the survey. Based on these results, Section 6 identifies the main needs and provides policy recommendations to widen the MP adoption and improve its market performance. Section 7 concludes.

2. MP as a Valorization Instrument for Marginal Areas

Since 1975, EU mountain areas have been given specific policy support, being acknowledged as LFAs [18]. LFAs are those areas that suffer from major constraints, such as physical and natural handicaps, marginality, and socio-economic weaknesses. In particular, high cultivation costs and low yield potential characterize LFA (and mountain) farming systems [19]. This low agricultural productivity can explain the decrease in the economic activities of farms over time, hence land abandonment, depopulation and agricultural decline in mountain areas [20–22].

While mountain agriculture suffers from these physical and economic constraints, mountain agri-food products show distinctive features, appreciated by consumers [23], due to the way these products are farmed, the linkage with high-quality raw materials, the presence of clean waters and pure air, the use of traditional production and processing methods, the local origin [19,23,24]. Thus, in addition to direct support, the EU has also introduced GI quality schemes, which are used the most in LFAs [25–27] to add value to traditional agri-food products [28], and a voluntary market instrument for mountain agri-food products, i.e., the MP.

In particular, the MP as a means to promote mountain agri-food products is intended to lead to multiple positive effects: Supporting the mountain agri-food sector, diversifying local economies, providing quality guarantees to consumers, protecting the environment and territorial biodiversity [23,24]. In addition, production systems and practices tied to local traditions and culture are also intended to be explicitly preserved [29,30]. This kind of

public tool might be a complement to private initiatives of product valorization, such as those linked to diversification toward tourism and agritourism services [31,32].

Economic theory suggests that the MP, as other quality schemes, might have a positive impact on both consumers and producers, reducing information asymmetry [33–35]. The former benefit from having no misleading information on the mountain origin of the products, while the latter can exploit the positive image of mountains to increase the value added of their products [24,36]. However, to ripen these benefits, a critical issue is the cooperation among producers aiming at creating “strategic alliances”. The issue has been largely analyzed for GI schemes [37,38].

Since its introduction, the MP adoption has been higher among Italian producers than those in other Member States [39]. Thus, most of the scientific studies are focused on the Italian context. Among the studies that investigated consumers’ attitudes toward MP, Linder et al. [40] explored consumers’ perceptions of the rules governing the MP scheme, while Bassi et al. [24] found a direct relationship between MP and purchase intentions. The authors also highlighted that the attractiveness of mountains and mountain food are likely to be the factors behind the positive valuation of the MP. The attitude towards MP, however, is higher among consumers living in the lowlands than those living in the mountains [40]. A group of studies assessed the importance attached by consumers to the MP for specific types of products. Brun et al. [41] discovered that consumers have a positive attitude towards MP honey, Bentivoglio et al. [42] found that consumers are willing to pay more for MP milk, while Mazzocchi et al. [43] and Mazzocchi and Sali [23] obtained similar results for cheese. Comparable conclusions were reached by Resano and Sanjuán [44] and Sanjuán and Khlijji [45] in their studies on beef meat in Spain.

On the producers’ side, studies are even rarer and focused only on the regional scale. Bentivoglio et al. [46] and Finco et al. [47] explored the opinion of farmers and retailers on the MP and their attitudes toward its use in central Italy. Bonadonna [36] and Bonadonna et al. [29] conducted similar studies in mountain areas located in north-west Italy.

3. The MP Regulation

The mountain product voluntary quality term was introduced in the European legislation as a voluntary quality term by Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012, which also regulates other quality schemes (e.g., Protected Denominations of Origin, Protected Geographical Indications). The general objectives of this regulation are the improvement of product quality, the provision of information to consumers and the increase in farmers’ income. A specific objective is set for the MP, whose establishment is aimed at “provid[ing] mountain producers with an effective tool to better market their product and to reduce the actual risks of consumer confusion as to the mountain provenance of products in the market place” (Reg. (EU) No 1151/2012).

The rules provided by Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012 and by the Delegated Act (EU) No 665/2014 are slightly different depending on the type of product. For crop production, the MP can be used only if the plant is grown in mountain areas (as delimited pursuant to Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013). More flexibility is allowed for products of animal origin, for which it is required that animals are reared in mountain areas for at least the last two thirds of their life or, for transhumant animals, that they have grazed for at least one quarter of their life in mountain areas. In addition, the European legislation sets, for each animal type, the maximum quantity of feedstuffs that can be produced outside the mountain area when using the MP. The share, as a percentage of dry matter, of the annual diet that can be produced outside the mountain area must not exceed 40% for ruminants, 75% for pigs and 50% for other animals. Finally, the Delegated Act (EU) No 665/2014 introduces derogations for some processing activities (i.e., milk processing, meat processing, pressing of olives), which can take place outside mountain areas, provided that the distance from the mountain area does not exceed 30 km. On this point, however, flexibility is left to Member States, which can decide not to apply the derogations or to change the distance parameter. In Italy,

the distance is reduced to 10 km for milk and milk products, while it is maintained at 30 km for meat and olive processing.

As highlighted by Euromontana [39], despite the presence of the European Regulation, nine Member States have not yet implemented the MP. Among the other eligible countries (i.e., those having mountain areas), some directly applied the EU Regulation, while others issued or were issuing national rules. However, several flaws remain, such as the absence of a national register of MP producers (e.g., in Austria and France), the absence of a specific label (e.g., in Austria, Germany, Slovenia, the Czech Republic), and the very low use of the MP by producers (e.g., in Austria, Germany, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria). According to the information reported in Euromontana [39], Italy and Romania are the only two countries with a quite comprehensive MP legislation and a not negligible use of the MP by producers.

In Italy, the rules for adapting the EU Regulation are provided at national level, by Ministerial Decree N.57165 of 26 July 2017. The national legislation regulates the procedure to be granted the right to use the MP and the monitoring system. Because agricultural policies in Italy are implemented at regional level, regional institutions are also important actors of the MP governance. A producer who wants to apply the MP on his/her products must notify the competent regional institution of the intention to enter the scheme. The regional institutions then insert the producer in a specific regional register that is sent, once a year, to the Ministry of Agriculture. With respect to monitoring, a traceability system must be set in place by producers to demonstrate the mountain origin of the raw material and feedstuffs used in the production process. The Italian legislation identifies the Central Inspectorate for Quality safeguard and Fraud Repression (ICQRF) and several local authorities as the subjects entitled to perform the controls on producers. Aiming to increase consumer awareness of the MP, the Ministry of Agriculture defined a single national label for MP (Figure A1 in Appendix A).

4. Methods

To investigate the challenges and opportunities of the use of the MP for meat products, we used a case study approach [48], focusing on the regions (Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia) and autonomous Provinces (Bolzano and Trento) of the Italian Alps. The Italian Alps territory also includes Valle d'Aosta, but this region was excluded given that it has no producers using the MP on meat products. Following a mixed methods strategy [49], we exploited both quantitative and qualitative data in performing the analysis. Secondary data from the 2010 Agricultural Census (i.e., the most recent ones allowing coverage of the entire Alpine area) were used to provide a brief contextualization of the case study area. Conversely, the main analysis relies on primary data, collected through a direct survey.

Specifically, we interviewed, in the second half of 2021, both the farmers authorized to use the MP on meat and the regional food quality institutions. Farmers allowed to use the MP were retrieved from the lists sent once a year by regions to the Italian Ministry of Agriculture. Since each list reports the type of product for which farmers intend to use the MP, it was possible to select those dealing with meat products.

Two interview formats were administered to farmers and regional institutions. Regional persons responsible for the food quality policy were interviewed via an online platform using a semi-structured questionnaire including open-ended questions only. These questions were aimed at collecting qualitative information about several aspects, such as the institutional process of granting the MP, the implementation of information and promotion activities by the regional government and the existence of regional specificities that may affect the use of the MP. Farmers were instead contacted by phone and interviewed using a questionnaire including both open-ended and closed-ended questions. This allowed us to gather specific quantitative data to describe the characteristics of the MP producers as well as qualitative information to understand their attitudes toward the MP. The interview covered several aspects, including the structure of the farm, the channels

used to market the products, the reasons that led farmers to use the MP and a personal evaluation of the economic impact of the voluntary quality term on the farming activity.

We conducted a total of six interviews with the regional/provincial institutions and 21 with farmers. By 2021, there were 92 producers in the case study area who notified the use of the MP on several products, including meat, most of whom were located in the north-western regions. The quantitative data collected from the interviews with farmers were analyzed to provide a picture of the structure of the farms currently using the MP in the Italian Alps. The interviews were transcribed and used as a basis for the SWOT analysis, together with the data obtained from the interviews with regional authorities.

When applying a SWOT analysis, it is important to discriminate between the factors that are 'internal' to the actor's agency and those that are 'external' to it [50]. While the internal situation addresses both the strengths and weaknesses which are under the direct control of the actor, the external elements (i.e., opportunities and threats) include those trends and drivers that can at best only be monitored, but cannot (or can only slightly) be changed by the resources at hand [51].

The main aim of a SWOT analysis is to assess whether the current organization strategy is appropriate for acting successfully, especially when faced with the foreseen changes in socioeconomic conditions [51,52]. In this regard, the SWOT analysis has become a useful tool to check whether a policy intervention is suited to its context, eventually helping the debate on strategic orientations [53], in addition to being already used in several scientific works dealing with issues related to mountain areas (some examples are [54–56]). It has gained increasing practical relevance for strategic rural policy making in the EU (see, for example, the implementation process of the Rural Development Programmes across the EU and, in particular, the ex-ante evaluation). In our analysis, the SWOT fruitfully contributed to identifying and framing the main issues linked with implementation of the MP in the Alpine area.

5. Results

5.1. The Italian Alpine Context

The Italian Alpine territory is classified as LFA. Within its boundaries, at the 2010 Census there were 96,754 farms, while the utilized agricultural area (UAA) was around 1 million hectares (ha). The average farm size was 11 ha, with a strong prevalence of very small (less than 2 ha) and small farms (between 2 and 5 ha), which accounted for nearly 45% and 25% of the total number of farms, respectively. The comparison with the previous Agricultural Census, in 2000, shows that in 10 years the number of farms in the Italian Alps dropped by more than 40%, while around 15% of the UAA was lost.

With respect to the type of farming, farms in the Alpine area specialized in permanent crops (43.1%) and livestock rearing (31.5%). Livestock farms, however, managed nearly 50% of the Alpine UAA. The main livestock activity was cattle rearing, with around 660,000 heads. Sheep and goat rearing is characteristic of mountain areas, given that 72% of the total heads reared in the considered regions were concentrated in the Alpine area.

In the Italian Alpine territory, there are valorization tools for agricultural productions. The production areas of 85 food GIs, 57 Protected Designations of Origin (PDOs) and 28 Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs) include territories in the Italian Alps [57]. However, several of these GIs are not exclusive to mountain areas, since their production can also take place in the lowlands. This is particularly relevant for meat GIs as, for 85% of them, the delimited area of origin includes both mountain and non-mountain municipalities. Hence, there is room for the MP valorization tool better highlighting the specific characteristics and quality attributes of products exclusively produced in mountain areas.

5.2. Regional Governance of the MP

Through the interviews with regional authorities, we investigated how the MP system is structured in the study area. The most relevant aspects are related to (i) the procedure

through which producers adopt the MP; (ii) the actions taken by regional institutions to encourage the use of the MP by producers; and (iii) the promotion activities set up by regions towards consumers.

Adoption procedure: The process to communicate the use of the MP is the same across the whole study area. Producers communicate their intention to use the MP to the region, filling in a form where they declare their compliance with the legal requirements, i.e., the location of the farm in a mountainous area, location of the processing plant (e.g., the slaughterhouse, cheese factory) and the mountain origin of animal feedstuffs. Regional offices check the information and transmit the producer's communication to the Italian Ministry of Agriculture.

A difference is observed with respect to the subject who submits the communication on behalf of a group of multiple producers, as is the case, for example, of cooperatives or large processors that collect the raw material from several producers (often the case in the milk/cheese sector). Five out of the six Alpine regions decided that the responsibility of the communication is given to the aggregating structure and not to each individual producer. The structure is also responsible for keeping the traceability of the raw material, including origin of the feedstuffs. Only one region requires that each individual producer submit the communication to use the MP.

Regional actions towards producers: Despite all interviewees agreeing that the Minister has not yet assigned specific roles to regional institutions in managing the MP, two regions devised some initiatives aimed at fostering its use among farmers. One region tries to take advantage of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) to promote the use of the MP by assigning additional points to farmers allowed to use the MP on their products in the ranking of fund distribution for some RDP measures. In another region, leasers of summer dairy farms owned by a regional body are the target of specific information activity on the characteristics and use of the MP.

Regional information and promotion towards consumers: According to all the interviewees, the promotion of food quality products (e.g., GIs) can benefit from public support through specific RDP measures. However, these measures are not fully suited to promoting the MP because they cannot support individual producers, but require the presence of a producers' group, e.g., a consortium.

Nonetheless, some promotion initiatives are observed in two regions out of six. In one region, brochures are provided to visitors of regional summer dairy farms. Another region includes the MP products within the food quality products promoted under its territorial promotional brand.

5.3. The MP Meat Producers

Among the 92 meat producers who notified the use of the MP on meat products, 50 accepted to be interviewed: 29 of them stated they do not use the MP at all, while 21 declared they used it on some products. We focused our analysis on these 21 producers. Considering that, in 2010, in the entire alpine area there were almost 38,000 farms rearing cattle, pigs, sheep or goats, the share of farmers using the MP on meat products is negligible.

The average farm size of the 21 interviewed farmers is around 67 ha of UAA, and the distribution across the different class sizes is quite homogeneous. In terms of livestock units (LUs), the average size is 40.5, and small-medium farms are the most represented ones (nine farms have fewer than 20 LUs and six farms have between 20 and 50 LUs). These figures show that the size of these farms is above the average size of Alpine farms, both in terms of UAA and LUs. The average LU density with 1.75 LU per hectare highlights the extensive nature of these farms.

Pastures occupy, on average, more than 70% of the farm UAA. The second land use type in terms of importance is meadows, followed by woodland. The other land uses are found only on a few farms. Most farms rear goats (52%), dairy cattle (43%), pigs (43%) and sheep (33%). These shares show that farmers tend to diversify the livestock activities by rearing different types of animals.

Farming is the main source of family income for 83% of the interviewed farmers. This is also a consequence of the labor structure of the farms, in 90% of which the family is the main source of labor. With respect to the farm income, the average share of it that is gained from meat production is 21.4%. Another frequent source of income for the interviewed farmers is agritourism, which is present for more than half of them (compared to around 8.5% of all livestock farms in the Italian Alps). On average, when a farmer performs an agritourism activity, this contributes 30% of the farm income.

Specificities emerge also in the characteristics of the producers. While the average age of a livestock producer in the Italian Alps is approximately 53 years, the producers we interviewed are younger, with an average age of 42 years. In addition, the interviewed producers are better educated, considering that 81% of them completed secondary upper school, compared to 30.5% of Alpine livestock producers.

Moving specifically to the products on which the MP is used, Table 1 reports the number of farms under analysis using the MP on a specific product. Despite specifically selecting farmers who communicated use of the MP on meat products, the actual use of this tool on meat products is fairly low. Even for the types of meat on which the MP is used the most (cured meat and sheep meat), less than half of the farmers use it. Conversely, most farms also producing cheese label it with the MP.

Table 1. Number of farms producing specific MP products and average MP product share of the farm income.

Product	Number of Farms	Share of Farm Income ¹ (%)
Cow cheese	9 out of 9	28.2
Cured meat products	4 out of 9	24.3
Sheep cheese	3 out of 4	20.3
Potatoes	2 out of 2	19.1
Goat cheese	8 out of 10	17.7
Sheep meat	3 out of 7	14.7
Beef meat	1 out of 5	8.0
Fruit	2 out of 3	6.3

¹ Each share shows the average contribution to the farm income of a given MP product only on the farms producing it.

In the third column of Table 1, the average share of farm income gained from each MP product in farms producing that product is reported. Notably, for some MP products, the average contribution covers more than 25% of the total farm income (including public support and agritourism activities).

Overall, the livestock farms that have been ‘early adopters’ of the MP have a different structure when compared to the average farm structure in the study area: They have a larger average farm size, both in terms of UAA and LUs, most of them are managed full time by younger and better educated farmers who diversify their activity both among different livestock productions and through the provision of agritourism services. The use of MP seems to be a useful tool for them to valorize their products, as confirmed by the relatively high share of income they get from them. However, MP cheese production plays a more relevant role than MP meat on farm income.

Finally, the marketing channels used by farmers to sell MP products are explored. The most used channel is direct selling (15 farms), followed by retail and local farmers’ market (seven farms) and agritourism (four farms). When we focus on meat, the structure does not change: Three farms sell directly to consumers in the farm shop, two to retail shops, one in their agritourism and one to wholesalers.

5.4. SWOT Analysis of the MP for Meat Products in the Study Area

To explore the challenges and opportunities of the adoption of the MP for meat products, Table 2 reports the SWOT analysis based on the results of the survey of the interviewed producers and regional institutions.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of the adoption of the MP for meat products.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product differentiation against competitors (+) • Application <i>procedure is simple</i> (++) • Requirements are not difficult to meet (++) • Traceability is easy • MP can facilitate access to RDP measures • MP label is useful in distant markets 	<p>MP label is of no or little usefulness in direct or local selling and in agritourism activity (++)</p> <p>MP has still scarce diffusion, hence visibility</p> <p>MP is unsuitable when selling without packaging</p> <p>Restrictions are too loose</p> <p>MP is suitable only for large farms and large processors</p> <p><i>Feebler link of meat with mountains compared to other products</i></p> <p><i>The governance of MP is flawed</i></p>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumers are interested in the productions from mountain (+) • Consumers pay attention to quality and local products • MP is credible and credibility can be enhanced by regional promotion and information initiatives (++) • There is a specific website for MPs 	<p>Low consumers' <i>knowledge and interest</i> (++)</p> <p>Low promotion activity towards consumers (++)</p> <p>Limited information to <i>producers</i> (++)</p> <p>Low retailers' knowledge (++)</p> <p>Low institutions' interest (+)</p> <p>Low producers' <i>knowledge</i></p> <p>Low food culture of consumers</p> <p>Presence of too many labels and low consumers' trust in labels</p>

Source: Authors' elaborations based on interviews; (++) and (+) where the issue is frequently mentioned; italics refers to issues partially or exclusively addressed by Regional Institutions.

Strengths and weaknesses. While little positive effects on prices or on quantity are noticed, the diffusion of the MP in meat production is still very low and this hinders its visibility among potential adopters and consumers. However, current meat producers recognize the capacity of MP to provide a comparative advantage in terms of product differentiation against competitors, a factor that increases the chance to sell the product.

In particular, the MP is easy to use: Both producers and regional authorities emphasize the simplicity and rapidity of the bureaucratic procedure. Meeting the requirements is also easy: All interviewed producers declared they did not need to implement any adjustment in their farm organization. Indeed, some farmers admit they will continue to use the MP "because it has no cost". In addition, when asked whether they would recommend the MP to other producers, the answer is "Yes, as long as they do not need to change the farm organization".

The advantages of using the MP are strengthened by its adoption in distant markets (e.g., outside the area of production), where consumers do not have a direct relationship with producers. This indeed mirrors the main weaknesses of the MP: It has little or no effect when the product is sold directly to consumers in the farm shops, in local markets or through agritourism activities. Notably, these are all contexts where consumers have a direct contact with producers or can access the relevant information more easily; hence, the producer's reputation plays a more relevant role than a public sign like the MP label. In a producer's words: "On the farm you have the opportunity to describe the product to the customer, while in the large-scale retail trade you cannot, and therefore you need to let the package speak". Packaging is another weak issue with the MP: Several interviewees agree on the difficulties in using the MP label on meat products, which are larger than for packaged products or cheeses.

Another perceived weakness lies in the nature of the MP as an umbrella label. According to the respondents, the label is not product specific, and it has no links either to a specific method of production or to a specific geographical area. However, those properties are characteristic of the GI schemes.

Finally, a weakness lies in the greater difficulties for small farms to adopt the term. Farmers state also that the quality sign is more suitable for large farms or processors, in other words when one agent supplies an adequate quantity.

The regional authorities highlight flawed governance issues; they argue that up to now controls on producers have been quite limited, given that: i) They are based on a risk analysis system only and not on a third-party certification, as in the case of GIs; ii) the definition of which authority should perform the controls is as yet unclear; and iii) there is a lack of a well-defined sanctions system in the case of abuse. Similarly, monitoring activity on the market to protect the MP products has so far been scanty, while the traceability of products and materials is not likely to be always easy, especially in the mountain context characterized by a territorially dispersed farming system.

Opportunities and threats. Among the external factors which limit the economic success of the MP, the most important one is the lack of awareness concerning the MP label, not only among consumers but also among retailers. Despite that, some farmers agree on the idea that most of the consumers share a positive attitude towards mountain food products, especially in terms of their perceived high quality. Conversely, other farmers emphasize the consumers' limited food culture as a threat. Regional institutions pointed out that some products, such as milk, cheese, honey and some fruits and vegetables, are more easily associated by consumers with the mountain areas. Consequently, the MP is supposed to be currently more efficient in attracting consumers' attention on these products compared to others, e.g., meat. This is in line with the results of a report from Nomisma [58], claiming that both Italian and Austrian consumers would be more interested in cheese MPs than in any other kind.

The limited information and promotion activities carried out by public institutions so far seem to be an important threat for the potential demand for MP to emerge in the market. In this regard, one meat producer stated: "It's not we, the producers, who should perform promotion activities, the public nature of the MP label implies the involvement of Public Institutions". Some producers even claim that regional institutions do not fully trust the MP. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the few promotion activities put in place by some local institutions—also through the creation of a specific website for mountain products—are considered an important opportunity for the valorization of MP meat.

Finally, according to both producers and regional institutions, the limited knowledge of the MP voluntary quality term by farmers is another relevant threat that hinders its use by producers, limiting its value-adding potential effect. In this regard, some producers complain about the scarce information that their colleagues and themselves had received about the MP. Some of them perceive that most public institutions are not doing enough to inform either them or the consumers.

6. Discussing the Enhancement of the Use of the MP for Meat

The evidence emerged from both the interviews and the SWOT analysis is basically in line with the results obtained by other few available studies about the MP on producers. The strongest agreement with the existing literature is about two aspects: the low knowledge of the MP term, as reported by Bonadonna et al. [29] and Finco et al. [47], and the ease for producers to comply with the location and feedstuff requirements, as found also by Bonadonna et al. [36]. Moreover, similarly to our study, Bonadonna et al. [29] observed that small farms might be disadvantaged compared to larger producers, especially because of the possible bureaucratic burdens.

Previous studies stressed the interest of producers for the MP [29,47]. This interest is mainly due to expectations that producers have about the possible positive effects of the MP, such as the higher visibility for their products [29], the higher value added [19,29], the possibility to communicate a higher quality and to promote the local territory [19,47], and the fostering of rural development [19]. Some of these expectations, such as the improvement of the value added, the increased visibility of the products, and the differentiation against

competitors were relevant also for the producers we interviewed when they decided to use the MP.

Since these expectations have been met, to date, only partially, and the use of the MP among producers is still quite low, the SWOT helps us in identifying how the use of the MP for meat can be balanced. The main needs that should be considered to stimulate the meat MP system to leave its current infancy and to grow are: (i) increasing consumers' awareness on MP; (ii) increasing information provision on MP to meat producers; (iii) improving MP label protection; and (iv) producers' empowerment. For each of them, the role of public institutions is crucial, at least at this early stage of MP adoption. Indeed, the livestock farms of the Italian Alps are characterized by a small size, and networking and cooperation skills are still lacking among them. Currently, this situation mirrors what has been observed by literature for some GI schemes in their infancy stage. In these cases, when no agent, e.g., a processing company, can play a pivotal role, public institutions can act as a catalyst for the creation of "strategic alliances" among producers [37].

6.1. Better Informing Consumers about MP and Stimulating Their Demand

The SWOT analysis identifies lack of knowledge of MP among consumers as one of the major threats, to date, to the proper functioning of this tool. In this regard, a research conducted in the Veneto Region (North-eastern Italy) confirms consumers' poor awareness of the MP: more than 60% of respondents have never seen the MP label, while the share of respondents who correctly identify the requirements for MP use by meat producers drops to 13% [59].

As for other public labels and certifications, consumers' awareness is a prerequisite to stimulate their demand and willingness to pay for a price premium. In a context where consumers pay more and more attention to product origin and to quality attributes in their food choices [23], the MP can exploit the positive perception that consumers have about mountains, which are associated with natural, healthy and environmentally sustainable agricultural productions [19,23,24]. Therefore, the MP is perceived to have, also in the eyes of producers and institutions, a great potential, as confirmed also by some studies on milk [42], cheese [23,43] and meat [44,45]. However, the poor knowledge that consumers have about this term undermines any possible ripple effect on the supply chain. One could argue that such little knowledge is due to the recent implementation of the EU Regulation on MP, ignoring the fact that specific consumer information on MP is crucial.

In this regard, information provision to consumers on the existence of the MP and its main characteristics is essential. According to Euromontana [39], this need is common in all the countries where there is MP implementation legislation. In our view, given that the MP is an element of the EU food quality policy framework, and hence has a public nature, the information provision to consumers could be effectively carried out at the EU level. This could be achieved, for example, including the MP in the EU 'Enjoy European Quality Food' information strategy. Furthermore, establishing a common MP label at the EU level, which to date is not part of EU policy, might also enhance consumers' awareness more than the existing national labels.

It is interesting to note that the MP has recently been adopted by some 'big GIs', when their area of production covers both mountain areas and lowlands (e.g., Parmigiano Reggiano PDO and Asiago Cheese PDO). Adding the MP label to the GI one is a tool to enhance intra-GI product differentiation. Consequently, the communication strategies of those GIs (which are already well developed) may eventually contribute to increasing consumers' awareness of MP.

The meat sector located in mountain areas is currently lacking a system of concentration of supply and processors (i.e., slaughterhouses) which can play a leading role in managing self-financed promotion and marketing activities, as is the case for cheeses. In this respect, meat MP producers expect a public co-financing of the promotion activities, while regional institutions observe that the current RDP framework does not allow the inclusion of MP in the promotion activities of food quality labels, as in the case of GIs. The

extension to MP of the information, promotion and marketing activities co-financed by public institutions under the new 2023-27 CAP might help to overcome this problem. However, this requires that MP meat producers join producers' groups, which are still lacking.

Another no-cost information and promotion action by regional institutions is the inclusion of MP products under their umbrella regional brands. For example, the regional brand "The Land of Venice", adopted by the Veneto Region, includes tourism-related activities and facilities and certified food products, e.g., GIs and regional quality schemes. The effectiveness of this promotion tool depends on the extent to which meat producers will group, so avoiding the risk of an excessive fragmentation of the communication.

6.2. Increasing Information Provision on MP to Meat Producers

The poor knowledge of producers on the existence of the MP emerges not only from our analysis, but also from similar studies conducted in Italy [29,47] and should be considered another decisive factor limiting a widespread use of MP. In other EU countries this knowledge is even poorer [39].

Two major methods could contribute to spreading knowledge of the MP among producers and encouraging its use. One is through the provision of information about the existence and characteristics of this scheme by public institutions. The next CAP programming period allocates an increased budget to information and dissemination activities towards producers through the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), which also includes initiatives aimed at increasing the value added from farming. This information can be provided either directly to producers or through intermediaries, such as professional associations and technicians.

Another method, which has revealed its effectiveness in other contexts, e.g., in the adoption of agro-environmental schemes by farmers, is the information transmission to farmers from 'early MP adopters'. Indeed, the sharing of early adopters' experience nudges other producers' participation [60].

6.3. Improving the Protection of the MP

To date, especially in the view of regional institutions, the MP is not sufficiently protected on the market. According to the interviewees, two aspects are of particular importance. On the one hand, the presence of several wordings, images and marks that directly or indirectly refer to mountain areas means that different tools still coexist on the market to signal the mountain origin of the product. In this sense, therefore, the MP is just one among several graphical and textual signs used by producers to communicate to consumers that their production takes place in the mountains, thus weakening the MP itself. However, the EU MP has been introduced to limit the misuse of different mountain visual or textual references, which could confuse and sometimes mislead consumers [27]. In its early stage, the EU MP seems to not have fully reached this goal.

On the other hand, the control activity on MP producers, based on risk analysis, seems to be still quite limited and a clear sanctioning activity is not yet well defined. Without proper control and sanctioning activity, the risk of fraud increases, thus limiting the efficacy of the label in communicating mountain production, as well as possibly undermining its credibility. As in the case of other well-established quality labels, the prolonged use of the MP over time might reduce these weaknesses.

6.4. Producers' Empowerment

According to the MP legislation, producers must comply with precise requirements about the provenance of the feedstuff, and must set up a strict traceability system to demonstrate it at farm level. Given these requirements, the viability of the implementation of the MP from 'early adopters' to a wider number of producers would make some organizational adjustments advisable, such as the development of producers' groups. A collaborative approach, still very infrequent amongst meat producers, might provide positive effects at different levels. With respect to the MP adoption, this group approach would reduce the

bureaucratic burdens for single producers, also facilitating the MP adoption by small-scale farms. With respect to the MP requirements, it would facilitate both compliance with the feedstuff thresholds, (e.g., through collective management of fodder) and the management of the traceability system. Lastly, the group approach would lead to a concentration of supply and the adoption of marketing strategies, aiming at accessing distant markets, where food quality labels better fulfil their value-adding potential [61].

To this end, a change in the mind of producers is needed in the direction of activating a learning process aimed at collective action and governance.

7. Conclusions

The mountain product voluntary quality term, devised by the EU in 2012, can be a tool to exploit the positive image that consumers have about mountain agriculture, thus improving the economic conditions of mountain producers. Our study expands the existing literature by widening the area of the analysis to the whole Italian Alpine area and focusing on meat products, less explored up to now.

Thanks to this broader view, it helps to identify actions to improve the use of the MP useful also in other EU mountain contexts. These actions involve both public institutions and producers.

Given that awareness of the MP is still limited among both producers and consumers, it seems advisable that both the EU and national public authorities invest in promotion and information activities to spread the knowledge of this tool along the value chain.

On the producers' side, it is crucial that producers join in groups in order to stimulate the participation of a wider number of producers, not limited to the 'early adopters'. This has multiple advantages: It helps in meeting the mountain feedstuff requirement, alleviates the bureaucratic burdens and, above all, facilitates the concentration of supply and adoption of shared marketing strategies, crucial for accessing distant markets.

Overall, this study added new information to the still scanty literature on MP adoption. Further research is needed to explore the opportunities and challenges, especially from the producers' side. It would also be useful to widen future studies to other mountain areas in the EU.

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Appendix A



Figure A1. Italian MP logo.

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