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e-fa: News Round-Up

news bulletin from the European Free Alliance Group in the European Parliament

February 2013 Round-Up

The European Free Alliance (EFA) draws together political parties fighting for democracy and self-determination for the stateless nations and regions of Europe. European Free Alliance MEPs sit in a European parliamentary group with the Greens, making up the fourth largest group in the European parliament.

EFA MEPs are:

Jill Evans MEP - Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales (EFA Group President)

Ian Hudghton MEP - Scottish National Party (EFA Group Vice-President)

Mark Demesmaeker MEP - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie

François Alfonsi MEP - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie

Ana Miranda MEP - Bloque Nacionalista Galego

Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party

Tatjana Zdanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia

Highlights this month include:

- EU wide fisheries reform
- New MEP joined EFA Group
- Calls to ban pesticides that threaten bees
- Children's linguistic rights

- MEPs want peace for Kurds
- EFA MEPs visit Galicia
- Horsemeat scandal response
- Investigating environmental issues in Galicia
- Innovation in active and healthy ageing welcomed

EU wide fisheries reform

SNP President **Ian Hudghton** welcomed a key vote in the European Parliament earlier in February as an important step on the road to reform of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy.

The vote was on the main regulation which will govern the management of European fisheries for the next decade. MEPs voted in favour of returning substantial powers to Europe's fishing nations and rejected attempts by the European Commission to turn historic fishing rights into tradable concessions.

The Parliament must now enter negotiations with the Council of Ministers and the Commission with a view to finalising the reform.

Mr Hudghton commented: *"The existing CFP is completely discredited and the ongoing reform is vital for our coastal communities. The one-size-fits-all centralised approach has failed our fishermen and failed Europe's fish stocks. The European Parliament has thrown its support behind a meaningful return of powers to the individual fishing nations and rejected continued rule by diktat from Brussels.*

"The parliament has also completely rejected Commission proposals for fishing rights to become tradable commodities. These proposals would have seen fishing quotas bought and sold on the international markets - and could have seen Scotland's historic rights swept up by the Spanish fleet. The parliamentary vote marks a significant step in fixing the broken system but important work lies ahead. A final deal must now be reached between MEPs and Europe's fisheries ministers, and there are vested interests who will continue to try to derail the process."

New MEP joined EFA Group

The EFA Group welcomed **Mark Demesmaeker** from Flemish nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) as its newest MEP.

The N-VA is the largest party in Flanders, and in Belgium, and works for an independent Flanders in a strong European Union. Mark replaced Frieda Brepoels who stood down to become Mayor of Bilzen in the Flemish province of Limburg.

A member of the Flemish parliament until taking his seat in Europe, Mark serves on the European Parliament's Committees on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, and on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety. He is also a member of the parliament's Delegation for Relations with Japan.

Jill Evans MEP (Wales), President of the EFA Group, said: *"I'm pleased to welcome Mark to the EFA Group, and to pay tribute to Frieda Brepoels for her outstanding work in the European Parliament over many years. This is a crucial time for Europe's stateless nations with many exciting constitutional developments taking place across the continent. It's more important than ever for nations like Flanders and Wales to have a strong voice in Europe, and I look forward to working with Mark on a range of issues."*

Mark Demesmaeker MEP said: *"I look forward to working with my colleagues in the EFA Group during what is a crucial period for the European Union and of course for Flanders. I believe in a European project*

that respects the diversity of languages and cultures, the identity of every national community, and genuine subsidiarity. As a resident of the Vlaamse Rand (the Flemish ring of municipalities around the capital, Brussels) I have always campaigned passionately in defence of the Dutch language, and for a truly green and open environment. I now look forward to continuing that work at European level."

Calls to ban pesticides that threaten bees

EFA MEPs **Jill Evans** (Wales) and **Alyn Smith** (Scotland) took an active interest in calls to ban certain pesticides that have been blamed for declining bee numbers. Both backed a partial ban and Alyn supported calls for further investigation.

EFSA, the European Food Safety Agency, recommended the ban after studying evidence of the risk to bees. There has been concern for some time in the scientific community about declining bee numbers, and the wider effects of this for farming and food production. The European Parliament's Agriculture Committee heard evidence from EFSA experts this month.

The British Beekeepers Association estimates that because of their role in pollination, one third of the food we eat would not be available but for bees. They put the value of the 'bee economy' in the UK at an estimated 200 million pounds annually.

This new generation of neonicotinoid nerve-agent pesticides has been blamed by some for declining bee populations, and EFSA has recommended banning three types of this pesticide.

Agriculture Committee member Alyn Smith (SNP) said: *"It is up to us as legislators to make a call on the balance of the evidence available proportionate to the scale of the risks involved, and I've been concerned to see some MEPs parroting what is in effect lobbying propaganda as if it were gospel handed down on tablets of stone.*

"The worrying decline in bee numbers is, at least in part, caused by toxic chemicals sprayed on our fields. I simply do not see how any other conclusion is possible based on the evidence available, not least after the EFSA study found clear links between the use of the chemicals and damage to bees. I back the European Commission's proposals for a partial ban on the most risky uses of these chemicals, but I also want to see a lot more research and if we're proven to be over-cautious then we can relax the ban."

Jill Evans (Plaid): *"After a thorough and wide ranging expert study, EFSA has concluded that certain types of these pesticides pose a serious enough risk to bees that they should be banned.*

"Bees play an important role more widely in promoting a sustainable environment and declines in the their numbers are a matter of serious concern. The worry is that the chemicals would harm their ability to pollinate crops, which could be devastating for the agricultural industry and food production."

Children's linguistic rights

MEP **Tatjana Zdanoka** supported the case brought by a Russian speaking Latvian to the European Parliament's Petitions Committee this month. Elena Antonova resides in the Netherlands. She brought the case after her children were removed from her care, with language used as a reason.

In her petition, Ms Antonova says: "By removing the children from my custody because of our language and by depriving the children of the possibility to communicate in their native language, the Dutch authorities have violated the prohibition of direct discrimination by language as well as indirect discrimination by ethnic origin and nationality".

The Petitions Committee heard the case as part of a number of petitions from the Netherlands and Denmark concerning parental rights in cases where parents are of different nationalities. All petitioners referred to the alleged violations of the Charter of Fundamental Rights prohibiting discrimination by ethnic origin and nationality.

MEPs want peace for Kurds

EFA MEP **Mark Demesmaeker** (N-VA, Flanders) urged the European Commission to take an active role in bringing about a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

Turkey's Kurdish people have long been involved in a campaign for self-determination and respect for their national and language rights. Regrettably this has often been marked by violence and bloodshed. EFA MEPs have called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

The issue has been in particular focus lately following the brutal murder of three female Kurdish activists in Paris and the start of talks between Turkey's intelligence services and Abdullah Öcalan, held prisoner on Imrali island. It was also noted during a debate in early February in the European Parliament that hundreds of Kurdish prisoners in Turkish jails went on a 67 day hunger strike in 2012 calling for better rights for Kurds in Turkey. They also called for better conditions for imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan.

Speaking during the debate Mark Demesmaeker (N-VA, Flanders) said:

"Once more it seems that the solution to the Kurdish question lies in Turkish hands. And if the signals about the Imrali peace process are right, then perhaps Ankara has come to realise that with Abdullah Öcalan it has the key to a Kurdish solution in its hands.

"But we must be cautious. When Turkey opens one door to democratisation, another is slammed shut. Whilst there have certainly been some positive developments, they have been too few and far between and too slow in coming. Political persecution has continued, and the detention of anyone who criticised the government has led to the world's largest prison for journalists.

"So I say to the Commission, Council and EU Member States, do not be blind to these risks, but remain strong in your support of a sustainable political dialogue with all Kurdish political forces."

EFA MEPs visit Galicia

Some EFA MEPs took part in a working visit to Galicia in February at the invitation of BNG MEP **Ana Miranda**. They took part in a public debate on sovereignty and the right to decide held at the Marco Museum in Vigo.

The MEPs also visited the town of Pontevedra which has recently been awarded a prestigious European prize for its innovative development of sustainable intermodal transport.

Horsemeat scandal response

EFA MEPs **Jill Evans**, **Alyn Smith** and **Mark Demesmaeker** were supportive of EU measures to tackle horsemeat contamination in the food chain. The European Commission is undertaking wide ranging DNA testing across the continent to assess the problem and reassure consumers.

EFA MEPs emphasised the importance of buying locally as a means of dealing with the issue. They also emphasised that this is an issue of apparent fraud, rather than a public health question. Robust traceability and labelling are vital in protecting the food chain and consumers, said the MEPs.

Jill Evans (Wales) said: *"In Wales, our meat is a high quality product and we must intensify efforts to promote Welsh produce. Whilst ensuring that consumers can be confident that food is labelled correctly, there are valuable long-term lessons which we can take from this crisis. DNA testing has an essential role in ensuring that we know the magnitude of this scandal and measures are taken to prevent this happening in future.*

"New EU food labelling legislation will come into force in December 2014, with the aim of increasing transparency about the origin of food sold on the EU market. However, I would like to see more done on every political level in Wales so that we enable more people to buy locally to help the Welsh economy as well as the environment."

The SNP's Alyn Smith said: *"Incidents such as the horse meat saga, and the reports of halal produce containing pork, work to undermine the faith of EU consumers in the safety of the food chain and strengthen calls for more robust, precise and a compulsory method of food labelling which clearly identifies the origin of the product."*

Mark Demesmaeker (N-VA, Flanders) commented: *"Consumer safety is our key concern and the consumer must be able to have confidence in what's printed on the label. In this instance, the consumer has been betrayed. So far, this has been about fraud and there is no evidence so far of a risk to public health. The problems seem to lie in the areas of enforcement and monitoring and this must be addressed urgently by the European Commission and the competent authorities.*

"We should also guard against an overzealous regulatory response that would adversely affect small scale producers when the key issue is to tackle the fraud, and restore consumer confidence."

Investigating environmental issues in Galicia

Latvian MEP **Tatjana Zdanoka** took part in a visit of the Petitions Committee to Galicia to look into complaints of contamination in a number of estuaries, and the implications in EU law.

The visit looked at the situation in Vigo, Ferrol and O Burgo estuaries. Local authorities have been criticised for not doing enough to comply with EU directives on water quality. Galician MEP **Ana Miranda** also joined the visit. She criticised the the Galician authorities for cutting funding for water purification schemes.

Innovation in active and healthy ageing welcomed

Flemish nationalist **Mark Demesmaeker** is supportive of European Commission plans to foster innovation in active and healthy ageing.

Mark took the floor on his first day in the European Parliament to speak out on the matter, emphasising how engaged his own nation of Flanders is on this issue.

Mark said: *"An ageing population poses huge challenges, but also opportunities. I welcome that active and healthy ageing has been chosen as a pilot project for the European Innovation Partnership, with support on strategic implementation from the European Commission. I strongly believe innovation has a crucial contribution to make in this regard, benefitting both citizens, entrepreneurs and society as a whole. Whilst the Parliament's report has several positive features, I regret that it is missing a clear focus on innovation and a targeted response to the proposals of the Commission."*

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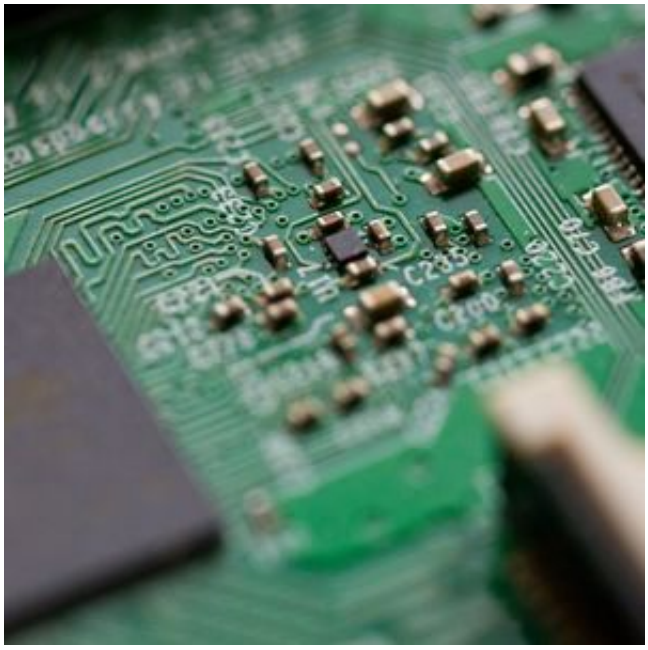


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