

GUEST ARTICLE

What is the true cost of reduced plant food consumption?

By Bernard Deryckere, chairman ENSA , 26-Nov-2013

Related topics: Phytochemicals, plant extracts, Soy-based ingredients, Industry, Botanicals

Increasing intakes of soy and other plant-based foods and supplements can reduce environmental burdens – but does the political will exist to do it? Not really, says the chair of the 10-year-old European Natural Soyfood Manufacturers Association (ENSA).

The challenges in the food sector have never been greater than they are today – the rapidly growing population, our changing consumption patterns and continuing depletion of natural resources pose real challenges for industry professionals and policymakers. However, while the environmental impact of the sectors such as transport and buildings have been widely studied and acknowledged by policy makers, only few questions are being raised about the environmental footprint of the food we consume on a daily basis – too few questions.

With the population growing rapidly in developing countries, the demand for food has risen exponentially over the last couple of decades. According to some OECD estimates, agricultural production will have to increase by at least 60% over the next 40 years to meet a growing global demand for food. We all know that we cannot afford to continue business as usual – the finite amount of agricultural land in combination with resource depletion will sooner or later put a stop to our ability to grow agricultural production the way we are doing now. In other words, we need to move towards more sustainable agricultural production patterns, and we need to do it fast.

The sustainable production and consumption of food of animal origin, i.e. the main source of our protein, represents the biggest environmental challenge for the agricultural sector today. An obvious solution to this challenge is to rebalance our consumption of animal-based products with more resource-efficient foods which contain similar protein levels. Soy and plant-based foods can provide an answer here as they consistently outperform animal products when comparing their environmental impact in terms of CO₂ emissions, land and water use.



This statement is supported by independent research such as the WWF 'LiveWell-plate' initiative which highlights the need to rebalance our diets towards more plant-based foods. Furthermore, the Double Food Environmental Pyramid model of the Barilla Center for Food & Nutrition indicates that in order to move to a more balanced diet from both an environmental and nutritional perspective, we need to reduce the consumption of foods with a higher environmental impact such as dairy and meat and increase consumption of products with a lower environmental impact such as fruits, vegetables, cereals and legumes.

Regulatory hurdles

Although this data shows there is great potential for soy and plant-based foods in the EU, the sector is still hampered by a number of regulatory hurdles. One of the main obstacles for the sector is the unequal fiscal treatment of soy and plant-based foods in comparison to animal-based foods despite them being fully-fledged alternatives to dairy and meat products. In some EU countries, soy foods are subject to higher taxes than traditional dairy products which leads to fiscal discrimination.

Secondly, current EU policy does not sufficiently support the cultivation of GM-free soy products despite a clear demand for non-GM food. According to the 2010 Eurobarometer, 66% of EU citizens are worried about GM in food and drinks. Soy and plant-based products produced by ENSA members answer this demand because their products are GM-free. However, current regulation impedes the sector from clearly informing consumers about GM-free content in food products.

Thirdly, European labelling rules are not yet fully harmonised across EU member states which may result in consumer confusion. A clear labelling policy (e.g. on lactose-free) highlighting health and environmental benefits of soy and plant-based foods could help raise awareness about these products among consumers.

In the world where agricultural resources are already strained and demand for food is soaring, increasing the share of plant-based products in the overall food mix will help us use our natural resources more efficiently and at the same time enable consumers to maintain a healthy and nutritious diet. For this to happen we request a level playing field for the animal and plant-based industry in order to help European consumers make an informed choice and facilitate an EU-wide transition towards sustainable production and consumption of food.

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