FARM TO FORK: IN SEARCH OF A SOLUTION-ORIENTED APPROACH

SPECIAL REPORT
https://eurac.tv/9REo
The debate over the targets specified in the Farm to Fork strategy (F2F) has inevitably prompted extensive attention, both before and after the strategy was launched.

But the initial focus on the ‘numbers’ of the EU’s new flagship food policy – such as the percentage of cuts in pesticide, fertiliser and antibiotic use – drew the attention away from its constructive aspects.

This means the issue of how the F2F ambitions can be practically implemented has so far tended to be neglected.

However, with the targets set, questions are turning to how these can be achieved in practice.

It is time to move towards a solution-oriented approach, focusing on the ways in which food producers can achieve sustainability standards.

In this special report, EURACTIV.com explores the ways in which innovation and a well-balanced regulatory framework can help to cope with the trade-offs that every transition inevitably presents.
EU farmers: Unlock potential of agricultural drones or risk falling behind

Putting all pieces together is Farm to Fork’s nitty-gritty

Kyriakides: Investments will match EU’s ambition on sustainable food systems

Young farmers need a toolbox ‘as broad as possible’ to achieve Farm to Fork goals

What is the reaction of the pesticides and biopesticides industry to the EU Farm to Fork and Sustainability strategies?
Agriculture stakeholders are calling on the European Commission to update the sustainable use of pesticides directive (SUD) and allow the use of drones for aerial spraying of pesticides.

They stress that this can help farmers reduce their use of pesticides in line with the ambitions of the EU’s new flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy.

The strategy, released in May this year, stipulates an EU-wide target of a 50% reduction in the use and risk of all chemical pesticides by 2030. While this ambition has been welcomed by many stakeholders, questions are turning to how this can be achieved in practice.

One promising solution includes the use of drones for the targeted application of pesticides. [SHUTTERSTOCK]

Continued on Page 5
for years.

Preliminary results suggest that drones could provide farmers with a precise tool to further reduce inputs and increase safety, both for the environment and operators, in line with the priorities of the Green Deal, according to farmers’ association COPA-COGECA.

The association emphasised in a letter sent earlier this year that drones “seem to be a highly valuable tool for precision farming” highlighting that this is particularly the case in vineyards and orchards in steeply sloped areas, where the use of conventional technologies is “difficult or impossible”.

Christoph Raab, executive director of Drone Alliance Europe, told EURACTIV that “a drone can fly extremely low over any agricultural fields (one metre and less), it can fly slowly and maneœuvre more precisely than a helicopter or aeroplane and its rotors create only a fraction of the turbulences a helicopter does”.

Practising precise aerial application of pesticides with drones would “very likely allow a reduction of phytosanitary products”, he said.

Similarly, a 2018 report from the European Commission highlights that the ability of drones to easily adjust their altitudes and flight paths according to the surrounding topography and geography makes them well-suited for crop spraying.

The report also says that “experts argue that crop spraying by drones may be up to five times faster than with regular machinery”.

However, drones are currently not being explored to their full capacity due to restrictive regulation.

The SUD lays out the legal framework for testing the application of this technology.

Although the provisions of the SUD, which was written back in 2009, do not specifically mention the use of drones for pesticide application, Article 9 prohibits the application of pesticides by aerial spraying unless a derogation is granted under special circumstances.

In practice, this means that no forms of aerial spraying, manned or otherwise, are permitted under the SUD.

However, it does acknowledge that a derogation to the ban is possible “where it represents clear advantages in terms of reduced impact on human health and the environment in comparison with other spraying methods”.

This has been taken advantage of by some European countries, such as Switzerland, where authorities have given a three-year permit to the Swiss Agricultural Institute to investigate aerial spraying via drones in vineyards.

But very few testing authorisations have so far been granted at national level under very strict conditions.

Pekka Pesonen, secretary-general of the farmers’ association, told EURACTIV that this “slows down the deployment of this technology in Europe,” while other countries like China, Canada, and the US seem to have gained a “major advantage” in this field.

He expressed concerns that this may “reduce EU farmers’ competitiveness at the international level” in the long-term.

In order to unlock the full potential of unmanned spraying systems, the association is calling on the EU Commission to start a reflection on the current legislation’s adaptability to the latest progress in drone technology through “continuous exchanges with member states and clearer guidance on the application of the directive”.

While it is true that the Farm to Fork strategy says it will revise the SUD to “promote greater use of safe alternative ways of protecting harvests from pests and diseases,” it does not specify what exactly this will entail.

However, EU sources told EURACTIV that the use of drones for aerial spraying is “being considered in the context of the review of the SUD – if benefits are demonstrated and risks are mitigated”. But they say that, as it currently stands, member states have not provided any evidence of benefits of use, or of the general application of pesticides, but only of trials ongoing.

A reconsideration of the SUD is something that Drone Alliance Europe’s Raab considers both desirable and feasible, saying it would “seem quite possible in the light of the above advantages that drones represent over airplanes and helicopters in the context of sustainable use and the exact definition given in the directive.”
Reconciling all the numerous policy areas involved in the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy within one coherent framework has become one of the toughest challenges in the implementation of the EU’s new flagship food policy.

As for any Commission initiatives with impact on various policy areas, the F2F has been prepared based on cooperation and consultation among all Commission services concerned, a Commission source told EURACTIV. In the context of this strategy, the Commission has planned to deliver before 2023 an overarching framework that will provide a basis to ensure policy coherence at EU and national level, as well as mainstream sustainability in all food-related policies.

The framework on sustainable food systems will set out general principles and requirements that will underpin the development of future legislation in food-related policies, including possible reviews of the existing acquis.

As there is clearly an urgency to act, the Commission told EURACTIV that proposals in this specific legislative framework, for which there will be mature preparatory work, will come forward already before 2023. But until then, the issue of coherence between different pieces of regulation forming the F2F and their

Continued on Page 7
coexistence with ongoing EU policies adopted in the past seems to remain questioned by stakeholders and even lawmakers.

**CAP TIMING**

The first problem concerns the compatibility of EU food policy with the landmark EU farming subsidies program, the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP).

According to Yves Madre, a former adviser to the European Commissioner and co-founder of the think tank Farm Europe, the real issue is balancing the timing of the P2F implementation and the post-2020 CAP.

Madre recalled that the CAP reform is currently under negotiation and will be implemented as from 2023, meaning that national strategic plans will have to be finalised in early 2022 to be approved by the Commission in 2022.

However, the EU executive foresees the revision of the pesticides directive with its proposal to be filed in 2022. Consequently, the new legislation that will enforce the Farm to Fork targets on pesticide reduction could not be approved before 2023-24.

For Madre, this will create a situation where the first national strategic CAP plans will be approved taking into account existing rules, but will then need to be adjusted after just two years, jeopardising the certainty that any economic sector needs.

"Every product imported into the EU has to fulfil the same standards as European products, which should be in line with environmental protection, pesticide use and fair wages for workers," Waitz continued, adding that if the imported products do not fulfil these standards, punitive tariffs have to be applied.

**NOT STARTING FROM THE SCRATCH**

The challenge of holding together legislation approved in the past could be easier considering all the good things done so far.

"We don’t start from scratch: we have already lots of useful tools in the current CAP," said Pierre Bascou, director in charge of sustainability and income support in DG AGRI.

He mentioned environment measures, greening, cross-compliance and other CAP instruments that already deliver positive elements for the environment.

"What we want to do in the future is to improve the effectiveness and broaden the scope of these instruments in a more strategic and targeted approach," he concluded.

Likewise, experienced socialist MEP Paolo De Castro said that, for instance, the long process by which the EU is reducing its use of pesticides in agriculture is at an advanced stage.

"We have been doing this for years in Europe, unlike other continents," he said, adding that what the Green Deal says is that the lawmakers need to speed up this process and provide farmers with real alternatives.

"Farmers are ready and able to embark on this transition quickly. But we need to give them concrete solutions," he concluded.
The EU’s determination to become a global leader in sustainability will be matched by investments in solutions to deliver on the commitments set out in the EU’s new food policy, Commissioner Stella Kyriakides told EURACTIV.com in an exclusive interview.

Investments in innovation and research will be part of the many solutions the EU wants to offer to support the transition to a more sustainable food system, the face of the Farm to Fork strategy (F2F) added.

Stella Kyriakides is Commissioner for Health and Food Safety. She spoke to EURACTIV’s Gerardo Fortuna.

Do you think there was too much focus on the targets in the Farm to Fork strategy (F2F), while some other relevant aspects have been neglected from the public perception point of view?

It was indeed clear throughout our work on the strategy that a lot of interest would be focused on the targets. They are understandable, tangible and measurable – and a clear sign of our level of ambition.

However, as you rightly point out, the F2F represents much more than a list of targets. It sets out a roadmap for action. These range from actions on food security, the improvement of animal welfare standards, reducing the pressure of fish stocks in the seas around Europe, to actions on food waste and food fraud.

Whilst initial reactions to the strategy centred on the targets proposed, I am seeing in my regular meetings with all the stakeholders involved that the focus is shifting towards all the various actions we have

Continued on Page 9
It is very encouraging to see the real willingness of our partners along the food chain to engage with us in order to deliver the transformational change our citizens and consumers expect from us.

So, will the focus be more on ‘constructive aspects’ of the F2F from now on, in terms of solutions provided to food producers?

The F2F already clearly identifies the tools and solutions that we will provide to food producers and, as the strategy is implemented at national, regional and local levels, many more will become available.

Our Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) will remain key tools to support the transition to sustainable food systems while ensuring a decent living for farmers, fishers and their families.

Research and innovation will also be key drivers in accelerating the transition to sustainable, healthy and inclusive food systems – and we will invest generously in these areas. We have proposed to spend, under Horizon Europe, no less than €10 billion on research and innovation in the agricultural, aquaculture and food production sectors to find digital technologies and nature-based solutions for the agri-food sector.

The change we envisage with the F2F will not happen overnight, but we have the opportunity to build robust food systems for the future, as well as support a green and sustainable recovery from COVID-19.

Earlier in June, ministers complained about the risk of asymmetries between the new high demands on EU producers and lower sustainable standards of imported products. In order to avoid this scenario, how important is the ‘external’ dimension of the strategy?

The transition towards sustainable food systems cannot be successfully achieved by the EU alone. To raise the sustainability standards globally, we have to work with our international partners, at bilateral or at the multilateral levels, such as through the United Nations and the WTO.

This includes supporting developing countries in their transition to sustainable food systems and making food safety a top priority in future bilateral EU agreements.

We will deploy all diplomatic efforts to establish alliances in the international field to drive the convergence to a global sustainable food system so that EU farmers are not disadvantaged compared to third-country producers.

Reflections on how such environmental issues of global concern could be integrated in the EU’s decision-making on, for example, maximum residue levels for pesticides are ongoing. This could contribute towards ensuring such a level playing field.
Ensuring that food producers are provided with the appropriate alternatives is the best way to make progress in meeting the specific objectives set in the new Farm to Fork strategy (F2F), according to young European farmers interviewed by EURACTIV.

As a long-term strategy, the EU’s flagship food policy will have considerable ramifications on future generations, which can be seen as the true main recipients of the F2F. But this also means that young farmers will be asked to make the lion’s share of the efforts to put the strategy into action.

Young farmers’ organisation, the European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA), took a generally positive but cautious view on the Commission’s ambition to make the European food system the global standard of sustainability.

Continued on Page 11
On Monday (13 July), CEJA’s delegates approved a position in which they insisted on the need for strong investment support to successfully implement the required technological tools and management choices.

Contacted by EURACTIV, CEJA President Jannes Maes said that what young farmers need is a toolbox “as broad as possible” of solutions to lead this transition.

“The larger you make this toolbox, the easier is for different types of farmers to find the right tools to do their part,” he said.

For Maes, the F2F includes some positive elements in this regard, such as a strong commitment towards ensuring full broadband coverage in rural areas, as well as looking at the new plant breeding techniques (NPBts) as “a viable option”.

“However, our general feeling remains that the scope of the tools taken into account is way too limited,” he added.

For instance, investments should be directed not only towards research and development (R&D) but also towards the practical implementation of new technologies on the ground.

As an example, he cited the newest heat detection technology that could offer livestock farmers the option to manage their herds more efficiently.

“That’s very nice, but at the end of the day, it’s very expensive to get things to work,” he said, adding that farmers are also not keen to invest in this kind of innovation due to a lack of knowledge.

NOT (ONLY) ABOUT THE MONEY

Veronica Barbati, national president of Italy’s young farmers’ association Coldiretti Giovani Impresa, welcomed the F2F as an important opportunity to continue on the path toward increased sustainability in farming, but also cautioned:

“This would be difficult without the right financial and political tools,” she said referring to the risks of cuts in the agricultural spending of EU’s long-term budget.

However, she added that there are also non-budgetary related policies that need to be put in place, such as a fairer trade policy and more transparency for consumers.

“We need the right tools at the European level to improve communication between farmers and consumers,” she stressed.

According to her, there are now high expectations for the Commission to “be brave” and carry out a mandatory country of origin labelling, as it will bring consumers closer to farmers and allow them to make informed choices.

NO REDUCTION WITHOUT ALTERNATIVES

There are also dissenting voices, like Eva Marín, a young farmer from Toledo, Spain, who was not at all satisfied with F2F and the Biodiversity strategy.

“I do not understand how the Commission decided to present these strategies in the middle of a health crisis, without knowing how it can affect Europe’s food security,” she told EURACTIV.

Marín asked for a longer transition period to achieve the main objectives – “at least until 2050” – and more flexibility between countries and regions in Europe.

“Spain has lowered its consumption of antibiotics per animal by more than 20% in recent years, while other countries that have done nothing,” she said.

The young Spanish farmer hopes that support for new genomic techniques will gain momentum, saying that this can help farmers to lower their consumption of plant protection products (PPPs), fertilisers and help crops increase their resilience to drought.

“Without alternatives, there can’t be any reduction,” she concluded, saying that these techniques are already used by EU’s competitors in the rest of the world and are not detectable at the borders.

ACCESS TO LAND

CEJA’s Maes highlighted that the Commission failed to address the strongest barrier that young farmers are facing: access to land.

“Targets are essential to the success of any strategy, but it seems that the main way to bring improvements refers to land use,” he said.

For him, addressing the challenge of access to land for young farmers should be a key priority, even in plans for greening agricultural practices.

“If the strategy doesn’t come up with a coherent response to that challenge, it will never be successful,” the young farmer warned.
VIDEOS

What is the reaction of the pesticides and biopesticides industry to the EU Farm to Fork and Sustainability strategies?

Géraldine Kutas, European Crop Protection Association (ECPA) Director General, discusses the industry’s role in the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity 2030 strategy.

She explains how the sector agrees with the direction of travel set out by the European Commission and is ready to play its part in providing solutions for producing enough food sustainably. However, she says that she is deeply concerned by the isolated targets being preceded by an impact assessment.

Her comments reaffirm that ECPA’s members are committed to delivering more with less, and that the industry supports realistic and science-based goals that will help realise a more sustainable food production model in Europe.

Video: https://eurac.tv/9REq