GLOBE EUROPEAN UNION
The Network for Environmental Legislators

GLOBE EU Conference

"Cultivating Change: Empowering the Future of Sustainable Agriculture and Building Resilient Food Systems"

European Parliament, November 20, 2025

Summary:

Panel Discussion 1: Empowering Future Farmers: Innovations and Skills for the Next Generation

Maria Gafo Gomez-Zamalloa (DG AGRI) discussed the focus on generational renewal in the European Parliament, especially concerning agriculture and food's future post-2027. She highlighted the aging farmer demographic in the EU, noting the challenges this poses, especially for young women in farming. Ursula von der Leyen has prioritized this strategy for the Agriculture Commission.

Consultation with organizations like CERJA and young farmers has been essential, as actions largely depend on national policies. The strategy identifies key areas: access to land and credit, knowledge and innovation, improving rural quality of life, and addressing pensions and succession.

Specific measures include proposing a land observatory, collaborating with the European Investment Bank, expanding Erasmus for young farmers, and introducing farm relief services. Ambitious targets aim to double the share of young farmers by 2040 and encourage member states to allocate at least 6% of agricultural spending on generational renewal.

Nona McElwee (Unilever)emphasized the importance of agriculture to Unilever, not only for food but also for cosmetics and detergents. She highlighted their focus on regenerative agriculture, which appeals to young farmers through non-traditional practices that improve soil health, biodiversity, and ecosystem function. Key practices include cover crops, crop rotation, reduced tillage, and organic fertilizers. These efforts aim to stabilize supply chains, maintain yields, and protect farmer incomes. Unilever commits to implementing regenerative agriculture across 1 million hectares by 2030, with 550,000 hectares currently targeted.

Active projects span Europe and other regions, involving crops like soy, rice, and vegetables. A significant project in Badajoz, Spain, demonstrated notable environmental benefits, including a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and an increase in bee populations. Unilever uses technologies like ARC and Sentinel for optimal irrigation and crop protection, with young farmers being crucial to their efforts.

Nona called for wider support from governments and the European Commission, particularly through the Common Agricultural Policy, to balance economic, ecological, and social goals. The approach focuses on creating a sustainable and viable future for farming, with regenerative agriculture as a model, driven by science and aimed at healthy outcomes for soil and people.

Marion Picot (European Council of Young Farmers) expressed appreciation for the European Parliament's focus on generational renewal, highlighting its consistent support for young farmers. She observed that millennials and Gen Z farmers aim to make meaningful impacts while balancing well-being and work-life. Generational renewal addresses supply security and food sovereignty, with Europe's agricultural diversity cited as a strength. However, sectors like wine and livestock face generational gaps.

Young farmers prioritize sustainability, often engaging in organic and conservation agriculture. They also play a crucial role in rural social fabric by connecting generations and organizing community activities.

The strategy supports essential elements like land, succession, and social policies, which have been contentious with member states. A Land Observatory is important for addressing inconsistent policies and improving soil quality. Financial instruments are vital, as current aid and leasing arrangements are insufficient.

Health and mental health need attention, as crises can stress young farmers. Support involves community actors like vets and advisors. Concerns arise with the NRPP and MFF proposals, which shift from a binding budget for young farmers to a recommendation, reversing previous progress. A binding budget is crucial for implementing strategies that support young farmers.

Marion emphasized the need for these vital changes, asserting that while the tools and ideas are in place, execution remains uncertain.

Gerben van der Lugt (Grodan) introduced the company as a part of Rockwool, known for its stone wool products used in controlled environment agriculture (CEA). CEA, which includes high-tech greenhouses, allows for year-round, resource-efficient farming and addresses key European agricultural challenges: food security, operating within planetary boundaries, and equipping future growers with skills and technologies.

CEA enhances food security through local, high-yield production with minimal resource use, and supports sustainability by significantly reducing water usage. For instance, CEA-grown tomatoes use just 4 liters of water per kilogram compared to 60 liters in open fields. Policy, investment, infrastructure, and skills are crucial for CEA to succeed.

Gerben emphasized the potential of CEA to attract new talents with data and automation skills, although challenges like land, capital, and technology talent barriers remain. Grodan works to lower industry entry barriers through innovation and collaboration, focusing on sustainable cultivation and knowledge sharing. They support training initiatives to strengthen industry skills.

To solidify CEA's role in sustainable agriculture, regulatory frameworks, incentives, and improved capital access are needed for young entrants. While CEA isn't a complete solution for generational renewal, it offers a future-oriented narrative centered on high-tech sustainability. Grodan is dedicated to empowering the next generation of growers through innovation and skill development.

Discussion:

The discussion with participants highlighted the importance of integrating a fair remuneration system across global supply chains, noting the aging population of cocoa farmers in Ghana as an example of global interconnectedness. Emphasis was placed on ensuring that all actors, including buyers and policy makers, commit to fair prices to support young EU and non-EU farmers. Unilever's commitment to improving livelihoods through regenerative agriculture and living wages was noted, along with calls for addressing unfair trading practices through appropriate legislation.

Concerns were raised about small farmers in less populated regions, particularly in the Portuguese-Spanish border, and how they might be overlooked in broader policies. The potential for financial instruments to support climate adaptation and generational renewal was discussed. The need to change perceptions of risk and utilize available financial tools was emphasized. Encouraging comprehensive business plans for young farmers to access transition funds was suggested as a strategy for promoting sustainability and resilience in agriculture.

Panel Discussion 2: Strengthening Financial Viability and Ensuring Fair Trade in the Agri-Food Sector

Bart Vandewaetere (Nestlé) emphasized that regenerative agriculture is a sustainable approach that enhances yields, reduces reliance on fossil fuels and pesticides, and lowers costs over 3-7 years. Despite challenges like the removal of income support, these practices improve resilience to climate shocks and profitability.

He highlighted a project in Spain with 110 dairy farmers practicing regenerative agriculture, leading to increased milk yields and reduced synthetic fertilizer use. Scaling

this model requires supportive policy frameworks, such as transition payments, and fair market conditions to ensure consistency and sustainability.

Bart stressed the importance of addressing unfair trading practices in the retail sector and called for a focus on policy support and fairness to ensure a resilient agricultural future.

Casper Holl (Rabobank) highlighted the bank's focus on transitioning the food system within the broader EU context. As a major financial player in the Netherlands, Rabobank acknowledges its role in addressing systemic issues related to food and agriculture. The bank's sustainability efforts are concentrated on energy and food system transitions.

He noted that in certain sectors, like greenhouse farming, economic incentives align with sustainability, driving the adoption of renewable energy. However, such incentives are lacking in others, such as dairy farming near protected areas, where sustainable practices are not immediately financially viable. This calls for both public and private contributions to ensure fair compensation.

Casper emphasized the importance of recognizing the full societal value of sustainable food production, including environmental and social benefits. Rabobank is developing true value models, incorporating both public and private valuations, to reflect these aspects.

The bank is collaborating with Dutch stakeholders to create a common KPI system for sustainability, aiming to translate societal value into tangible benefits for farmers. He stressed the importance of collaboration across the food chain, involving all major players, to develop sustainable economic models that benefit everyone.

Chuck de Liedekerke (Soil Capital) emphasized that regenerative agriculture can coexist with productivity and profitability, focusing on strategies that minimize transition risks and costs while enhancing farmers' economic viability. At Soil Capital, they provide agronomic guidance and financial incentives to support farmers, engaging half a million hectares in Europe and the UK, and reducing over 600,000 tons of CO2 with improvements in water and biodiversity.

As president of the Climate Agriculture Alliance, Chuck noted the challenge of channeling payments to farmers at scale, despite successful projects. Capturing the non-crop value that farmers provide is crucial, as regenerative practices alone aren't sufficient amid decreasing agricultural budgets. Collaboration between private and public sectors on food sovereignty, competitiveness, and generational renewal is essential.

He cited the USDA’s model under the Biden administration, where $3 billion for regenerative projects spurred €20 billion in private sector bids, illustrating effective co-

financing. Chuck stressed the importance of supporting farmers promptly to avoid higher costs and delays in environmental transitions.

Simon Krämer (European Alliance for Regenerative Agriculture) emphasized supporting diverse forms of regenerative agriculture by uniting farmers in conservation, agroecology, and organic practices. The aim is to frame farmers as climate and health heroes, highlighting their historical role in societal regeneration. He referenced a Wageningen study showing farmers achieving Green Deal targets with significant input reductions, showcasing the feasibility of regenerative practices.

Simon stressed the importance of regenerating water cycles and providing farmers with planning security and autonomy for transition plans. He cautioned against potential pitfalls in benchmarking, drawing lessons from the organic movement. An upcoming report will analyze certification methods from a farmer's perspective, advocating for farmer-owned data sovereignty.

In Germany, the oligopolized food retail and processing sectors pressure supply chains, reducing diversity and farmers' negotiating power. Simon called for antitrust measures to ensure fair market conditions. He noted that companies like Nestlé are investing in regenerative agriculture, suggesting that similar investment in the agri-food system could significantly enhance farmers' capacity to meet sustainability targets.

Discussion:

In questions from the audience, the need for an integrated supply chain approach was emphasized, particularly concerning unfair trading practices and fair pricing for farmers. The importance of sustainability investments and the impact of retail consolidation were highlighted. The discussion suggested a comprehensive review of the entire supply chain to ensure fair remuneration and sustainability without causing food price inflation. Concerns were raised about the lack of acknowledgment of retail alliances' impact on farmers, suggesting that without addressing these issues, future revisions of trading practices might fall short.

The dialogue also addressed upcoming revisions to the Unfair Trading Practices (UTP) directive and the importance of ensuring that farmers have tools to protest unfair conditions. There were discussions about the democratic crisis affecting long-term investments in sustainable agriculture, as seen in challenges to the soil monitoring law. The need for collaboration across the value chain was noted, emphasizing the role of true cost and true value accounting in understanding and addressing production costs. This approach could shape future policies for fair remuneration and sustainable agriculture practices.