

Martin Hojsík opened by expressing that agriculture should be viewed as part of the broader European and international food system, which currently contributes to issues like inequality, environmental degradation, and animal welfare concerns. He emphasized the challenge of reforming this system due to its deep connection to everyday lives, impacting everything from health and food affordability to the livelihoods of farmers. Martin advocated for a holistic approach in addressing these issues, focusing on creating systemic changes rather than isolated fixes. He highlighted the importance of connecting stakeholders, including the farming community, industry, and other key players at events like the conference, to collaboratively transform agriculture from being part of the problem into part of the solution. This discourse, facilitated by GLOBE EU, aims to drive significant changes in European environmental policy.

Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle in her keynote address emphasized the importance of a systemic approach to making food systems more sustainable and resilient. She highlighted the need for innovation, collaboration, and solutions within the agricultural sector. Catherine referenced a strategic dialogue initiated by President Ursula von der Leyen, which involved various stakeholders agreeing on recommendations to advance sustainability in the food chain. She stressed that immediate action is necessary to change production and consumption patterns and improve farmers' incomes while ensuring environmental sustainability. She mentioned the significance of aligning objectives across the food chain and using indicators to measure progress in sustainability.

Catherine also discussed the role of the Common Agricultural Policy and the need for both public and private funding to support farmers. She underscored the importance of engaging stakeholders to shape a vision for agriculture and food, with an emphasis on reducing the sector's climate impact and fostering alignment and dialogue. She announced plans for a high-level advisory body to continue strategic dialogue and provide input on agricultural and food issues. Overall, her remarks focused on fostering a collaborative approach to enhance the sustainability and resilience of food systems.

First Panel Discussion: Sustainability Benchmarking Tool for EU Farms

Peter Meedendorp discussed the challenges faced by young European farmers regarding sustainability reporting and regulatory requirements. He highlighted the inconsistency in market and legal demands, leading to fragmented and duplicative reporting efforts for farmers. Peter emphasized the need for a structured benchmarking framework to streamline sustainability reporting, allowing for better alignment across various stakeholders, including banks, supermarkets, and regulatory bodies. The goal is not to create a single overriding system but to make sustainability efforts comparable, rewarding farmers who exceed baseline requirements with market recognition and potentially better remuneration. This framework would also facilitate more informed policy discussions by assessing current performance across CO₂, animal welfare, and water quality and identifying trade-offs between different sustainability goals. Peter stressed the importance of focusing on actionable steps and monitoring progress rather than fixating solely on long-term targets like those for 2050.

Bart Vandewaetere emphasized the importance of viewing investment in agriculture as a means to enhance sector resilience rather than just a cost. He highlighted a significant

investment gap of approximately 35 billion euros annually, necessary for improving soil health, as identified by Food Drink Europe. Nestlé is contributing to this effort by investing 1.2 billion Swiss Francs (1.1 billion euros) until the end of next year, supporting various initiatives like premiums and training. He stressed the significance of regenerative agriculture but noted the need for credible and measurable standards, especially in light of consumer skepticism and policy validation.

Bart introduced a benchmarking tool to achieve these standards and foster trust. This tool aims to harmonize measurements and guide effective solutions, fostering credible investments and partnerships. Internally, their system operates on three levels: Engage (onboarding and initial incentives), Advance (application of context-specific practices), and Lead (achieving measurable outcomes). Each level carries differing incentives, balancing input practices and outcomes. By standardizing through this tool, the company hopes to make agricultural investments more credible and effective, benefiting all stakeholders.

Dominik Klauser discussed the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform's approach to regenerative agriculture and the organization's recent efforts and learnings. He introduced the SAI Platform as a member organization in the food and beverage sector, emphasizing pre-competitive collaboration to enhance sustainable supply chains. Dominik highlighted two key strategies of the platform: shared learning, which involves sharing successful practices and those that haven't worked, and benchmarking, which assesses sustainability performance across the food and drink value chains, particularly for crops, dairy, and beef.

Dominik noted the emerging prominence of regenerative agriculture since around 2015, pointing out the risks of inconsistent frameworks among different stakeholders, which can lead to administrative burdens and limit farmers' market access. To address this fragmentation, the SAI Platform developed a new framework that offers a standardized approach, focusing on being outcome-based, context-specific, and inclusive. The framework prioritizes environmental sustainability, considering factors like soil health, water usage, biodiversity, and climate, while acknowledging the challenge of incorporating livelihood considerations.

Dominik shared insights on the need for realistic expectations in data collection and reporting, emphasizing the importance of reducing administrative burdens for farmers. He also underscored the need for further research to understand which farming practices lead to desired outcomes. To support farmers during the transition to more sustainable practices, he advocated for investing in knowledge generation and dissemination, along with providing adequate training and support.

Alex Datema emphasized the need for a unified sustainability benchmark in farming during his presentation at a recent conference. He highlighted the current challenge where farmers face multiple benchmarks from different parties, resulting in confusion and inefficiency at the farm level. Alex argued that a single benchmark would streamline efforts and data collection, ensuring farmers meet sustainability standards across all stakeholders.

Moreover, he stressed the importance of incentivizing sustainable practices, suggesting that those who invest early and heavily in sustainability should receive faster and more

substantial economic rewards. Alex shared Rabobank's approach in the Netherlands, using the "biodiversity monitor dairy farming" as a benchmark to assess dairy farmers' sustainability. Based on their sustainability performance, farmers are categorized, and those who excel receive interest rate discounts, while others pay slightly more.

Friesland Campina also adopted this monitor within their quality system, rewarding top-performing farmers with additional payments, partially derived from the market and from penalties imposed on lower performers. Alex underscored the necessity of involving all stakeholders, including supermarkets, in adopting a common benchmark throughout the value chain to ensure a coherent and profitable push toward sustainability.

He acknowledged that while the biodiversity monitor works well in the Netherlands, adjustments might be needed for broader European implementation due to different regional conditions. Nonetheless, the goal should remain to add value to any benchmark by rewarding sustainable actions.

Second Panel Discussion: Farming & Food in Europe: Sustainable Solutions

Nicu Ștefănuță highlighted the progress made in green policies, eco-schemes, and conditional subsidies but noted that much work remains. Nicu expressed concern about resistance to these sustainability measures, stating that the backlash often stems from broader political issues rather than the measures themselves. He emphasized the importance of continuing support for small farmers, particularly through top-ups and capping subsidies for large landowners. He also stressed the role of national governments in supplementing EU subsidies and criticized their reluctance to do so. Nicu advocated for using the budget to drive sustainability and biodiversity initiatives, suggesting that budgetary measures are more effective and politically feasible than legal mandates. He expressed optimism about working with Commissioner Hansen and looked forward to developments in the agriculture committee.

In his additional comments at the conference, Nicu emphasized his support for innovation, particularly in the protein sector, including new market variants. He addressed a political narrative from a previous mandate suggesting that citizens were forced to consume insect-based products, clarifying it was merely a market authorization for such products. Nicu urged improved communication from the Commission, MEPs, and others to prevent public rejection of innovation based on misinformation. He expressed concern that Europe might fall behind countries like China and the USA if it fails to embrace new opportunities, potentially losing market shares and innovation advantages.

Veerle Vandeweerd emphasized the urgent need for innovation and a transformative change in the European agricultural system to meet future food demands, especially with the global population expected to reach 10 billion. She advocated for new approaches such as alternative protein sources, highlighting bio-fermentation as a promising and underutilized technology. Veerle pointed out that bio-fermentation could revolutionize protein production and has significant investment potential, with Europe currently having a competitive edge in this field. She urged Europe to create a supportive regulatory environment to retain and scale up innovative start-ups within the continent, preventing them from moving to other regions like the United States. By doing so, Europe can maintain

its leadership in bio-fermentation and contribute to global food sustainability.

Dorothy Shaver highlighted Unilever's efforts and approach toward regenerative agriculture. She expressed gratitude to GLOBE EU and European legislation for policies like the nature restoration law. Unilever collaborates with the SAI Platform to enhance regenerative agriculture practices, emphasizing that this is not a "silver bullet" for food system sustainability but requires extensive collaboration across the value chain.

Dorothy noted the absence of retailers and suppliers in discussions about sustainable agriculture and stressed the importance of their involvement. She explained Unilever's commitment to implementing regenerative agriculture methods on at least 1 million hectares by 2030, with 400,000 hectares already underway, many in Europe. Unilever supports these efforts through a billion-euro Climate Nature Fund and collaborates with suppliers and farmers, using agronomists to tailor practices like drip irrigation and cover cropping to specific needs.

A key issue identified by Dorothy is the need for stronger supplier engagement to drive changes on a larger scale. She advocated for collective action among stakeholders to support transitions and ensure farmers are rewarded fairly. Sharing data and successful strategies is also crucial for accelerating progress and avoiding past mistakes. Dorothy recounted a project in southern Spain where Unilever collaborated with farmers to overcome a tomato shortage by utilizing regenerative techniques, resulting in better yields and inspiration for neighboring farms to adopt similar methods. This example underscores the potential of collaborative learning and data sharing in promoting regenerative practices efficiently.

Nicolas Verschuere outlined his company's approach to facilitating the transition of farmers to sustainable practices at a recent conference. Soil Capital, existing for 10 years, aids farmers in improving soil health and profitability, supporting the transition with a belief that sustainability is unattainable if farmers are financially struggling. The company collaborates with over 2,000 farmers covering 1 million hectares in Europe. Emphasizing the importance of financing this transition, they measure environmental outcomes, particularly focusing on carbon, and developed an ISO and BTI certified carbon measure. This certification allows agro-industries to incorporate certified carbon footprints into their value chains, financially incentivizing farmers for sustainable practices. Their platform collects environmental data, benchmarks farmer performance, and facilitates financial incentives, having returned 15 million euros over three years. Nicolas stressed the need for alignment between public and private sectors to avoid complications like double counting in schemes. Soil Capital aims to expand to 10 million hectares and distribute 100 million euros in farmer remuneration over the next five years, emphasizing collaboration with various stakeholders, including MEPs, to achieve these goals.