SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS IN THE FARM TO FORK STRATEGY

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Embedding the concept of sustainability in the way we produce and consume our foodstuff represents a challenge for the food systems as we know them today. But it also offers opportunities for growth, once it becomes clear how to lead the transition.

The new von der Leyen Commission wants to ride that wave, charting the way forward towards the climate neutrality objectives by 2050 in its new flagship environmental policy, the European Green Deal.

The first concrete initiatives within this policy framework will be unveiled this spring and one of them in particular, the much-awaited Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F), is expected to pave the way for moving towards a more sustainable food supply chain in Europe.
# Contents

- EU farmers tread carefully on Green Deal, as balance with CAP is not easy stuff  
  - MEP: Green Deal should ensure EU food sector’s competitiveness  
  - Industry’s pathway to more sustainable food systems  
  - Sinkevicius: EU aims to ensure viable food packaging recycling by 2030  
  - Commission bemused by consumer information conundrum
Policymakers are being called to take up the challenge of finding a place for bloc’s farm aid provided under the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the ambitious new environmental flagship policy of the European Commission.

The new von der Leyen Commission wants to set out the way forward regarding the climate neutrality objectives by 2050 through the European Green Deal, whose first initiatives will be tabled this spring.

The European farming sector is expected to play a major role in this wider project and the announced Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F) will be devoted specifically not only to make agriculture practices more sustainable but also to outline a new integrated food policy that involves the other side of the supply chain.

According to the Italian MEP Herbert Dorfmann, coordinator for the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) at the Parliament’s Agriculture Committee (AGRI), the concept of sustainability has now become absolutely essential in farming.

“Nowadays, if a high-value product does not have some sustainable aspects, it cannot be considered as

Continued on Page 6
Continued from Page 5

such,” he told EURACTIV.com, adding that since the farming sector has an interest in producing high-value products, there is this demand for sustainability even there.

Last November, the European Parliament plenary also adopted a non-binding resolution declaring climate emergency, pressuring the Commission and the member states on delivering a sufficiently ambitious Green Deal.

“I fully share the concerns of the MEPs and agriculture needs to contribute to the EU climate objectives towards 2050 and should be part of the solution,” Croatia’s Agriculture Minister Marija Vučković told EURACTIV in a recent interview.

“At the same time let’s not forget the key role of European farmers to provide food security. We need a balanced approach,” she added.

CAP AND THE GREEN DEAL

Agriculture ministers have repeatedly expressed the view that future CAP subsidies could be used for making steps towards carbon neutrality, including by incentivising farmers to take up so-called ‘green’ production methods.

The topic was discussed at the EU Agrifish Council on 27 January, as the EU executive started an analysis on whether its CAP reform proposal, which dates back to 2018, is aligned with the ambition presented in the Green Deal.

“Let me be clear, this is not about amending the proposal,” Agriculture Commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski told ministers. “It is to understand how to position ourselves in the negotiations to ensure that our ambition is achieved,” he added.

The EU’s farm chief also pointed out that the CAP reform must address sustainability as a whole, including its economic and social dimensions, while an adequate budget to support farmers delivering more sustainable farming systems should be ensured.

In her interview with EURACTIV, Vučković also recognised the need to ensure that national strategic plans for agriculture reflect the ambition of the Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy, although all the details will be examined during the inter-institutional negotiations.

NOT FROM SCRATCH

Compulsory greening measures are not new, as they were introduced in the 2013 CAP reform, accounting for 30% of the direct payments budget.

The European Commission has proposed to increase the proportion of the next CAP expenditure dedicated to climate action to 40%, the same percentage contained in the negotiating box of the Finnish presidency.

For Commissioner Wojciechowski, the CAP proposal already contains many elements that can enable the sector to meet the ambitions of the Green Deal, such as the focus on results of the strategic plans, the eco-schemes in the first pillar and the improvements in the conditionality system.

“Sometimes people act like we’re starting from scratch, but where the CAP was implemented in the right way, we already have a commitment toward the environmental protection through the eco-schemes for instance,” MEP Dorfmann said.

On the same page is the boss of farmers association Copa-Cogeca Pekka Pesonen, who said that there is a common denominator in all the recent CAP reforms: “No matter what is done, the common perception is that nothing has been done before,” he told EURACTIV.

“Even when we had the first ‘greening’, some said that we had to do something dramatic and this, from the farmers’ perspective, means adding another layer requirements for less money,” he added.

CAUTION NEEDED

However, farmers have adopted a cautious approach on the F2F since the Commission’s communication of the Green Deal was released last December.

Contacted by EURACTIV, Copa-Cogeca’s Pesonen said that his organisation wouldn’t say anything specific on the F2F as there are still big question marks related to procedural concerns and clarity.

“How to incorporate the F2F in the CAP is not very clear at this stage, as well it’s not very obvious how this would work in concrete terms,” he said.

For Pesonen, it still unclear whether the European Commission can come up with a proposal that actually would enable farmers and the value chain to deliver what they promised in terms of sustainability and consumer added value.

Cooperation with the other side of the food supply chain remains, however, crucial to delivering the climate agenda. “We work as part of the food chain and value chain with all other partners. We need all our partners upstream as much as downstream, all the way to the consumers,” he concluded.
With the new European Green Deal, all actors across the food chain will need to adjust to new EU standards. But policymakers also have to make sure EU industry is protected against unfair competition, MEP Maria Spyraki told EURACTIV.com.

Maria Spyraki is a New Democracy MEP (EPP) and co-chair of the European Parliament Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development. She spoke to EURACTIV’s Sarantis Michalopoulos.

INTERVIEW

**MEP: Green Deal should ensure EU food sector’s competitiveness**

**By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com**

**that national governments often focus on the short-term? What can the EU do?**

The Farm-2-Fork Strategy (F2F) is a key component of the European Green Deal. The European food industry is famous for following specific key standards in order to create safe, nutritious and high quality products as well as for keeping the sustainability standards high.

With food systems currently responsible for almost one third of man-made greenhouse gas emissions, putting food under the spotlight is a step towards the right direction. By updating the current format, the F2F strategy will help reduce emissions and produce a more sustainable food system.

F2F initiative will create new opportunities for all operators in the food value chain. Stakeholders will be benefited from the new technologies and scientific discoveries, combined with increasing public awareness and demand for sustainable food.

The Strategy is in line with the new environmental perspective of the European Commission. It focuses on

Continued on Page 8
the significant reduction of the use of chemical pesticides, as well as the use of fertilizers and antibiotics, setting out specific targets. More products based on the principles of bio-economy and circular economy like fertilisers originate from farming residues (harvest, pruning) and vegetable residues (e.g. peas, green beans), gristmills residues, etc. Ecolabelling will have a significant role in this context, not only to the agricultural and fishery product but also to their entire logistics chain including transport, storage, packaging and food waste.

In the context of this holistic approach that you very rightly mentioned in your question, it is important to note the connection between healthy food and cancer. The intentions of the European Institutions are very clear. President von der Leyen’s political guidelines refer explicitly to “a European plan to fight cancer, to support Member States in improving cancer control and care” and to this end the discussion on the ‘Europe’s beating cancer plan’ will commence in the coming days.

There is already robust scientific evidence that the dietary bioactive compounds found in whole plant-based foods have significant anticancer and chemopreventative properties. With the required adjustments and changes in the food processing system, we could increase the retention of bioactive compounds and thus the chemopreventative properties of whole foods.

**How do you see the role of industry in this process, from production, processing to packaging and transport?**

F2F Strategy is our chance to transform our food industry and our food system for a truly sustainable Europe. Therefore, evolving industries should welcome this initiate as an opportunity to upgrade their business and as their chance to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

Against this background, food and drink manufacturers, as well as dairy, fishery and agricultural sector need to ensure that their business models and strategies are heavily focused on sustainability. This needs to be promoted from top to bottom from the types of machinery they use to the vehicles they use to deliver products whilst also meeting consumer demands.

The food industry should make full use of the great potential of the sustainable finance action plan and the financial instruments of the InvestEU programme.

At the same time, it is important to mention the difficulties that the EU producers will face. The increased awareness of the consumers may result in higher production costs, but it can also be an opportunity for the producers to differentiate their products in the context of alternative production systems.

According to the EU agricultural outlook 2018-2030, a decline of 176 million ha in the total agricultural land is expected by 2030, while the total value of EU agricultural production is projected to grow in volume and value terms.

Whilst, the EU food and drink industry is generally competitive on a global scale since it produces high quality, healthy and safe food, it is rather challenging to maintain its competitiveness given its slower growth in labour productivity and added value.

The Green Deal sets the bar even higher and all actors across the food chain will have to adapt and comply with the new EU standards. At the same time though, it is our role as legislators to protect them against unfair competition when passing new EU laws and negotiating trade agreements with third countries.

**What’s the role of innovation in tackling climate change throughout the food chain? Is the current EU legislation framework supportive of innovative tools? (in agriculture for instance).**

F2F strategy is an opportunity to adopt common metrics and standards. In fact, if we want to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal of a ‘world with zero hunger’ by 2030 we will need more productive, efficient, sustainable, inclusive, transparent and resilient food systems. Nevertheless, this will also require an urgent transformation of the current agrifood system.

The positive aspect of this is the increasing number of corporations that already adopt environmental, social and governance (ESG) methodologies and investments, which are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. In fact, disruptive’ digital technologies such as Blockchain, Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence and Immersive Reality are already being implemented in several sectors. But the so-called ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ (Industry 4.0) with extra further digital innovations and technologies will provide an extra boost.

However, there are challenges to consider in the ‘digitalization’ of agriculture and food value chain. The transformation must be done carefully in order to avoid an increase of a ‘digital divide’ between economies and sectors and between those with differing abilities to adopt new technologies.
As the largest manufacturing sector in the EU, the food and drink industry will be a key stakeholder in the European Green Deal discussions, especially when it comes to the Farm to Fork Strategy. Hubert Weber, president of FoodDrinkEurope, outlines the food and drink sector’s route to more sustainable food systems.

We are at a critical time in our history. We must avoid a damaging rise in global temperatures and loss of biodiversity, while continuing to provide safe, affordable, high quality and nutritious food to a growing population.

Some good progress has been made, but we need to accelerate our efforts to improve the way we grow, manufacture and consume our food and drink products.

As the largest manufacturing sector in Europe, buying some 70% of all EU farm produce, the food and drink industry has an important role to play in the transition towards more sustainable food systems.

Continued on Page 10
This is why FoodDrinkEurope recently published a paper outlining the food and drink industry priority actions and recommendations to support a greener planet, healthier living and thriving business.

**A GREENER PLANET**

Tackling climate change is front of mind for our sector. We support the Paris Agreement efforts to keep global temperature rises to less than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and will take a lead in supporting Europe’s ambitious target to become the first climate-neutral continent in the world by 2050.

In the EU, an estimated 20 per cent of food is lost or wasted. By cutting this waste we can avoid the associated carbon emissions – not to mention the unnecessary stresses on our soils, water and energy sources.

Our sector has committed to contribute to the UN sustainable development goal to halve food waste by 2030, we are also taking actions to eliminate inefficiencies in the supply chain and raise consumer awareness on issues such as date marking.

As a major user of packaging, a circular economy approach on plastic is also a top priority. Last year, 27 million tons of plastic waste was collected across the EU, while only 4 million tons of recycled plastic was used.

As part of the Circular Plastics Alliance, we are working together with the plastic value chain to achieve the EU target to ensure that 10 million tons of recycled plastic make their way into new products by 2025.

We will also continue our work to limit the quantity of plastics and packaging we use and to find sustainable alternatives, while importantly, maintaining the highest level of safety of our food and drink products.

Biodiversity loss is another great challenge. The natural world is an important benchmark of planetary health and it is worrying to see the rapid loss of biodiversity both in Europe and globally. We must protect our forests and strengthen policy for sustainable land-use practices.

As major buyers of raw materials, we also work closely with farmers to ensure that the supply of farm produce is sustainably sourced. At the EU level, we want a robust Common Agriculture Policy that can support the demand for safe, affordable food, while also protecting our environment.

**HEALTHIER LIVING**

Food and drink products are a necessity, but also a pleasure. Today in Europe, we have access to a variety and quality of safe food and drink that our grandparents could only have dreamt of. However, some consumers can experience a lack of balance in terms of the quantity of food they consume, and the lifestyles they pursue, affecting their health.

The food and drink industry is determined to accelerate its actions to encourage balanced diets and an active lifestyle. Innovation is central to further optimise the nutritional content of products, to develop new nutritious food products and to respond to consumer demands.

Also, identifying ways to further enhance clear and correct food information to consumers, including through digital means, will continue to be an important area for the industry.

**THRIVING BUSINESSES**

The industry is also diverse, with 50 per cent of sector turnover generated by more than 290,000 small and medium sized enterprises across the Continent.

We are also a global industry. The EU is the world’s largest exporter of food and drink, with exports having almost doubled over the past decade. Given we also rely on ingredients from farmers around the world – cocoa from West Africa for example – we are working to carry out due diligence to ensure global supply chains are fair and sustainable.

**PART OF THE SOLUTION**

We are at the beginning of an ambitious new decade. Over the next few years, the European Commission will drive the European Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy to ensure sustainable growth across the region.

Meanwhile, the international community has ten years to meet the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and tackle the most pressing global issues of the day. The food and drink industry has the ideas, innovations and the desire to be part of the solution. We count on all stakeholders to act with us to succeed.
The Circular Economy Action Plan and the Farm to Fork strategy (F2F) have the same overarching objective of reducing unsustainable resource use by promoting sustainable production and consumption and reducing waste generation, Environment Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius told EURACTIV.

The Commission plans to table both initiatives in the first quarter of this year, according to the work programme released on 29 January.

Contacted by EURACTIV, the young Lithuanian Commissioner said he is working with his colleagues at the Berlaymont to ensure that the F2F initiative includes circularity principles at its core.

“One of our key commitments is to prevent food waste,” he said, adding that the EU executive wants to ensure the EU’s contribution to one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to reduce by 50% the per capita global food waste by 2030.

Continued on Page 12
The Commission adopted in 2019 a food waste measurement methodology and will work towards setting an EU-wide target for food waste reduction, based on the data collected by member states.

“There is potential to reduce the generation of food waste all along the value chain – in primary production, in processing and manufacturing, in retail and other distribution of food, in restaurants and food services as well as in households,” Sinkevičius said.

“We have to promote ways to distribute food that simultaneously deal with the problems of food waste and the rising levels of packaging waste,” he explained.

The Commissioner added that his team is working on amending the EU legislation to ensure that packaging, including the packaging used by the food and beverage industry, is recyclable and reusable in an economically viable manner by 2030.

When addressing the food system, the EU should aim to adopt a comprehensive approach that will also look at the ways we keep food fresh, according to Sinkevičius.

An important step would be tackling the plastic packaging problem and prescribing the use of recycled plastic.

Last year, the EU signed off on measures that include bans on single-use plastic plates, cutlery, expanded polystyrene food containers, beverage cups, balloon sticks, straws and cotton bud sticks.

The proposal was one of the most quickly finalised pieces of legislation in recent EU memory, highlighting Europe’s willingness to be a global leader in tackling plastic marine litter.

“We definitely want to expand the rules for single-use plastics and are currently investigating in which direction it would be possible,” Sinkevičius said.

Europe’s food and drink lobby group, FoodDrinkEurope, agreed on the need to develop a holistic and coordinated approach from farm to fork involving everyone.

“The concept of a circular and sustainable economy should be reconciled within the Farm to Fork Strategy, whilst ensuring that Europe remains the world leader in food safety,” said Laura Degallaix, director of environmental sustainability at FoodDrinkEurope.

For her, an effective transition to more sustainable food systems requires addressing the three pillars of sustainability in a coherent, consistent, and integrated manner, acting throughout the entire food chain and at all geographical levels.

In a letter sent by EuroCommerce to Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides, seen by EURACTIV, the retailers’ organisation asked the Commission to work towards a circular economy by better enforcing the agreed targets, with member states.

“The approach needs to be practical and balance environmental objectives with the need for safety and convenience, and enable the Single Market to function,” the letter said.

On the same page, the association of European consumer co-operatives, EuroCoop, consider it key to couple climate-smart, resource-efficient food systems with strong empowerment of communities.

“We believe that the concept of circularity should be fully embedded in the upcoming Farm to Fork Strategy,” the Secretary-General of Euro Coop, Todor Ivanov, told EURACTIV.
The European Commission has started sketching the new EU-wide food labelling scheme, expected to be proposed in the context of the new Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F), but the debate over what kind of information to provide to consumers has just started.

It is still not clear whether the labelling system the Commission is about to propose will have mandatory information on nutritional aspects only or if there will be space for other information on sustainability or animal welfare.

Contacted by EURACTIV, Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides said the Commission will propose actions to help consumers choose healthy and sustainable diets, as it is stressed in the Green Deal communication.

The Commission’s main aim is to explore ways to give consumers information to help them make more sustainable choices, Kyriakides confirmed.

“I am fully aware that consumers want to have access to maximum information, in a clear way, and if possible on the labels, on the food that they are buying in stores,” she said.

Kyriakides added that the EU food labelling system is already very

Continued on Page 14
Continued from Page 13

transparent and that in the context of providing more information to consumers they’ve also seen some voluntary initiatives, “including on environmental aspects.”

So far, the main discussion at the EU level has been about which kind of nutritional label will be mandatory, with a battle raging between the Nutri-score system backed by France and Italy’s counterproposal called Nutrinform battery.

French Nutri-score converts the nutritional value of products into a code consisting of five letters, from A to E, each with its own colour, while Italy’s Nutrinform indicates to the consumer the nutritional contribution in relation to the daily needs, as well as the correct dietary style.

Nutri-score raises some environmental concerns, as meat products often have a high Nutriscore due to a high content of protein, despite the high emissions linked to livestock farming.

Nutri-Score is backed by EU consumer organisation BEUC, which has explained that the scheme only aims to make nutrition information easy to grasp for consumers and that it is currently impossible to integrate environmental concerns in the Nutri-Score calculation.

“But as consumers are increasingly interested in the environmental impact of their food, a separate label could do the trick,” BEUC’s senior communications officer Pauline Constant told EURACTIV.

According to her, Nutri-score alone should not be seen as a silver bullet that will make consumers shift to more sustainable diets. “For this to happen, decision-makers must make sure that choosing sustainable food is affordable, easy and attractive,” she added.

The EU already tried to adopt methodologies to measure products’ environmental footprint (PEF) as part of the efforts to move toward a green single market.

Several industries have tested the PEF in practice in a Commission-led pilot phase, putting in place different approaches in order to identify those that could work best.

According to Europe’s food and drink lobby group, FoodDrinkEurope, consumers should be further empowered to become participants in the transition towards more sustainable food systems and climate neutrality.

“For instance, the correct sorting and disposal of packaging waste is a vital step in unlocking a more circular economy, one which cannot be achieved without the active participation of consumers,” said Laura Degallaix, director of environmental sustainability at FoodDrinkEurope.

But consumers increasingly demand more information about the conditions in which the animals whose meat they eat have been raised and slaughtered.

There have been a number of national voluntary schemes implemented in different member states. However, a corresponding legislative framework has yet to be initiated at the European level.

At the Agrifish Council on 27 January, the German delegation called for the creation of a transparent and harmonised EU-wide animal welfare label, arguing that this will “significantly increase consumer confidence in the labelling of animal products.”

They argued that the creation of an animal welfare label would also open up a new market for farmers to sell products produced to higher animal welfare standards and would lead to an improvement of animal welfare in livestock husbandry.

This proposal was supported by several other delegations, including Spain, Denmark and Italy, the latter saying that such a label would help the “growing number of citizens” who would like as much information as possible about animal welfare in order to make informed choices on both the nutritional and ethical aspects.

The European Commission was invited by the Council conclusions to assess the need for and impact of an EU regulatory framework with criteria for animal welfare labelling schemes taking into account national experience.

Speaking at the Council, Health Commissioner Kyriakides said she would consider the German delegation’s proposal for EU wide labelling, saying that proposals to go beyond existing animal welfare rules and regulations will be part of the Farm-to-Fork strategy, due to be released this spring.

Considering all nutritional, environmental and animal welfare aspects that must be taken into account, some stakeholders are also tempted by the potential of digital tools for providing information to consumers, in order to avoid long and unwieldy food labels.

“It would be important to increase especially the digital agenda capabilities within the value chain to make sure that the consumers can make an informed choice all the way to the primary producers,” said Pekka Pesonen, Secretary-general of farmers association Copa-Cogeca.
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