

SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY FOOD

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EU gradually turning green in food security debate

With the world's population expected to rise to nine billion by 2050, European regulators are pushing for a gradually greener approach to food sustainability, warning that demand for food could cause a number of related crises, such as runaway carbon emissions, waste and obesity.

Historically, Europe has largely responded to rising domestic food demand by increasing agricultural intensification, with large, heavily-mechanised farms, and pushes to gain more yield from crops and livestock through a mixture of pesticides and herbicides.

Even though the continent's population is expected to fall from 740 million in 2012 to 628 million by 2050, European Commission experts predict that the continent will be hit by food shortages due to demand in other markets, particularly the emerging economies.

In the recent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, the European commissioner for agriculture and rural development, Dacian Cioloş, pushed for a



“greener” approach to EU farming, backing more organic cultures, and measures to protect cropland and rural biodiversity.

Competition

A 21 June report by the European Academies Science Advisory Council, said that producing enough food sustainably “requires crops that make better use of limited resources, including land, water and fertiliser”.

The EU's chief scientific advisor, Anne Glover recently defended the EASC report calling it “authoritative” on agriculture science. She also expressed support for the so-called “sustainable intensification” of food production, including genetic

modifications of crops (GMOs).

The report said that Europe's policy against GMOs was having “grave scientific, economic and social consequences”.

European farmers are wary of ramping up agricultural intensification, saying that without the approval of EU regulators, these practices may create further distortions in the global market, as countries using such technologies would be able to lower their prices.

In an interview with EurActiv, Pekka Pesonen, the secretary-general of Copa-Cogeca, the association of European farmers and agri-cooperatives, issued a warning to regulators negotiating free trade talks with

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the United States about the acceptance of US foods produced via intensification, such as hormone treatments or GMOs.

“Beef is a very good example for the hormone use but now we have also had ractopamine, which is a specific product for the pig meat industry ... if that was allowed in the European Union market, we would have had a major problem with it, because it is very clear that it is a competitive advantage that they would get from these products,” he said.

Pesonen added that European regulators were unlikely to advocate an agricultural ‘arms race’ with the United States. “Our feeling is that the European Union decision makers wouldn’t accept that European own production would produce growth promoters to the same extent that the Americans [do]”.

The European farming leader made a similar point about the potential “presence of advantageous GMOs, especially in the instance of feedstocks [for livestock]”.

Europe’s reluctance to promote

intensified practices stems largely from the public opposition to some biotechnology. A 2005 Eurobarometer survey said that the majority of Europeans believe that GM food should not be encouraged. “GM food is seen by them as not being useful, as morally unacceptable and as a risk for society,” the survey said.

But Europeans were more open to other innovations, such as nanotechnology.

‘Greening’

The EU CAP reform has offered more incentives for small-holder farmers using “green” methods to grow food. These methods include more organic cultures, fallow land, set-asides to promote biodiversity, and crop diversity and rotation.

The European Commission will also attempt to promote “quality” European products, such as organic regional olive oil, wines, and cheeses.

Pesonen believes that these products may even help secure the EU’s place in the world market.

“Well, we’re confident in Copa-Cogeca in saying that products like French cheese and wine are very competitive. So we have to be optimistic and we are optimistic, in the sense that we know that the American consumers would be interested in these high-quality products, including GIs [geographical indicators for products],” he said.

NGOs are attempting to push regulators towards ever greener practices.

The Livewell campaign, a partnership between the Commission, the WWF conservation group and Friends of Europe, a think tank, aims to get consumers to switch to a diet that takes better account of its impacts on the environment, society and the economy.

“Food is one of the big drivers for energy and for climate change,” said Tony Long, the director of the WWF’s European policy office. “17 to 18% of greenhouse gas emissions come from the agricultural sector. If you then add the agri-food processing and the transport, that goes up to 27-28%. I mean that’s huge ... and that’s where we came in on Livewell,” he said.

CAP reform favours the greening, not the individual industry

European regulators and producers alike are confident that the change in the balance of direct payments, redrawn in the Common Agriculture Policy, will improve ‘greening’ practices and ultimately boost demand and productions for more natural foods.

The new environmental measures include the maintenance of permanent grasslands, crop diversification and areas of ecological interest designed to protect

biodiversity.

Between 2014 and 2020, over €100 billion will be invested to help farming meet the challenges of soil and water quality, biodiversity and climate change. 30% of direct payments will be linked to three environmentally-friendly farming practices.

Farmers will receive payments if they carry out the measures rather get funding for their production of certain foods.

This means that a cattle farmer carrying out the greening measures will receive the same funding as a soybean or beet producer using similar practices.

“In budgetary terms, one third of direct payments and one third of rural development programmes will enable investment in the environmental sustainability of European agriculture,” Dacian Cioloş, the commissioner for agriculture and rural development, told a CAP advisory group in Brussels last month.

“Mobilising millions of farmers, specific measures will be implemented at

European level to combat climate change, stem the loss of biodiversity, and improve the quality of soils and of our environment in general,” he said.

‘Natural foods’

Bernard Deryckere, the president of the European Natural Soyfood Manufacturers Association (ENSA), thinks regulators should “re-balance” their support mechanisms towards so-called “natural foods”, such as soy, which he says are better for the environment than animal-based foods.

Soy currently accounts for 2% of the food sector. Dairy, including milk and cheeses, accounts for 15%. Their funding has largely reflected the market size. Deryckere would like to see his industry receive a share of those payments for its milk substitutes.

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“We are not allowed to call it soy milk, although it’s an alternative to milk. We have to speak about soy drink. And it means for the moment that we are absolutely in this complete vacuum ... In certain countries ... milk is [paying] tax or levels which are much lower than plant-based foods and sometimes we are associated to soft drinks”, he said.

The issue, for Deryckere, is that plant-based foods need to be produced to feed animals, which then go back into the food chain, so overall have a better impact on the environment. Pasture accounts for an estimated two-thirds of global agricultural land, compared to one third for crops.

“Our view is that soy and plant-based foods can provide an answer as they consistently outperform animal products, when comparing their environmental impact in terms of CO₂ emissions, land and water use,” he said.

“We are not against animal proteins. It’s just about rebalancing the whole thing,” he added.

Green beef

Beef and milk farmers believe that they can fit into the EU’s environmental objectives for the agricultural sector.



Indeed, a report by Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC), released in August 2013, on the impacts of the greener CAP on regional beef and sheep farms shows they will be affected little by the change.

“Most Scottish beef and sheep farms rely substantially on farm support payments. For these farms, the move from an historic payment to a regionalised flat rate payment will have more of an impact on farm profits than adopting greening measures,” the report says.

Under the reform, farmers receive payments per hectare rather than the old

method of historical records, in which they received support based on their previous production figures.

Some Scottish beef and dairy farmers score well under the EU’s definition of “green” farming, with extensive grasslands and verges lined with trees.

“But the exception is intensive beef farms where there is a very small, negative impact from greening CAP basic payments,” the SRUC report says.

Intensive farms may also receive funding if they carry out other greening measures.

Health experts call for EU to move on eating habits

Health campaigners are calling for the European Commission to take action to alter people’s eating habits and curb rising obesity, but officials are wary that such a move may expose them to “nanny state” complaints, sources say.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over 50% of Europeans are overweight and some 23% are obese. The figure is expected to rise over the coming decades.

The WHO says that people are consuming on average too many calories per day, up to 1,000 above the daily recommended intake, and too much red meat.

“In terms of the diet there is the [problem of] the absolute intake of calories. There needs to be increasing vegetable and fruits, decreasing red meat and decreasing salt intake - that’s a very important factor,” said Roberto Bertollini, the WHO’s chief scientist in Brussels.

The UK Department of Health backs up that claim, saying that reducing saturated

fat intake from 12.7% of food energy per person to 11% would prevent some 2,600 premature deaths in the country each year.

Most of people’s saturated fat intake comes from animal sources of food, excluding fish, the Health Department says.

Dropping subsidies for animal fat halved heart problems

To Bertollini, if policymakers took action, it would not be long before there was an impact on people’s health.

The WHO scientist referred to a 2012 study, published in the BMJ medical journal, which found that when Poland abolished communist-era subsidies for animal fats in the 1990s, the incidence of cardiovascular disease and other ailments fell dramatically.

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From 1991 to 2005, the death rate from cardiovascular problems halved.

“In Eastern Europe, for example Poland, they managed to change dietary patterns very quickly, and so changed the incidence of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer in a short time. There was marked decrease particularly in cardiovascular diseases, which is the main cause of death [in Europe],” he said.

Other Eastern European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania, witnessed similar improvements.

Cutting back public support for the meat industry will sound like music to the ears of the ‘natural foods’ movement, which says it offers consumers a healthier alternative to their current meat-based diets. The industry, which includes soy and other vegetable proteins, wants European food to match its real health costs.

“I think that today we are in a bit of a legal vacuum,” said Bernard Deryckere, the president of the European Natural Soyfood Manufacturers Association (ENSA). “I think that Europe needs to solve this legal vacuum, ... to say to the people that there are alternatives to animal-based foods, and to review the level playing field in terms of taxation.”

Commission in ‘realism’ plea

The Commission is wary of taking too



many steps to alter directly people’s diets. One Brussels source said that Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik felt that proposing regulation on people’s diets would open the EU executive up to accusations of operating a “nanny state”.

Werner Bosmans, an official in the European Commission’s environment directorate, who deals with the resource efficiency agenda, said: “We cannot change diets on the short term ... What’s the realism of this proposal?”

“We’re talking about changing people’s diets. I don’t see how you could do that,” Bosmans told an ENSA-organised panel debate on 4 December.

The Commission has made previous

efforts to guide consumers towards healthier foods. The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will reduce subsidies for foods that harm the environment or public health when it is implemented, in 2015.

In 2008 the Commission also proposed UK-style traffic light warnings of high fat, sugar or salt content on food packaging. MEPs voted down the proposal, saying that national governments should decide themselves whether to use such visual labels.

The EU executive is now preparing a communication on sustainable food, due for early next year. The policy paper will focus instead on measures to protect the environment, for example the halving of edible food waste by 2020, Bosmans said.

Soyfood leader: ‘We are not against animal-based food’

Vegetable-based foods may offer consumers a number of advantages compared to meats, such as lower fat content and a lower carbon.

Bernard Deryckere, a soyfood industry leader, explains why he wants food to reflect its real costs and why he is not against animal-based products.

Bernard Deryckere is the president of the European Natural Soyfood Manufacturers Association. Koen Bouckaert is the strategy and business development director of Alpro, a Belgian soy, almond and hazelnut drink and yogurt producer. They spoke by telephone to EurActiv’s Marc Hall.

Why a diet with more ‘natural foods’ more sustainable?



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Deryckere: In a nutshell, it's because to produce vegetable proteins, it's less consuming land, water and it's less producing CO₂, and that's why it's much better. I think today the sustainable production and consumption of foods, of animal origin represents probably one of the biggest environmental challenges for the agricultural sector.

An obvious solution to this challenge is to rebalance our consumption of animal-based products with more resource efficient foods that contain similar protein levels. Our view is that soy and plant-based foods can provide an answer here as they consistently out-perform animal products when comparing their environmental impact in terms of CO₂ emissions, land and water use. To produce a litre of cow milk versus a litre of soy milk you need three times more land, 2.5 times more water and it's creating five times more CO₂.

We are not against animal proteins and that's very important for us. We just want to rebalance the whole thing. With an increasing world population, we really need to look to alternatives to dairy products and meat.

Bouckaerts: I think that's one part of the answer. I think there is a second element, which is linked to health. Or if we look to the food pyramid, or the circle as you refer to it in the UK, we see that there is a clear recommendation to diminish in fact animal-based products and to increase more plant-based foods, be it vegetables, be it fruits, be it protein-containing products, which are alternatives for dairy and meat, because what we see in there is, first of all, the fat composition is much more advantageous, in the sense that it has less of the bad fats, which are the so-called saturated fats and they have more of good fats, which are the unsaturated fats. Or also plant-based products do not, in fact, contain cholesterol at all, which indeed gives an opportunity to improve our health.

What can regulators do to move towards sustainable food?

Deryckere: I think today Europe is looking to protect the consumer, and I think that this is absolutely the first priority. From there on we have to work. First of all, I think that they have also a role to increase our awareness. When we speak about animal-based foods, we need to also speak about plant-based foods. We will have a new Common Agricultural Policy. It's important that we give the opportunity to consumers that they start to be aware about their environmental impact of their food. It's not only related to the transport of their food waste but it already starts at the source. That's the second thing.

The third thing is that today we are in a bit of a legal vacuum. We are not allowed to call it soy milk, although it's an alternative to milk. We have to speak about soy drink. And it means that for the moment we are in this complete vacuum. So the level playing field in terms of taxation is a problem. In certain countries, you know, milk is [paying] tax or levels which are much lower than plant-based foods, and sometimes we are associated to soft drinks and things like that. And that is a thing that's important. I think Europe needs to solve this problem, to say to people that there are alternatives to plant-based foods, and three, to review the level playing field in terms of taxation.

Taxation, that's interesting. You could draw a parallel with pricing, perhaps. Do you think that taxes and prices on foods need to reflect better their sustainability, their 'real' costs, perhaps?

Deryckere: Once, I was reading, and it was from a CEO of an oil company, that we should pay the ecological price. If we tomorrow, we start to pay the ecological price of dairy milk and meat, I think that price will go up. If we pay the ecological price of plant-based foods, [their] prices will go down. That's the thing. We will have to help people to understand what they are doing. At the one side a healthy product, at the other side a healthy product for the human, a healthy product for the planet should have a better taxation level than products which are asking more resources to

the planet. That's for sure.

Bouckaerts: I think that is somewhat the vision for the long-term. If you think about what is feasible in the short-term, I think just a level playing field already would be a good start ... at the current moment in time we're somewhere penalised for being plant-based compared to some animal-based products.

Deryckere: It is sure that today the soy and the plant-based foods are still hampered by a number of regulatory hurdles. I just said about the main obstacle for the sector is unequal fiscal treatment of soy and plant-based foods in comparison to animal-based foods, despite them being full-fledged alternatives to dairy and meat products.

Current EU policy does not sufficiently support the cultivation of GMO-free soy products, despite a clear demand for GMO-free food by the consumer. 66% of the EU citizens are worried about GM in food and drinks, and thirdly European labelling rules are not yet fully harmonised across EU member states, which may result in consumer confusion. A clear labelling policy, [for example] lactose-free [labels] highlighting the health and environmental benefits of these products among the consumers. These are the three measures that Europe could take, even at short notice.

Do you see cutting food waste as one of the ways to provide food for a rising population?

Bouckaerts: Well, I fully agree on the topic on waste. The latest statistics show that about 40% of all the food which is produced in fact is wasted, be it at the agricultural step, because some crops don't even leave the fields, be it in transport, towards the production plants, or be it even, and especially at consumption level, because consumers in fact through away quite some food. So we're talking big big numbers. I'm seeing numbers indicating between 35 and 50 [%]. A general number that I think is accepted is that 40% of the food produced which is wasted. So it's clearly a point in fact

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in which we have to work.

But it will not be enough. I think there are other measures, and one of these in fact it includes the message that we're bringing over here, rebalancing a little our diet, in the sense that we should consume less animal-based products and more plant-based products, and as Bernard is already saying over here, it's gradual rebalancing, and it's quite possible that it will take one to two generations in order to make that happen.

Deryckere: The biggest waste is what we say, giving these plant-based proteins to animals, and these animals, giving us animal-based proteins. You can imagine what kind of waste we have there. I see figures, and I'm looking a little to Koen, that you could six to seven times feed more people by bringing immediately the plant-based proteins to the people, instead of giving it to an animal, which is giving then animal-based protein.

Consumers at the moment want to eat animal-based proteins. They don't as much to eat vegetable-based proteins. Do you think they are willing to change their diets to consume more of these vegetable-based foods?

Deryckere: It is true that it is a challenge to convince consumers to change their eating habits and adopt a more sustainable diet for themselves and for the planet and

this cannot be done overnight. It requires a mix of different actions, policy actions, actions by many stakeholders to promote these plant-based diets, and promote sustainable foods.

Although certain initiatives like the WWF's Livewell plate, are early supported by the European Commission, the European Union should more strongly support the promotion of sustainable diets by delivering clear guidelines to the European consumer on what constitutes a sustainable diet.

Now the thing is that I'm looking to the members of the European Natural Soyfood Manufacturers Association, I think people don't realise that in the last five to six years or perhaps a little bit more there was an enormous effort done in order to improve the taste of the products. Before that, healthy products did not always taste well.

I challenge you to go to the shop and buy the Alpro products, which are excellent products. We got different superior taste awards about it, because these products today are extremely tasty. Next to taste, we are coming the whole time with innovations. Next to soy-based products we were launching products based on almonds, based on rice, based on oats, based on hazelnut. And you know, I'm confronted the whole time in my neighbourhood and with my friends and things like that where people say wow we cannot believe anymore this was a soy product because these products became

so good. People today are discovering new products. People are starting to understand, but it will take time. We will be certainly one of these generations that are coming slowly but certainly to these new products, and that's why we are not against animal-based. We are just to review the balance, and to come with good products.

Bouckaerts: I think indeed that taste is still a main driver for people to select certain foods, and whenever people have tasty plant-based products and they get the health and sustainability on top of it for free. That's the kind of mind-set that we have to have to be as close as possible to consumers.

A number of companies claim to be working to improve their sustainability, where do Alpro and other ENSA companies fit in?

Bouckaert: Well, I believe that the strength that we have in the industry is that we can link sustainability to the core of our company, which is the product itself. We don't have to make some initiative of sustainability, I would say, around the strategy of the company but we incorporate sustainability in the heart itself of our companies, because it links to the core of our product, which is the product itself, because sustainability is given not to specific programmes next to the core of the company but through the core itself, which is plant-based products in fact, which are better for health and also better for the planet. I think that is distinguishing us from many companies.

Do you eat a lot of plant-based proteins, your own products?

Deryckere: We are not these kind of people black-white, so, personally I'm not against meat and I like also a piece of meat but what I did, and what I see with my kids is that we are eating more plant-based food and less animal-based foods. Are we still eating animal-base foods? Of course. It's not about saying 'oh, I don't do that anymore, I only do that'; it's about rebalancing.



Soyfood chief calls for harmonised GM food labels

The president of the European Natural Soyfood Manufacturers Association (ENSA), Bernard Deryckere, has called on the EU to better direct consumers towards foods that are not genetically-modified, perhaps by introducing GM-free labels across the food industry.

“Current EU policy does not sufficiently support the cultivation of GMO-free soy products, despite a clear demand for GMO-free food by the consumer,” Deryckere told EurActiv in an interview.

“66% of the EU citizens are worried about GM in food and drinks, and thirdly European labelling rules are not yet fully harmonised across EU member states, which may result in consumer confusion,”



he said, referring to a 2010 Eurobarometer survey on food-related risks.

Another Eurobarometer, from the same year, showed that 61% of Europeans did not think that the development of GMOs should be promoted.

The European Union currently has a system requiring companies to label their products if they contain more than 0.9% GMOs. But Deryckere believes that it is unfair that the scheme does not take into account feed for animal-based products.

Bart Staes, a Belgian Green MEP, said at a conference organised by ENSA on Wednesday (4 November): “85% of

imported soy feed for animals contains GMOs”.

Green MEPs have pushed for specific “GMO-free” labels to apply across the European Union.

A number of companies have introduced voluntary GMO-free labels, including Belgian soy manufacturer Alpro, a member company of ENSA.

In February this year, ENSA sent a position paper to the European Commission calling for “harmonised rules on the use of GMO-free labels on foodstuffs at EU level”.

At the moment, some European countries have decided to introduce their own national labelling regimes, but they are considerably different.

In Finland, a product must be 100% GMO-free to qualify for the label, whereas Germany permits under 0.1%. In France, vegetable-based products with under 0.1% GMO can qualify for the label.

However, to the European Commission, that the harmonisation of labels was not so simple. “There is a split majority on the issue,” said Werner Bosmans, an official in the Commission’s environment directorate.

Deryckere also supports the harmonisation of other food labels, including a product’s impact on people’s health and the environment.

Brussels: reducing waste first piece in food resource puzzle

To tackle pollution and climate change, policy-makers, NGOs and industry alike support more vegetables in Europeans’ diets, while insisting on better use of resources and waste-management.

Vegetable-based foods such as potatoes, pulses and soy have been shown to have a lower carbon footprint than animal products, which account for about 33% of total greenhouse gas emissions for the food sector, according to a report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization from September.

Although, vegetables still account for 24% of global greenhouse gas emissions they are considered more resource efficient in terms of water and land use, the report says.

According to Bernard Deryckere, president of the European Natural Soyfood Manufacturers association (ENSA), an obvious solution to the unsustainability of Europe’s food systems is “to rebalance our consumption of animal-based products

with more resource efficient foods that contain similar protein levels”.

“Our view is that soy and plant-based foods can provide an answer as they consistently out-perform animal products when comparing their environmental impact in terms of CO₂ emissions, land and water use,” he said.

According to the FAO study, pulses, such as peas and beans, are efficient sources of protein when compared with animal sources, because they require fewer inputs per kilogramme produced.

‘Carbon intensity’

However, the picture becomes more

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complex when figures of food waste are taken into account. The authors of the FAO report combined the two figures, for greenhouse gas emissions and carbon footprint through wastage, to come up with a single “carbon intensity” rating.

According to FAO report, meat products constitute just 15% of global food wastage, whereas some 21% of vegetable and cereal food is wasted along the food chain, whether in fields, processing facilities, supermarkets or homes.

The Eurostat resource efficiency scorecard published today (6 December) attempts to break down the figures to show Europeans’ use of resources per sector. In the scorecard, Eurostat used FAO data to come up with a “calorie supply” rating for European foods.

Vegetal products, such as cereals, vegetables and legumes, accounted for 2,600 of the total calories supplied, compared with 1,100 for animal products, suggesting that they may be having a larger impact on the planet.

However, vegetal products, cereals in particular, form a larger part of the human diet than meats on average, adding to the complexity of the figures. When health effects and other indicators are taken into account, the data may indicate that vegetal products should occupy a larger proportion of the calorie share.

“Soy products are just such a product, an excellent protein source which can be produced with a low environmental footprint,” said Janez Potočnik, the European commissioner for the environment, said in a video message at a conference, organised by ENSA on Wednesday.

However, commissioner Potočnik said that, in general, industry would “have to think longer-term and work together to safeguard their basic resources and reduce the impacts of their operations”.

Tackling food waste has ‘most obvious benefits’

While many policymakers agree that Europe needs to tackle the over-



consumption of food, in particular meat, another figure from the Eurostat report, the total calorie supply for each person, may indicate a more pressing problem.

The data reveals that in 2009 the total supply of food for Europeans was equal to a daily 3,700 calories per person, some 20% more than the recommended consumption level. This figure, which showed the amount of food available, differentiates from the average consumption level.

According to the FAO report, the world wastes about 1.3 billion tonnes of edible food each year, roughly one third of the amount that it produces. Potočnik said that the statistics made food waste the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, after China and the United States.

“When you consider that there are 870 million people going hungry every day, these figures are more astonishing,” he added.

Potočnik’s directorate is trying to take a pragmatic approach in improving the sustainability of Europe’s food systems, by focusing on food waste, a key component of the Commission’s roadmap to a resource efficient Europe.

The EU has set itself a target of halving the amount of edible food waste by 2020, and the almost complete elimination of landfilling.

“Food waste has the most obvious benefits for resource efficiency. It’s normal that policymakers focus on the things where you get the most results first,” Werner Bosmans, one of the authors of the roadmap and the

official responsible for EU natural resource policies, said at the ENSA conference.

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