

From Our Farms to all of Our Forks



By: Max Schulman

The current COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the fact that many things that we take for granted, including access to safe and affordable food, has become a lot more complex than people previously assumed. Unfortunately, this will probably continue to get worse at least in the near future.

Thankfully, until now, our grocery stores have been able to remain open, and for the most part, the shelves continue to be stocked. European policymakers, as well as national governments have gone to considerable lengths to protect the entire supply chain from collapsing, thus ensuring food security across Europe. This has also included provisions to ensure that European farmers have access to vital inputs such as plant protection products, fertilizers and seeds, allowing European citizens continued access to safe, diverse and reasonably priced food that EU farmers produce inside our territory.

With the current health crisis changing life as we know it, last week the European Commission published its long awaited Farm To Fork and Biodiveristy Strategies. It calls for farmers to shift to a more environmentally sustainable food model, specifically by calling for a 50% reduction in the use pesticides and anti-microbials for livestock as well as a 20% reduction in fertilizer use by 2030. These targets were announced in spite of the fact that over the past decades, European farmers such as myself, and my colleagues across Europe, have made considerable efforts to decrease the environmental footprint of production, while providing arguably the safest food in the world. Unfortunately, many of these measures and regulations for producers are motivated by the false assumption that European crop and livestock farmers do not adhere to the strict environmental standards that European consumers expect. Perhaps this could have been cleared up by the Agricultural Commissioner if he had participated in the Press Conference where the strategies were unveiled last week on the 20th of May.

Many policymakers and members of civil society believe that farmers should just shift their production models and accept the fact that consumers want food to be produced without the help of modern technologies. At the same time, they repeat incorrect and false assertions, that we can maintain the same levels of food security, food safety or current land use without using modern tools, as crop protection, fertilizers and new plant breeding techniques. Or that European agriculture can continue to remain viable while depriving its producers of these vital tools that our global competitors continue to have access to. This is simply not true.

Pesticides and fertilizers are vital tools for farmers to ensure that our crops are protected from pests and disease while maintaining a yield and quality output that allows for European farmers to remain

competitive. Farmers already see incomes at [less than 50% compared to other sectors in Europe](#)¹. Pesticides, herbicides and fungicides, just like other inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, are not cheap. No farmer would use these if they did not see a clear benefit.

We, farmers only use pesticides when it is **absolutely necessary**, precisely because we are balancing on a tight rope with very thin margins. We, farmers are also consumers, we also want safe and affordable food.

A recently published [study](#)² on the impact of the decreasing toolbox across numerous countries in Europe, including in my native Finland, show a devastating effect. On average, the crops analyzed in the report show a decrease in yields of over 40%, while agricultural production would simply no longer be viable as our profit margins would be completely eradicated, due to increased costs of production and lower yields. In short, it would, actually cost more money for farmers like me to produce food than we could get in return from the market. My question is, do European consumers and policymakers want to enjoy the same level of food safety and security? Or are we willing to trade it for cheaper imports? Why have we asked our farmers to invest so much of their money and sweat into producing, safe and affordable food and feed? Of course, there are ways for farmers to produce even more sustainably, but such solutions must be developed alongside farmers, not simply imposed on them by politicians in Brussels. Furthermore, any such targets should be preceded by an impact assessment on how such proposals would affect the economic livelihood of EU farmers before their publication, not two years after.

When I follow discussions on the future of food production in Europe, including last week, the key element that is never considered within the debate is the concept of trade-offs. Having access to safe and affordable food is in itself a trade-off. In order for farmers to produce crops, whether conventional or organic, land that could otherwise be designated to increase biodiversity is intentionally set aside for cultivation. The same is true if we decide to change the dominant current food production model. Of course, we can produce food without using chemical pesticides or fertilizers, but it must be underlined that there are very clear trade-offs to such an approach. Without modern crop protection, farmers' yields will decrease. The costs of production will go up as production will be reduced and farmers will be forced to employ alternative techniques. These alternatives would subsequently lead to an increase in food prices while processors and retailers will not purchase fresh fruits and vegetables or raw materials of inferior quality. It would also increase the carbon and environmental footprint, as more mechanical interventions, tillage, and mechanical weeding would have to be performed.

Today, farmers in Europe are just as entrepreneurial as any other sector, perhaps even more so as we must constantly react to a fluctuating market with many variables such as weather conditions or climate change which are completely out of our control. I can assure you that farmers are constantly adapting their production models to balance their land requirements with market demands. All that we ask in return is that before such a decision is made, we look TOGETHER at the trade-offs and listen to the concerns of those who we depend on to put safe and affordable high quality food on the table for all EU citizens and worldwide.

A very concerned EU arable farmer from Finland!

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[file:///H:/Downloads/Copa%20and%20Cogeca%20position%20on%20the%20CAP%20post%202020%20%20\(1\).pdf](file:///H:/Downloads/Copa%20and%20Cogeca%20position%20on%20the%20CAP%20post%202020%20%20(1).pdf)

² https://www.ecpa.eu/media/reports_infographics/low-yield-ii-report