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Cost-benefit of green infrastructures for water management: A sustainability assessment of full-scale constructed wetlands in Northern and Southern Italy

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1 **Cost-benefit of green infrastructures for water management: a sustainability assessment of full-**
2 **scale constructed wetlands in Northern and Southern Italy**
3
4 *Laura García-Herrero*¹(*); *Stevo Lavrnić*¹; *Valentina Guerrieri*¹; *Attilio Toscano*¹; *Mirco Milani*²; *Giuseppe*
5 *Luigi Cirelli*²; *Matteo Vittuari*¹
6 (1)*Department of Agricultural and Food Sciences, Alma Mater Studiorum-University of Bologna, Viale*
7 *Giuseppe Fanin 50, 40127, Bologna, Italy*
8 (2) *Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment (Di3A), University of Catania, Via Santa Sofia No. 98-*
9 *100, 95123, Catania, Italy.*
10 (*) *corresponding author: laura.garciaherrero@unibo.it*
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Cost-benefit of green infrastructures for water management: A sustainability assessment of full-scale constructed wetlands in Northern and Southern Italy

By *Laura García-Herrero, Stevo Lavrnić, Valentina Guerrieri, Attilio Toscano, Mirco Milani, Giuseppe Luigi Cirelli, Matteo Vittuari*

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14 *Abstract*

15 Sustainable water management has become an urgent challenge due to irregular water availability
16 patterns and water quality issues. The effect of climate change exacerbates this phenomenon in water-
17 scarce areas, such as the Mediterranean region, stimulating the implementation of solutions aiming to
18 mitigate or improve environmental, social, and economic conditions. A novel solution inspired by
19 nature, technology-oriented, explored in the past years, is constructed wetlands. Commonly applied
20 for different types of wastewater due to its low cost and simple maintenance, they are considered a
21 promising solution to remove pollutants while creating an improved ecosystem by increasing
22 biodiversity around them. This research aims to assess the sustainability of two typologies of
23 constructed wetlands in two Italian areas: Sicily, with a vertical subsurface flow constructed wetland,
24 and Emilia Romagna, with a surface flow constructed wetland. The assessment is performed by
25 applying a cost-benefit analysis combining primary and secondary data sources. The analysis
26 considered the market and non-market values in both proposed scenarios to establish the feasibility
27 of the two options and identify the most convenient one. Results show that both constructed wetlands
28 bring more benefits (benefits-cost ratio, BCR) than costs ($BCR > 0$). In the case of Sicily, the BCR is
29 lower (1) in the constructed wetland scenario, while in its absence it is almost double. If other
30 ecosystem services are included the constructed wetland scenario reach a BCR of 4 and a ROI of 5,
31 showing a better performance from a costing perspective than the absence one. In Emilia Romagna,
32 the constructed wetland scenario shows a high BCR (10) and ROI (9), while the scenario in absence
33 has obtained a negative present value indicating that the cost do not cover the benefits expected.
34 Further research should be focused on improving ecosystem services monetary quantification from
35 different context (i.e. rural vs urban).

36 **1. Introduction**

37 Access to water and sanitation are primary in humans' lives, as the United Nations recognises under
38 human rights (UN, 2020). At the same time, as a scarce and stressed resource, water is crucial in
39 producing energy and food, industry, and environmental quality. It has an enormous impact on natural
40 resource exploitation (Sgroi et al., 2018). Moreover, the Mediterranean region faces an unstable regime
41 and limited availability, increasing threats by climate change and drought events (WWAP, 2017).

42 During the past decades, multiple policies were adopted at a supranational, regional, and national scale
43 to deal with the water-related issue. At the EU level, in 2000, the Water Framework Directive was
44 implemented. This water policy aimed to protect water resources, ecosystems plan tailored policies to
45 reach sustainable management of the water resources (European Commission, 2000). Other relevant
46 policies linked to water management are the European Urban Wastewater Directive, which highlights
47 the necessity of secondary and more severe treatment of urban wastewater in sensitive areas to protect
48 the water resource and the environment (Djukic et al., 2016), and the EU Marine Strategy Framework
49 Directive, adopted in 2008 and related to the improvement of marine water quality (Börger et al., 2016;
50 EC, 1991). More recently, a new Regulation on minimum requirements for water reuse for agricultural
51 irrigation has entered into force, with rules to be applied from June 2023 in the Circular economy action
52 plan context, intending to stimulate and facilitate water reuse in the EU (EU, 2020).

53 As part of a global strategy, the European Union (EU) approved the 17 sustainable development goals,
54 part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal number 6, "Ensure availability and
55 sustainable management of water and sanitation for all," is related to the provision to developing
56 countries of bilateral assistance programs and regional initiatives and in general support to the water
57 sector, which is critical in the commitment towards to more sustainable management of water resources
58 (United Nations, 2015).

59 Therefore, the role of water in the EU's policy agenda emphasizes the need to address water scarcity
60 identifying innovative solutions to respond to raising problems.

61 In this framework, a promising technology for wastewater treatment that allows freshwater utilization
62 for alternative purposes is constructed wetland (CW). This green infrastructure mainly comprises
63 vegetation, soil and substrates, and water, creating different mechanisms to remove contaminants or
64 improve water quality, as natural wetlands would do (Gorgoglione and Torretta, 2018; Resende et al.,
65 2019). Unlike grey infrastructures, CW is an easily manageable and low-cost technology that requires

66 a minimal level of maintenance. It can be applied in different socio-economic and geographical contexts
67 and has the flexibility to be adopted and tailored to different territorial conditions (Gkika et al., 2014;
68 Lavrnić et al., 2018). CWs' performance is influenced by factors such as size, operating conditions and
69 local climate, wastewaters properties, and pollution content, among others.

70 Some CW are designed to treat domestic wastewater and combine more intensive technologies to
71 increase removal performance (Nan et al., 2020). In agriculture, the inclusion of CW could ensure
72 different effects because of their ability to block non-point sources of pollution, such as nitrogen and
73 phosphorus, hence preventing the eutrophication phenomenon that can harm surface water bodies
74 (Yang et al., 2020). Thus, acting as a multifunctional system that can provide several ecosystem services,
75 such as support to the biodiversity and habitat of an environment, recreational and socio-economic
76 services as the biomass produced, which could be utilized in energy production, flood prevention, and
77 control, retention of water and prevention of erosion (Lavrnić et al., 2018; Milani et al., 2019; Wang and
78 Banzhaf, 2018).

79 To reveal CW's positive and negative effects in the draft and implementation of efficient policies and
80 strategies related to water resources administration, the Water Framework Directive underlined the
81 importance of applying appropriate economic analysis tools, such as Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) or
82 Cost-Effectiveness. CBA is a wide-recognised tool to assess selected sustainability features in projects
83 and services. It combines price flow analysis, environmental consequences by including externalities,
84 and the social perspective of different projects or policies. Furthermore, CBA mainly adopts money or
85 welfare as a unit of reference (Hoogmartens et al., 2014), allowing comparing the different alternative
86 measures and scenarios - such as CW- enabling users to assess economic and financial profitability
87 respectively a societal and a stakeholders' points of view. As recognized by Aparicio et al. (2019), the
88 application of CBA for the evaluation of the economic feasibility of projects related to water use and
89 reuse increased over the past few years.

90 This research aims to assess the sustainability of a vertical subsurface flow constructed wetland in the
91 South of Italy (Sicily) and a surface flow constructed wetland in the North of Italy (Emilia Romagna)
92 by applying Cost-Benefit Analysis.

93 **2. Material and methods**

94 This section presents a brief description of each case study (Table 1) and the application of the
 95 methodology, considering both market and non-market values. Further details are provided in the
 96 Supplementary Materials (SS.MM).

97 *Table 1. Main characteristics of the Catania and Bologna case studies*

| | <i>Sicily</i> | <i>Emilia Romagna</i> |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Location | Metropolitan city of Catania | Metropolitan city of Bologna |
| Context | Urban | Rural |
| Type of green infrastructure | Retention pond + Vertical subsurface flow CW (VFCW) | Surface flow CW (SFCW) |
| Influent | Surface run-off | Agricultural drainage water |
| Flow rate | ≈40 m ³ d ⁻¹ (maximum 300 m ³ d ⁻¹) | Varying (0-600 m ³ d ⁻¹) |
| Scale | Full-scale | Full-scale |
| Waterproof | Yes | No |

98

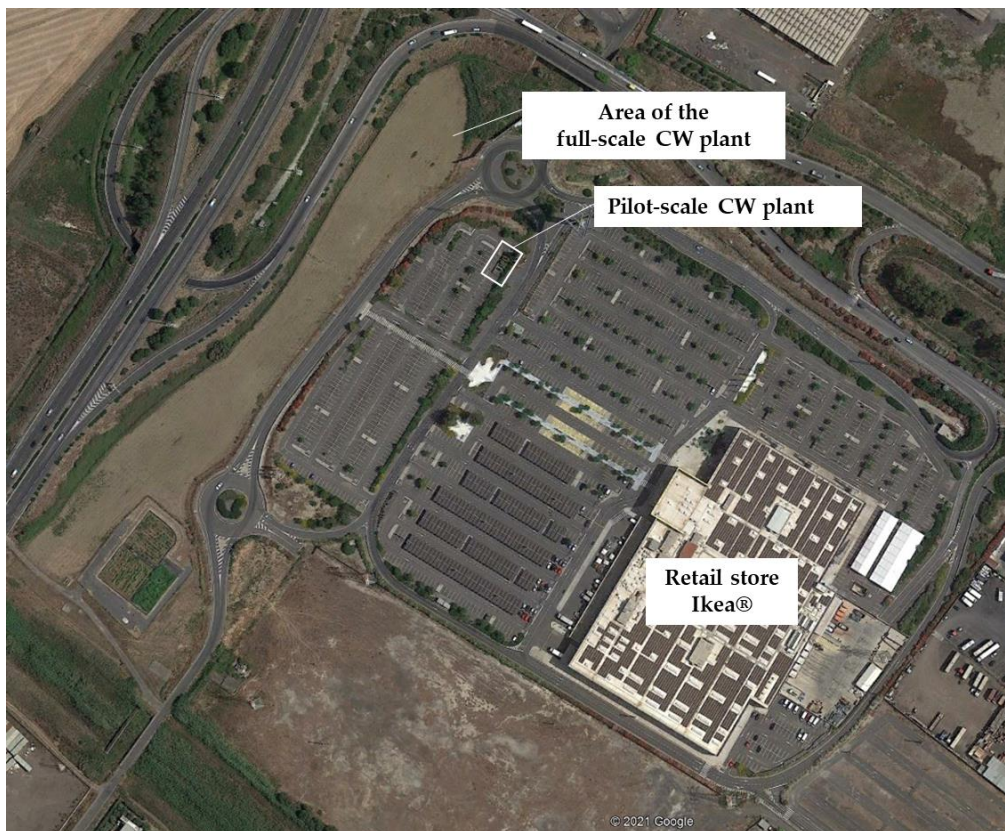
99 Each case study is organized around two scenarios. First, a baseline scenario without a vertical
 100 subsurface flow CW structure is coupled to an alternative scenario with a vertical subsurface flow CW
 101 structure for Sicily. Second, for Emilia Romagna, a baseline scenario without a surface flow CW
 102 intervention is coupled with an alternative scenario with a surface flow CW intervention.

103 2.1 Sicily case study

104 The Sicily case study is located in the Metropolitan city of Catania, within an Ikea® land property. At
 105 the end of 2016, this area was installed a pilot-scale CW plant to treat a portion (about 2 m³ d⁻¹) of the
 106 surface run-off collected from the retail store's parking area (Ventura et al., 2021). The University of
 107 Catania built the experimental plant within the international research joint project (Ventura et al., 2019).
 108 For the case study, the scale-up was assumed from pilot plant to full-scale CW plant in a field
 109 categorised for agricultural purposes currently used by shepherds for pasture (Figure 1). Due to its
 110 marginalised location, a land-use change for constructive purposes is not likely.

111 The surface will be extended to 1500 m², composed of a retention pond occupying an area of 500 m². A
 112 vertical subsurface flow CW extended on 500 m² and an area of the relevance of about 500 m². The CW
 113 will manage the first 5 mm of rain of the parking lot of Ikea® in Catania, about 60000 m², and will not
 114 manage unexpected events (second rainwater). It will be designed to treat a maximum flow rate of
 115 about 300 m³/day (15000 m³/year). Concerning the labour force, it is not projected to have a regular staff
 116 but only periodical maintenance after its construction. However, in the case of extreme droughts, it
 117 might need specific care. The water treated will be utilised for green areas irrigation and WC flushes at
 118 the store.

119 Following the CBA steps, the baseline scenario in this case study is defined as the current land use
120 without introducing the VFCW. In contrast, the alternative scenario implies applying the designed
121 VFCW.



122
123 Figure 1. Location of the pilot-scale CW plant and the area of the full-scale CW plant in Sicily (from Google Maps).
124

125 2.2 Emilia Romagna case study

126 This surface flow CW is located in the experimental farm of the Land Reclamation Consortium
127 Emiliano Romagnolo Canal in Budrio (CER, according to its acronym in Italian), in Emilia Romagna.
128 The SFCW was completed in 2000, and since 2003 has been the target of different experimental studies
129 (Lavrnić et al., 2020b). Currently, it treats the drainage water from the experimental surroundings, a
130 farm of 12.4 ha with different cultivation systems (mainly with trees, vegetables, and cereals). The CW
131 has a total area of 5557 m², with a 470 m long channel and 8-10 m wide, divided into four meanders
132 and a total capacity of 1500 m³ (Lavrnić et al., 2020a). It does not have a constant inflow of water since
133 agricultural drainage water volume mainly depends on precipitation. The main plant species are
134 *Phragmites Australis*, *Typha Latifolia*, and *Carex spp.* Below, 2 shows an aerial image of the case study
135 location.



136

137 *Figure 2. The SFCW in Emilia Romagna and the surrounding farm area.*

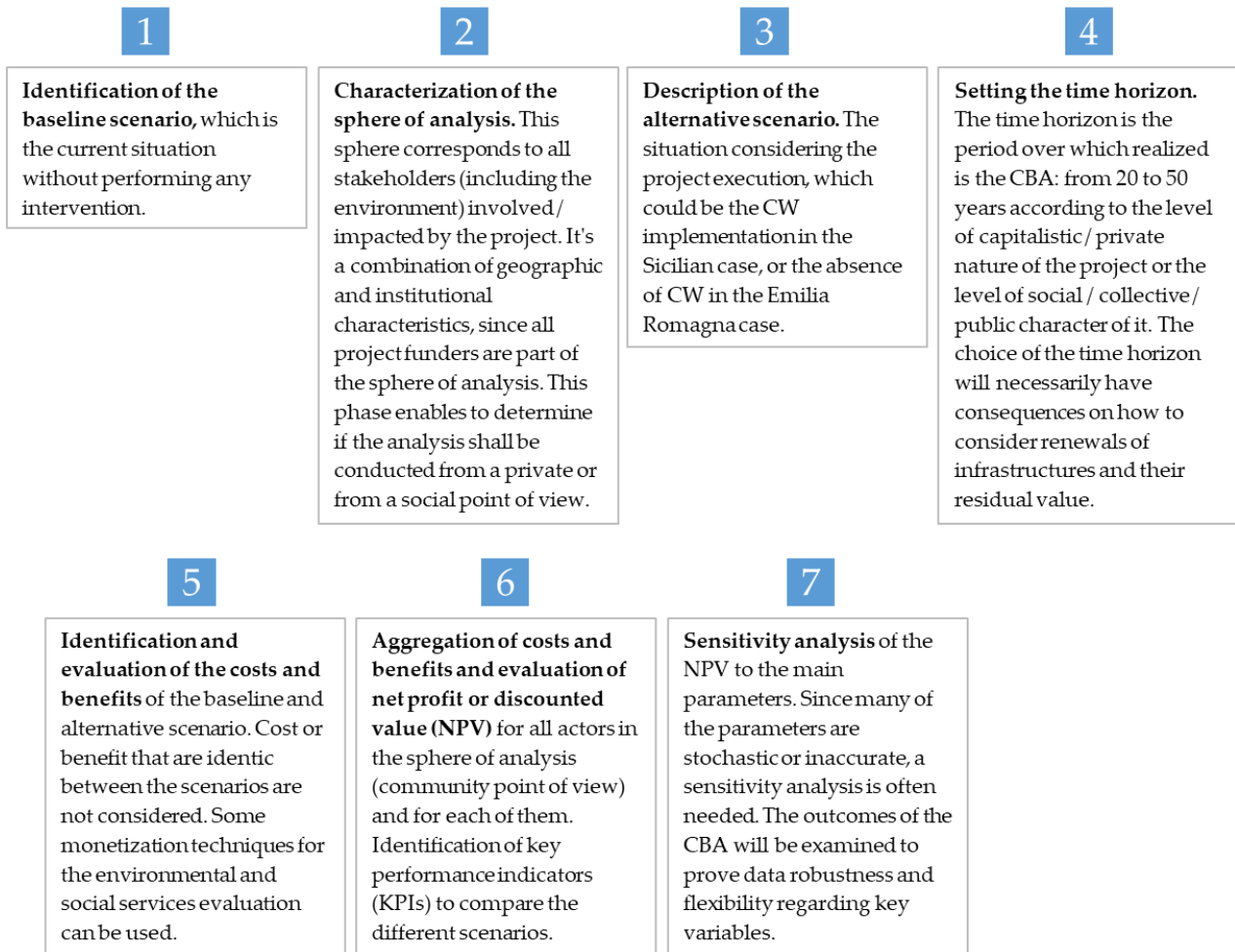
138 The main ditch collects the agricultural drainage water from the fields. It flows by gravity towards the
139 farm's end, where the SFCW is located. Two electric pumps bring the water into the wetland, as there
140 are few meters from the main ditch to the wetland. The water flows through the different meanders,
141 thanks to gravity and pressure from incoming water. If the water level above 0.4m – water discharge
142 occurs, a pump brings the water out of the SFCW to the main ditch. During the wetland construction,
143 the Labour force was concentrated on maintenance as mowing performed once a year. After almost
144 two decades of operation, the system can still effectively treat agricultural drainage water and presents
145 a buffer for different contaminants (Lavrnić et al., 2020b, 2018).

146 The alternative scenario considered the surface currently covered with the wetland as an agricultural
147 area with potatoes, soybeans, corn, and wheat. Therefore, these crops are selected as they are present
148 on the remaining surface of the experimental farm.

149 **2.3 Cost-Benefit Analysis**

150 Cost-Benefit analysis is a widely recognised economic tool that explores the costs and the benefits of
151 the selected project. The CBA starts from the premise that investment should only be commissioned if
152 the benefits exceed the aggregate costs (Molinos-Senante et al., 2010), considering that the compared
153 benefits and costs must belong to the same situation (Young and Loomis, 2014). However, as the

154 principal limit of this methodology is identified, the fact that not all impacts can be quantified and
 155 monetised, which restricts the provided results (Huyssegoms et al., 2018); while provides several
 156 advantages such as the identification of positive and negative societal cost, the inclusion of discount
 157 rate or the evidence of a general overview of impacts from different nature as evaluation (Huyssegoms
 158 et al., 2018). Figure 3 shows the steps followed to perform the CBA of the case studies based on different
 159 CBA guidelines.
 160



161
 162 *Figure 3. Steps followed in the CBA for the two case studies.*

163
 164 Primary data collection to perform this CBA was prioritised. As both cases are under the supervision
 165 of researchers from the University of Catania, University of Bologna, and CER, each case study's
 166 responsibility was addressed in person and by phone to provide most of the information. When
 167 researchers did not have the requested information, the contact of suppliers and operational workers
 168 was facilitated. Secondary data was collected in the absence of primary data, including an extensive
 169 literature review of scientific and grey literature.

170

171 The authors' highlight as a limit of this research the utilisation of secondary data when the primary was
172 not available and the estimations considered in some monetised items in the Emilia Romagna case since
173 they could be outdated as the construction took place at the beginning of 2000.

174

175 Some key performance indicators (KPI) associated with CBA (step 6 in Figure) were utilised to compare
176 different dimensions in the baseline and alternative scenarios. The first step to obtain the KPIs was to
177 set the present value or value 2019 in this research results.

$$178 \quad \text{PV cost} = \text{cost} * (1 + r)^{-t};$$

$$179 \quad \text{PV benefit} = \text{benefit} * (1 + r)^{-t}$$

180 *Equation 1. Present value.*

181 The present value (PV), in Equation 1, considered the discount rate (r) for future values under a specific
182 time (t). In this research, a 5% discount rate has been applied, as widely utilised in green infrastructure
183 assessments and recommended by the European Commission (Bixler et al., 2019; Djukic et al., 2016;
184 European Commission, 2014; Resende et al., 2019).

185

186 The net present value (NPV) was essential to understand if the scenario analysed is positive or negative
187 in terms of economic cost. At the same time, the benefit-cost ratio offered the relationship between the
188 relative costs and benefits of the case studies. Finally, the return on investment (ROI) is a well-known
189 monetary indicator that measures the investment's efficiency. Equation 2 discloses how these KPIs were
190 obtained.

$$191 \quad \text{NPV} = \sum \text{PV benefits} - \sum \text{PV costs}$$

$$192 \quad \text{Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR)} = \sum \text{PV benefits} / \sum \text{PV costs}$$

$$193 \quad \text{Return On Investment (ROI)} = (\sum \text{PV benefits} - \text{PV cost of investment}) / \text{PV cost of investment}$$

194 *Equation 2. NPV, BCR, and ROI formulas.*

196 Other KPIs considered were the cost/m² and NPV/m² to test the cost referring to the size occupied by
197 the wetland or in its absence.

198 **3. Results and discussion**

199 This section provides the results and discussion of both case studies. In addition, at the end of each case
 200 study, the results of the key performance indicators and the sensitivity analysis are provided.

201 3.1. CBA in Sicily

202 3.1.1. Baseline scenario

203 The value represents the total investment, while value 2019 (present value) represents the current value
 204 where a discount rate of 5% (when it applied) which is also the recommended discount rate by the
 205 European Commission for the cost-benefit analysis and the one applied in other studies analysing
 206 wetlands (Molinos-Senante, Hernández-Sancho and Sala-Garrido, 2011; European Commission, 2014),,
 207 allocating to the green structure a lifespan of 30 years, which is the estimated lifetime of the constructed
 208 wetland (Alves et al., 2019). Below, Table 2 shows the results of the baseline scenario.

209 *Table 2. Cost from the baseline scenario in Sicily without HFCW.*

210

| <i>Costs</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Unit</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|---|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| CAPEX (capital costs) | | | |
| Purchasing land cost – 1500m ² | 5000 | € in Year 0 | Interview |
| OPEX (operational and maintenance) | | | |
| Financial | | | |
| Land insurance | Not expected | €/year | Interview |
| Plant insurance | Not expected | €/year | Interview |
| Maintenance | | | |
| Land maintenance (weeds removal labour) | Not expected | €/year | Interview |
| External costs | | | |
| Environmental costs (flood risk) | 2369 | €/year | (i) |
| Alternative water treatment methods or water sources costs | | | |
| Outsourcing costs for water treatment | Not expected | €/year | Interview |
| Grey infrastructure plant cost | Not expected | €/year | Interview |
| Energy costs for grey infrastructure | Not expected | €/year | Interview |
| Disposal cost of greywater | Not expected | €/year | Interview |
| Taxes | | | |
| Sewer tax for greywater | Not expected | €/year | Interview |

211

212 i. USD\$0.18/m³ in 2018 (Nordman et al., 2018). It was updated with inflation and \$/€ to reflect the value in 2019. It
 213 considers the maximum flow rate that the GI can treat (15000 m³).

214

215 In the first instance, the baseline condition has only one initial investment: the land purchase cost. The
 216 operational costs are represented by the maintenance, which is zero, given that the land is freely

217 granted for pasture. The environmental costs are composed only by the flood risk, considering the
 218 absence of action. No other water treatment cost was identified in this section, as no taxes are paid to
 219 manage sewer greywater.

220 The largest burden is allocated to external cost due to environmental flood management, representing
 221 the total cost of the baseline scenario.

222 Table 3 shows the different expected benefits of the baseline scenario. Those sources under the Green
 223 Infrastructure label are disclosed in the alternative scenario of the HFCW.

224 *Table 3. Benefits from the baseline scenario in Sicily without HFCW.*

| <i>Benefits</i> | <i>Unit</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Value 2019</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|--|-------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Alternative use of the land | / | | | Interview |
| No material and equipment cost for GI | € | 90500 | 3016.67 | Green Infrastructure |
| No labour cost for green infrastructure | € | 12500 | 417.67 | Green Infrastructure |
| No maintenance cost for green infrastructure | €/year | 5000 | 5000 | Green Infrastructure |
| No electrical energy for green infrastructure | €/year | 940.8 | 940.80 | Green Infrastructure |
| No mowing and disposal of vegetable biomass cost | €/year | 1000 | 952.38 | Alternative scenario |
| Non-maintenance benefit because of pasture use of the land (Estimated 3 interventions/year 2 h/intervention) | €/year | 540 | 540 | (i) |

225 (i) 90€/h for 1500 m² (UNCAI, 2019).

226 According to the calculated benefits figures, about 10900 €/year are expected to be obtained when no
 227 action is taken. The largest contributor is those benefit items under the green infrastructure construction
 228 (initial cost and maintenance).

229 **3.1.2. Alternative scenario: constructed wetland**

230 Table 4 shows the cost calculated to implement the VFCW from its initial investment to its
 231 maintenance.

232 *Table 4. Cost expected from the alternative scenario in Sicily, with VFCW.*

| <i>Expected costs</i> | <i>Unit</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Value 2019</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|---|-------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Initial Investment | | | | |
| Purchasing land cost – 1,500m ² | € | 5000 | 166.67 | Interview |
| <i>Materials and Equipment</i> | | | | |
| Plant cost | € | 5700 | 190 | Interview |
| Excavation cost | € | 9649 | 321.67 | Interview |
| Ponds waterproofing | € | 34000 | 1133.33 | Interview |
| Electrical system | € | 9000 | 300 | Interview |
| Hydraulic system | € | 9000 | 300 | Interview |
| Completion work of ponds (non-woven fabric, bio jute net, filling ground, inert material) | € | 21250 | 708.33 | Interview |
| Lifting pumps | € | 1900 | 63.33 | Interview |

| <i>Labour</i> | | | | |
|---|------------------|--|--------|-----------|
| Completion work of ponds labour | € | 3750 | 125 | Interview |
| Ponds waterproofing labour | € | 6000 | 200 | Interview |
| Electrical system labour | € | 1000 | 33.33 | Interview |
| Hydraulic system labour | € | 1000 | 33.33 | Interview |
| Planting labour | € | 300 | 10 | Interview |
| Lifting pumps labour | € | 100 | 3.33 | Interview |
| Excavation labour | € | 350 | 11.67 | Interview |
| Operational Costs | | | | |
| <i>Fixed</i> | | | | |
| Electrical energy 400 kwh/month | €/year | 940.80 | 940.80 | (i) |
| Fixed plant staff cost | €/month | It is not needed | | Interview |
| Plant monitoring cost | €/month | It is not monitored | | Interview |
| <i>Variable</i> | | | | |
| Reagent substances (sludge) | €/year | No sludge - modest concentrations (less than 1 mg/L) | | Interview |
| Mowing and disposal of vegetable biomass cost | €/year | 1000 | 952.38 | (ii) |
| Ordinary maintenance of the plant | €/year | 5000 | 5000 | Interview |
| Irrigations (when necessary) | €/year | It is not needed | | Interview |
| Financial costs | | | | |
| Land insurance | €/year | There is not land insurance | | Interview |
| Plant insurance | €/year | There is not plant insurance | | Interview |
| Taxes | | | | |
| Plant taxes | €/year | There is not plant taxes | | Interview |
| Water distribution (if sold) | €/year | There is not water sold | | Interview |
| Nutrients distribution (if sold) | €/year | There are not nutrients sold | | Interview |
| External costs | | | | |
| Social costs | €/year | It is not monitored. It could be reputational for the company. | | |
| Exceptional irrigations | €/year and | This cost is not expected | | |
| Environmental costs | €/m ³ | 43.42 | 1.45 | (iii) |

- 233 i. 0.196 €/kw provided by Ikea®.
- 234 ii. Interview, vegetable biomass mowing, and disposal is a cost to sustain after one year. Therefore, it was discounted at the
- 235 5% rate.
- 236 iii. Environmental costs are represented only by the CO₂ of excavations, which were valued using the kg of CO₂ equivalent/m³
- 237 of the excavation(≈0.48) (Wernet et al., 2016), the m³ of the land (1500 m³) and the cost of CO₂ (60 €/ton) (*Eff. Carbon Rates*
- 238 *2021, 2021*).
- 239

240 Under the alternative scenario, a larger initial investment cost is evident compared to the baseline, as

241 the land must be prepared to allocate a VFCW. The primary cost item refers to the core works of the

242 VFCW. The total cost per year is approximately 10500 €/year. About 34% is associated with the initial

243 investment cost, and about 66% is related to operational costs. The CW in Catania does not have a

244 financial cost associated with land-use typology. Its utilisation does not require any type of insurance.

245 There are no-cost outcomes obtained from nutrient and water distribution. On the one hand, there is a

246 modest amount of nutrients present. On the other hand, currently, the water treated cannot be
 247 capitalised profitably.

248 When focusing on the environmental cost, the construction stage represents almost 100% of the overall
 249 environmental impacts due to excavations. This value is larger than the 80% specified in other studies
 250 (Resende et al., 2019). This cost has been calculated by establishing a carbon price that is highly volatile
 251 under current environmental policies and the carbon market. The large environmental burden happens
 252 once during the VFCW construction stage. Therefore, it could be neglected as these structures' lifespan
 253 is extended. In Table 5, the expected benefits of the alternative scenario are disclosed.

254 *Table 5. Benefits expected from the alternative scenario in Sicily, with VFCW.*

| <i>Expected benefits</i> | <i>Unit</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Value 2019</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|---|------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Output water 12000 m ³ /year | €/m ² | 10800 | 10285.71 | (i) |
| Improve air quality and CO ₂ storage | €/year | | 15884.12 | (ii) |
| Reduce the risk of flood | €/year | | 2369 | (iii) |

- 255 i. 0.9€/m³ water reuse cost in Italy (Pistocchi et al., 2018).
 256 ii. 1.48USD\$/m³ in 2018 (Nordman et al., 2018). It has been updated with inflation adapted to the European currency in 2019.
 257 Air pollution reduction + CO₂ storage.
 258 iii. 0.18 USD\$/m³ in 2018 (Nordman et al., 2018). It has been updated with inflation adapted to the European currency in 2019.
 259

260 A large benefit has been associated with the water output, expecting to be included in the water system
 261 and profit from it. Considering the location of the wetland, in an island suffering from high
 262 temperatures and irregular raining patterns, the cost of the water reused has been established in
 263 0.9€/m³, while this cost in Italy could rank from 0.25-1.5€/m³ (Pistocchi et al., 2018). Improve air quality
 264 is referred to as reduced air pollution, thanks to the CO₂ uptake by these natural ecosystems. This figure
 265 might be more prominent if other externalities such as human health improvement due to pollution-
 266 related diseases are considered. Several studies highlight the role of ecosystem services and their
 267 monetary value, a relevant study from Costanza et al., (2014) quantified that the land use changes at
 268 global level between 1997 and 2011 ensued in a loss of ecosystem services of between \$4.3 and \$20.2
 269 trillion/yr. It is also highlighted the difficulty for general public to understand the value of the services
 270 this ecosystem could bring, such as reduction of loss of resources, protection of human health, nutrients
 271 recycling and restoration and reuse of water resources, if the land is expected to be used for further
 272 proposes (Masi et al., 2018; Resende et al., 2019). Aesthetical benefits, such as improve aesthetic value,
 273 scenic beauty, temperature refreshment, have not been considered as the area is not easily accessible.
 274 Still, it should be considered in the future together as depending on the context it could offer positive
 275 welfare effects (benefits) (Darnthamrongkul and Mozingo, 2021; Jensen et al., 2019; Ureta et al., 2021).

276 Moreover, the value of wetlands per biome in monetary units among different ecosystem evaluated
 277 has been revealed the highest – mainly under mangroves (de Groot et al., 2012).

278 3.1.3. Performance and sensitivity analysis

279 Key Performance Indicators (KPI) considered to evaluate both scenarios are disclosed in Table 6.

280 Table 6. KPI comparing the alternative and baseline scenario in the case study in Sicily.

| <i>KPI</i> | <i>VALUE</i> |
|---|--------------|
| Alternative scenario: Green Infrastructure | |
| Net Present Value (NPV) | 2.46 |
| Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) | 1.00 |
| Return On Investment (ROI) | 0 |
| Total Costs/m ² (1500m ²) | 7.00 |
| NPV/m ² (1500 m ²) | 0 |
| Baseline scenario | |
| Net Present Value (NPV) | 5838.59 |
| Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) | 2.16 |

281
 282 Results evidence that the NPV is higher in the baseline scenario due to the present net value obtained,
 283 while at long term the alternative scenario could become more profitable. Following the CBA premise
 284 that benefits should extend the costs, constructed wetlands could be suitable for this case study, but the
 285 ROI and BCR is low. If considering an increase in the cost of the reuse water (from 0.9€/m³ to 1€/m³),
 286 and aesthetical value which is feasible due to its socio-economic and geographical context (>50 km from
 287 urban areas and the number of visitors to this parking lot, the BRC could reach almost 5 (adjusted with
 288 inflation 2.98\$/m³ from Nordman et al. 2018), and the ROI almost 3, being superior than in the baseline
 289 scenario. Therefore, further research should be made to better capture the costing service of this
 290 ecosystem.

291 For both cases, a sensitivity analysis was carried out to test how robust the results are by modifying
 292 selected inputs. In this case, the selected variables to test due to their influence on the results are:

- 293 • The discount rate. The reference value was modified by 2.5 and 7.5%, as the discount rate is
 294 often tested in similar studies (Alves et al., 2019; Molinos-Senante et al., 2010).
- 295 • The ordinary maintenance of the plant, which represents a high yearly cost, can vary based on
 296 the necessity, modifying the reference value by 3000 and 7000.
- 297 • The output water in m³/year varies on precipitation base, modifying the reference value by 6000
 298 and 15000 m³/year (as the structure has been projected to deal with a maximum flow rate of
 299 15000 m³/year).

300 • The sensitivity analysis results can be observed by changing the discount rate values, ordinary
 301 maintenance of the plant, and the output water in m³/year; there is only a minimum variation
 302 in the totals and the KPIs.

303 3.2. CBA in Emilia Romagna

304 3.2.1. Baseline scenario

305 In this case study, the baseline scenario is the SFCW. In contrast, the alternative scenario was defined
 306 as a theoretical cultivation rotation of potatoes, soybeans, corn, and wheat. Table 7 shows the cost from
 307 the baseline scenario, considering that the area has 0.55 ha and can treat up to about 20000 m³ of
 308 water/year depending on the rate of annual precipitations In this study, an overall inflow and outflow
 309 of 16186 m³/year and 7119 m³/year were considered as a mean value of volume of treated wastewater
 310 in the years 2018 and 2019 (Lavrnić et al., 2018).

311 Table 7. Cost from the baseline scenario in Emilia Romagna, with SFCW.

| <i>Costs</i> | <i>Unit</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Value 2019</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|--|---------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Initial investment | | | | |
| Opportunity cost land | €/ha per year | | 25.20 | Alternative Scenario |
| Design cost | € | 2000 | 66.67 | Interview |
| Cost of excavation and embankment (including labour) | € | 3500 | 116.67 | Interview |
| Electrical system cost | € | 500 | 16.67 | Interview |
| Cost of basic fertilization | €/kg | 0 | 0 | Interview |
| Cost of seedlings (in 60 holes multipot pot) | € | 2800 | 93.33 | Interview |
| Irrigation cost | € | 3708 | 123.60 | (i) |
| Other costs (concrete structures) | € | 5000 | 233.33 | Interview |
| Labour cost (assembly) | € | 560 | 18.67 | Interview |
| Cost of submersible electric pumps (2) AP.50.11.3 1KW, 380 volts, 3A | € | 2000 | 66.67 | Interview |
| Cost of pipes 5€ / m ² | € | 500 | 16.67 | Interview |
| Cost of electric box | € | 300 | 10 | Interview |
| Volumetric impulse meter (2) | € | 660 | 22 | Interview |
| Level sensor (2) | € | 1700 | 56.67 | Interview |
| Operational cost | | | | |
| <i>Fixed</i> | | | | |
| Maintenance costs (extraordinary) | €/year | 344 | 344 | Interview |
| Ordinary plant maintenance (green management) | €/hour | 18 | 1,080 | Interview |
| Energy costs 138 kW/month (ordinary operation) | €/year | 46.32 | 46,32 | Interview (ii) |
| <i>Variable</i> | | | | |
| Labour for mowing and dry biomass harvesting | €/hour | 18.00 | 288 | Interview |

Irrigation

Planting of new vegetation/plants

Financial cost and taxes

Plant insurance

Not applied

IMU (tax)

€/ha

200

70

Interview
(v)

External cost

Social cost

Environmental cost

€

44.80

1.49

(vi)

-
- 312 i. 1.20€/m² for 3090 m³ Gruppo Hera 2019 (non-domestic use, agricultural purposes).
313 ii. Retrieved from CER electrical bill (0.0125 €/kW + fixed costs = 0.20€/kW). Supplied by Nova AEG.
314 iii. 3.5% of the total taxable amount corresponds to the surface of the phyto-depuration area on the farm's total area.
315 iv. It refers to the CO₂ emissions produced by excavation (≈0.48tCO₂eq.) multiplied by the market price of CO₂eq./ton
316 emissions (60 € / ton) (*Eff. Carbon Rates 2021, 2021*)

317 Table 7 shows that land purchase has not been included in the cost as the CER owns this land for more
318 than 20 years. Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to calculate the opportunity cost deriving from the
319 income related to the following crops-, potato, soybeans, corn, wheat, which are usually grown in a
320 rotation system. The excavation costs were calculated for a depth of 0.40 m from the field level and 0.90
321 m including embankments and the inclusion of labour costs for the equivalent of 2 working days; the
322 cost of the electrical system includes the costs of bringing electricity from the rural buildings present at
323 the entrance to the farm, up to the Phyto-depuration area. Since the area is subject to scientific research
324 activities, the macrophytes planted were taken from natural environments and introduced into the area
325 by carrying out several tests to test their engraftment. To calculate their cost, reference is made to the
326 total sale price of the seedlings in multipots of 60 units, planted with a crop density equal to 1 unit / m²;
327 no base or cover fertilisations were performed, as the plant essences were selected for their high rustic
328 characteristics; the hydraulic system costs have been calculated based on the prices provided by the
329 interview performed to Impianti Bragaglia at the end of 2019. The total value of the investment costs
330 expressed reach about per year in 30 years of life.

331 The operational costs are mainly fixed—the first item related to maintenance, which is 1720€ and takes
332 place once every five years. The ordinary maintenance is expected to happen 5 times a year, each time
333 with a duration of 2 working days. The energy costs are related to the electric pump functioning to
334 transfer the water from the main channel to the constructed wetland, while no pumping is needed to
335 transfer clean water from the constructed wetland to the main channel once the water has been phyto-
336 depurated as it works thanks to gravity. There is a cost item related to labour – 2 working days per year
337 - when mowing and harvesting the constructed wetland biomass. The IMU cost, an Italian Municipal
338 Property Tax related to property land, was estimated as 3.5% on the total taxable amount,

339 corresponding to the surface of the phyto-depuration area on the farm's total area. The environmental
 340 cost was always related to excavation costs. Overall costs reaches 2121.28€/year.

341 This cost could be reduced if better performance excavators were utilised for the wetland construction
 342 consuming fewer fossil fuels. Below, Table 8 indicates the benefits of the current scenario.

343

344 *Table 8. Benefits from the baseline scenario in Emilia Romagna with SFCW.*

| <i>Benefits</i> | <i>Unit</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Value 2019</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|----------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Lower P pollution in water | €/year | 10.14 | 10.14 | (i) |
| Lower N pollution in water | €/year | 123.54 | 123.54 | (ii) |
| TSS reduction | €/year | 298.90 | 298.90 | (iii) |
| Ecosystem benefits | €/year | 17599.07 | 17599.10 | (iv) |
| Flood reduction | €/year | 30.10 | 30.10 | (v) |
| Agricultural benefits | €/year | 2554.01 | 2432.39 | (vi) |
| Scenic amenity value | €/year | 654.93 | 654.93 | (vii) |

- 345 i. 109 kg/year removal from Lavrnić et al., 2018 considering 29250AUS\$/t in 2012 (Daniels et al., 2012). The figure has been
 346 updated with inflation adapted to the European currency in 2019.
 347 ii. 0.36 kg/year removal from Lavrnić et al., 2018 considering 861 AUS\$/t in 2012 (Daniels et al., 2012). The figure has been
 348 updated with inflation adapted to the European currency in 2019 (Daniels et al., 2012).
 349 iii. 1.36 USD\$/m³ (Nordman et al., 2018). It has been updated with inflation adapted to the European currency in 2019
 350 iv. 24056 AUS\$/ha considering the minimum value (Daniels et al., 2012).. The figure has been updated with inflation
 351 adapted to the European currency in 2019.
 352 v. 0.18USD\$/m³ (Nordman et al., 2018). It has been updated with inflation adapted to the European currency in 2019.
 353 vi. Agricultural benefits from the potential reuse of wastewater considering an 'extra' income for avoided losses on
 354 production due to drought events equal to 20% of Gross Saleable Production (4036.05 €) of a field of ≈ 3,00 ha (Verlicchi
 355 et al., 2012).
 356 vii. 2.98USD\$/m³ (Nordman et al., 2018). It has been updated with inflation adapted to European currency in 2019.

357

358 Expected benefits have been calculated by applying estimations already established in different studies
 359 located outside Italy as other studies have not been found. This research gap suggests, as in the case of
 360 Sicily, the need to better explore the role of this ecosystem service in this case, in a rural area.

361 **3.2.2. Alternative scenario: without wetland**

362 There is no opportunity cost in the alternative scenario as the crop field is used for cropping purposes.
 363 The following rotation crops have been considering: potato, wheat, maize and soybeans. Operating
 364 costs are related to standard agronomic cultivation practices' average costs and are shown in Annex 1.
 365 The value of the IMU remains unchanged concerning the condition in which the CW is present. The
 366 alternative scenario costs amount to 2266€ without including external cost, while when it is included,
 367 it reaches 2296€. Table 9 discloses the expected cost from the alternative scenario.

368 *Table 9. Cost expected from the alternative scenario in Emilia Romagna, without SFCW.*

| <i>Expected costs</i> | <i>Unit</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Value 2019</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Initial Investment | | | | |
| Opportunity cost land | €/year | It is no expected | | Interview |

| Operational cost | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|---------|---------|-------------------|
| Potato/wheat/corn/soybean cultivation | €/year | 2196.12 | 2196.12 | (i) |
| Financial cost and taxes | | | | |
| IMU (tax) | €/ha | 200 | 70 | Interview (ii) |
| External cost | | | | |
| Risk of flood | € | 30.10 | 30.10 | (iii) |

- 369 i. Centro Ricerche Produzioni Vegetali (CRPV) and inflated to 2019 (World Bank).
370 ii. 3.5% on the total taxable amount, corresponding to the surface of the Phyto-depuration area (in this scenario, crop) on the
371 farm's total area.
372 iii. 0.18USD\$/m³ (Nordman et al., 2018). It has been updated with inflation adapted to European currency in 2019.
373

374 Yearly benefits of the alternative scenario reach over as is evidenced in Table 10 due to the economic
375 benefit of selling the crops and environmental benefit (externality) since no excavation like the one in
376 the baseline scenario would be required. Some authors (Baldochi, 2003; Bondeau et al., 2007) associate
377 carbon storage – sequestration - to specific crop production due to carbon intake naturally occurring in
378 certain agro-systems. This item has not been included in this research, as it is not uniformly recognised
379 in the scientific community. It could imply a zero balance once the crop is harvested.

380 Table 10. Benefit expected from the alternative scenario in Emilia Romagna, without SFCW.

| <i>Expected benefits</i> | <i>Unit</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Value 2019</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|---|-------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Gross saleable production | € | | 2219.83 | (i) |
| No CO ₂ emission due to excavation | € | 44.80 | 1.49 | (ii) |

- 381 i. Retrieved from ISTAT (yield q/ha) and ISMEA (price €/t) and inflated to 2019 (World Bank).
382 ii. It refers to the CO₂ emissions produced by excavation ($\approx 0.48tCO_2eq.$) multiplied by the market price of CO₂eq./ton
383 emissions (60€/ton), (*Eff. Carbon Rates 2021, 2021*).

384 3.2.3. Performance and sensitivity analysis

385 The analysis of KPIs in both scenarios in Budrio, Emilia Romagna is disclosed in Table 11.

386 Table 11. KPI comparing the alternative and baseline scenario in the case study in Emilia Romagna.

| <i>KPI</i> | <i>VALUE</i> |
|--|--------------|
| Baseline scenario: Green infrastructure | |
| Net Present Value (NPV) | 19027.79 |
| Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) | 9.97 |
| Return On Investment (ROI) | 8.97 |
| Total Costs/m ² | 0.38 |
| NPV/m ² | 3.424 |
| Alternative scenario | |
| Net Present Value (NPV) | -74.9 |
| Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) | 0.97 |

387
388 Results show that the NPV is higher in the baseline scenario than the SFCW due to the high benefit-
389 cost ratio obtained. Following the CBA premise, that benefit should extend the costs, therefore

390 constructed wetlands could be a suitable structure to consider in this case study. The ROI value is also
391 encouraging in the SFCW scenario and shows a fast repayment of the costs.

392 The BCR shows that the baseline scenario's benefits are about higher than the costs. In comparison, the
393 alternative scenario brings more than benefits higher than the costs, around 9 times.

394 In this case study, also a sensitivity analysis was carried out on the system by varying the discount rate
395 as it was done in the case of Sicily.

396 The sensitivity analysis results can also be observed in a way that changed the discount rate values, the
397 output water m³/year drastically, and the value of the biomass produced. There is only a minimum
398 variation in the totals and the KPIs.

399 **3.3. Case studies comparison**

400 In both case studies, the presence of wetlands has more benefits than cost. In the case of Sicily, the
401 scenario without the wetland brings more benefits due to the cost involved in the construction of the
402 wetland. Instead, if additional benefits such as aesthetical values are included in the scenario with the
403 wetland, it could become a promising scenario reaching a very high ROI and BCR (higher than without).

404 In the case of Emilia Romagna, the wetland scenario shows a better costing performance than the
405 alternative scenario. The benefits from selling the crop if the surface currently occupied by the wetland
406 are not worthy when comparing all benefits can be obtained from the wetland scenario. In fact, the
407 NPV in the alternative scenario is negative, and the BCR is less than 1, therefore it is not recommended
408 to perform that scenario. A key aspect should be further explored in further research is the need to
409 differentiate benefits humans can attribute to this system from rural and urban areas, while also other
410 benefits associated to the biodiversity improvement (or loss avoidance) could be also explored. When
411 reviewing the methodology applied, a lack of CBA is conducted on this typology nature-based
412 solutions, which is difficult to compare with other studies. Therefore, as recommended by the European
413 Commission (European Commission, 2014), this methodology should be widely utilised to support
414 decision making to move towards the decarbonisation plan expected in The Green Deal (European
415 Commission, 2019) while being aligned with different SDGs, beyond the number 6.

416 **4. Conclusions**

417 The current study presents a CBA of two types of constructed wetland in two Italian locations: a vertical
418 subsurface flow constructed wetland in the south of Italy, in Sicily, and a surface flow constructed
419 wetland in the north of Italy in Emilia Romagna. The CBA methodology allowed to compare a

420 constructed wetland scenario with a scenario without this intervention, offering numerical cost and
421 benefits of each option. The outcomes of this research evidence that both types of constructed wetlands
422 represent promising results in terms of their cost. In Sicily, the BRC is positive but low (ratio equal to
423 1), showing that it brings more benefits than costs. While comparing with the absence of CW scenario
424 still this last one has more benefits due to the lack of investments (NPV around 6000€/yr and a BCR
425 around 2). If further ecosystem services (mainly aesthetical are included), the wetland scenario could
426 reach a BRC of 5 with a ROI of 4 (considering secondary data from studies outside Italy). In that case,
427 the wetland scenario should be prioritised from a costing perspectives. In the case of Emilia Romagna,
428 the current scenario where the wetland is located have a very ROI (8.96) showing a very fast repayment
429 from the initial investment. The NPV is higher (around 19000€/year) compared with the negative value
430 in the alternative scenario (-75€/year), the negative value indicates that there are more cost than profits,
431 therefore it is not recommended to change the current status.

432 Further research could be driven to explore other social (human preferences) and environmental
433 benefits (such as biodiversity) of these structures. Additionally, other sustainability assessment
434 techniques, such as those under the life cycle thinking method, could be applied to bring a systemic
435 approach. Constructed wetland could bring new business model development under a favourable
436 policy framework linked with current trends about the circular economy. Thus, an exploratory analysis
437 of business model design, including this infrastructure, could be relevant for moving towards
438 sustainability.

439

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451

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