



Event Summary

GLOBE EU Earth Overshoot Day 2017: “Sustainable Farming” September 26, 2017, European Parliament (Brussels)

Agriculture Commissioner Phil Hogan opened the morning’s discussion by stressing the role the European Commission must continue to play as a global leader in addressing climate change, while persevering to meet the SDGs. Commissioner Hogan highlighted the sustainable trajectory of EU Rural Development programs and its support for innovation networks, emphasizing that European farmers have a key role to play in maintaining water and soil health, as well as biodiversity. The Commissioner also drew attention to the EC’s new task force on water, which aims to increase investments and promote best practices to improve water sustainability in European agriculture.

Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy MEP opened the first panel discussion on “Mitigating the Impact of Farming on Climate & Biodiversity”, stressing the social, economic, and environmental challenges we face in agriculture today. He noted that Earth Overshoot Day has been occurring sooner every year – in other words, that we are borrowing more and more from future generations to maintain current systems. Mr. Gerbrandy reminded participants that, given current land use practices, climate change, and the ensuing decline in soil health, we will need more land to accommodate our needs by 2050. He also stressed that solutions must no longer draw from the past (pesticides, monocultures) but must look to the future, through innovation and more ambitious CAP policies.

Mauro Poinelli, head of DG AGRI’s environment, climate change, forestry and bio-economy unit, provided an overview of positive developments in European agriculture: GHGs from the agricultural sector have been reduced by 20% since the 1990s, with animal production following a similar trend. Carbon sinks have increased considerably due to the expansion of forest areas and the maintenance of natural grasslands. Renewable energy usage, the organic sector, and the use of integrate pest management have increased throughout the EU, alongside a decrease in the use of pesticides, chemical and water for agricultural use. To Mr Poinelli, the CAP has played a large role in protecting land and ecosystem services, though greater cooperation is needed to meet the challenges ahead, including growing consumer expectation for high environmental standards and social justice in agricultural systems.

Oana Neagu, COPA-COGECA's Director of General Affairs, noted that agriculture and forestry are the only sectors positively contributing to climate change mitigation in Europe, and thus remain important sectors to meet the SDGs and the EU's commitments to the Paris Agreement. However, these sectors also provide some of the lowest incomes in the EU, providing a challenge to encourage new and young entrants to enter the sector. For Ms Neagu, the CAP has and must continue to provide significant support to meet challenges in the agricultural sector, while also responding to opportunities. She called for greater coherence between policies and further simplification. In particular, Ms Neagu requested that European institutions consider the overall aspects of a ban on glyphosate on conservation agriculture. She also stressed the need to further support precision agriculture and improvement of broadband communication and infrastructure across the entire EU.

Luc Bas, Director of IUCN's European Regional Office, recalled that it is still critical to address Europe's environmental footprint, which despite improvement, is still considerable. He drew attention to the lack of mention of sustainability in the recent State of the Union address delivered by President Juncker in September. He noted that it is critical to develop integrated solutions for sustainability. More attention must be paid to the way in which Ecological Focus Areas are used (e.g. the use of pesticides). Mr Bas also stressed that working with nature must be shown to be an investment, not a challenge, to both farmers and policy-makers. It will also be crucial to consider how to phase out particular agricultural practices and products, in order to avoid doing more economic or environmental harm than intended.

After Mr Gerbrandy opened the floor, it was argued by one participant that the CAP is still not in line with biodiversity, and recent greening of the CAP has proven insufficient to address sustainability in agriculture. Other participants supported this claim by asking panelists to identify the drivers of change that may lead to net-zero agriculture, and to suggest avenues for more disruptive thinking beyond 'business as usual' approaches.

Panelists responded by re-emphasizing that change is incremental, with results generally only showing after two years of policy implementation. Given potential CAP budget constraints in the future, however, Ms Neagu stressed that farmers may soon need to produce more with less. Result-based approaches from the Netherlands are proving successful in this regard, and further research needs to be conducted on whether these practices may be adopted by other member states. A review of the EU's bio-economy strategy was also highlighted as a potential opportunity to improve the agricultural and forestry sectors, with technology and digitization likely to play a large part in providing solutions. Mr Bas also pointed to the need to improve prices to farmers, to reconsider the cheapness of food, and to address issues of sustainability at the consumer end – including the 40% rate of household waste produced in Europe and high-levels of meat consumption. Mr Gerbrandy closed the discussion by agreeing that, while a share agenda has not yet been outlined, it is necessary to develop new strategies to meet current challenges, though it often proves difficult to move beyond policies of the past.

Kicking off the next panel on ‘Mobilizing Capital Investment to Support Sustainable Farming’, **Abigail Herron**, Head of Responsible Investment Engagement at Aviva Investors, presented how Aviva aligns sustainability issues with investment portfolios. Key issues included gender and diversity, climate change, sustainability in palm oil production, the role of pollinators, and sustainable protein in the context of antibiotic resistance. Ms Herron stressed that including investors in discussions on sustainability could prove transformative in the development of sustainable food and agriculture. The World Benchmarking Alliance was highlighted as an example of possible alliances between investment companies, national governments, and NGOs. The Alliance works rank large companies against sustainability criteria based on the UN SDGs.

Nicolas Verschuere, Director and Co-Founder of Soil Capital, highlighted the company’s work, namely its investments in farming approaches to improve soil health and the natural productivity of farming ecosystems. He emphasized possibilities to scale and replicate resource-efficient and sustainable operations. Incremental changes were presented as a necessary consideration for farmers to transition to more sustainable agricultural practices, setting 5-10 year timeframes for change. However, he also emphasized that farmers can begin to profit from sustainable transitions within a single year. Mr Verschuere indicated the low-hanging fruit for such transitions to succeed, including agrochemical input optimization, particularly to improve soil and farmer health. Farming systems must move away from conventional to regenerative agriculture.

Luc Bastanie, a Senior Investment Manager at Agri Investment Fund, highlighted the opportunities behind investments in sustainable food processing and transformation. He also confirmed the role of incremental change and the opportunities in technology platforms to support agricultural value. Mr Bastanie equally noted, however, that bigger disruptions may be needed to complement incremental change, suggesting the role of start-ups in bringing about sustainable transition. As consumers are demanding higher standards than what is being offered by current regulatory environments, he also stressed bringing up basic standards and regulations to meet this demand.

Luc Beerens, Global Sustainable Sourcing Director of Mars Food, reiterated that consumers are demanding greater sustainability in supply chains, but that this has not necessarily translated in changes of behaviour on the production side. He also provided insights into Mars Food’s efforts to improve the sustainability of its supply chains. This includes new benchmarks to reduce the company’s environmental footprint by 2020 and 2050, provide the 1 million farmers in their supply chain with more sustainable livelihoods through farmer partnerships, and reducing water usage. Mr. Beerens also stressed the need for agricultural producers to better comply with food safety and regulatory standards, and for regulators to address the significant discrepancy between the standards of countries from which they source their agricultural products and those in which they sell them.

Geoff Townsend, an Industry Fellow for Ecolab, emphasized minimizing water usage and food waste throughout the food supply chain. He suggested establishing clear system boundary

thresholds, implementing context-based targeting while developing metrics that can be applied at the global level. Mr. Townsend drew attention to better defining “sustainability” and “sustainable agriculture”, namely in how the term translated to consumers and by trying to price externalities. He lastly identified the lingering disconnect between investments, public interest groups, and corporate interest groups, and how this disconnect provides an ongoing challenge to make sound policy decisions.

GLOBE EU President, **Sirpa Pietikäinen** MEP, closed the discussions by re-emphasizing the need to establish integrated *food* policies at the Europe level, creating a “European Commissioner of Food” position, alongside better support and guidance for farmers, retailers, and financiers to transition to more sustainable practices. Ms Pietikäinen called on health ministries, amongst others, to address health in the context of sustainable diets, and to consider the impacts of low-carbon diets on food prices. She ended by re-opening the discussion to the floor on how to rally the necessary political support for sustainable agriculture, and implications for the CAP.

Panelists provided a number of suggestions and highlighted further areas of interest in response. These included adopting a value-chain perspective; addressing unfair trading practices, food waste and soil health; leveraging the role of consumers in creating change; bringing trade onto the sustainable agriculture agenda in addition to the environment; developing appropriate benchmarks drawing on SDGs commitments; showing the short, medium, and long-term benefits of increasing sustainability on the farm to producers; rewarding farmers for sharing data to create appropriate targets and practices; and addressing the true cost of food. It was also emphasized that farmers are ultimately responsible for the soil condition on their farms. As a benefit to farmers, one recommendation was to capture the quality of soil in the price of farmland.

Re-opening the floor to discussion, barriers and opportunities to move consumers towards a low-carbon diet were considered. The need to build consumer awareness, to improve food traceability, leverage block chain technology were mentioned as possible opportunities.

The need to talk about both mitigation and adaption was mentioned by one participant. Another participant drew attention to the difficult task of addressing the global population increase, and the unsustainability that will ensue if there is a global increase in the environmental footprint of our diets – due to increasing dairy and meat consumption in emerging economies. While defining what constitutes a healthy diet remains a challenge, participants agreed that we are still consuming too much. There was also consensus that key areas of opportunity include improving public procurement schemes, developing shorter food chains to the benefit of both producers and consumers, and finding strong political leadership.

One participant pointed to the tobacco industry as a clear sector from which to divest to see meaningful change towards health, and clear pathways must also be identified in other agricultural sectors. The need to highlight tools for investors to bridge information gaps, to tie regulations with best practices, were re-emphasized.

It was also stressed that, while consumers hold an important role, companies should be held accountable for their actions and must play a leading role in driving necessary changes. So long as unsustainable farming, processing, and distribution practices do not translate into the real costs of production and consumption, however, it will remain difficult to change company and consumer behaviour.

The discussion concluded with the reminder that creative solutions and long-term and integrated thinking — both within and beyond the CAP — must become the basis for the sustainable agriculture policies and practices needed in the EU. Beyond providing high quality agricultural and food products, the EU must also continue to set high quality standards.