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Towards an ambitious and ecological re-localisation of protein crops in the EU

It is no news that one of the main problem of the EU farming system is the huge insufficiency of locally grown protein crops. Only 3% of arable lands are dedicated to protein crops in the EU and we import 75% of our vegetable protein supply - soya for the most part, mainly from Brazil, Argentina and the United States. In 2014, the Union's overall protein deficit was 20.8 million tonnes[1], and it has been increasing steadily since then. The consequences of this situation go far deeper than a simple trade question.

This strong imbalance between needs and production originates from a trade agreement between the European Community and the USA dating from the 60's, when EU accepted to let enter free of tax soya and other protein crops from the US, in exchange for the USA buying our cereals. The agreement was confirmed in 1992 within the framework of the GATT[2]:

This commercial decision had devastating consequences, especially for farmers and consumers all over the world and for the environment. Its principle favours long transports of huge amount of crops through the ocean, polluting the waters and aggravating climate change. It has also, as was highlighted recently by [a report](#) from the NGO Mighty Earth, dire impacts on the countries producing these protein crops like Brazil and Argentina. The genetically modified protein crops, and in particular soya, are heavily treated with pesticides and herbicides, polluting soil and water, destroying biodiversity and causing intolerable health problems to the farmers and the rest of the local population. It is also a major factor in deforestation, strengthening even more the impact of this trade on climate change.

This problem has been on the table for years (see for example this [European Parliament's report](#) from 2011) but it did not lead to any decisive action. The inclusion of the possibility to grow protein crops on Ecological Focus Areas[3] in the framework of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) has led to an increase of the production, but it is still acutely insufficient.

A [new report](#) voted today in the European parliament is calling the European Commission to put stronger measures in place. These include a mandatory 3-year minimum rotation with non genetically modified protein crops, the diversification of protein crops (lupine, peas, chickpeas, alfalfa...), the introduction of leguminous plants in grasslands, the support by the EU of infrastructures to store and transform protein crops, measures to foster growing of protein crops on the farm or locally (as is done in organic farming), and finally a strong support for research.

All of these measures would represent a notable improvement. However, the Greens/EFA do have some

concerns with the report, as well as complementary proposals to make.

For a start, the way it addresses the disastrous environmental and health impacts these productions have in South America, by proposing “sustainable criteria” for imports might be tricky: which criteria are we talking about, and who will control them? An additional measure could be to label the meat, dairy products and eggs from GMO-fed animals, allowing the consumers to make an informed choice. In addition to bring a much needed transparency, it would quickly weed out the dirtiest productions.

If the Greens/EFA obviously support the re-localisation of protein crops production in the EU, our aim is not to re-localise also the disastrous impacts, which means working globally on reducing the quantity of pesticides used. Therefore, we cannot understand why this report calls for the authorization of use of pesticides and herbicides in Ecological Focus Areas, which would annihilate all the benefits of this measure for biodiversity^[4].

The question of Biofuels is not appropriately dealt with. Growing protein crops for biofuels will not help feeding our farm animals, and will on the contrary aggravate even more the current competition between food and energy for land use and drive pressure on land elsewhere, leading to deforestation. Reducing the gap between demand for vegetable protein and production will also require to reduce our demand.

This means we also need to address the elephant - or rather the cow - in the room: the [overall consumption of meat](#) in the European Union (on average [65 kg per year per capita](#)). It is far exceeding what is [good for our health](#), the excess nutrients emitted pollute water, and it uses huge surfaces of arable land (currently including recently converted tropical forest and savannah) to produce animal feed, which could be used to produce food for humans instead, or for much-needed forests for CO2 sequestration and biodiversity. Yet the idea of a “deficit” is misleading as the current level of production is unsustainable simply because of the sheer scale of resource use currently dedicated to meat production. The question here is not be against meat in itself, just to be reasonable enough: eating less and better animal products, produced from well cared-for animals with locally produced feed, within the carrying capacity of their environment. This is an issue we need to tackle.

The Greens/EFA are supporting a shift from a chemical, meat based food and farming system towards a fairer, agro-ecological one. They will address these proposals publicly to Commissioner Hogan in a few days and will support them in the coming months, in particular in the framework of the discussions around the CAP.

^[1] The EU consumption of protein crops minus what it produces, plus what it exports

^[2] General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade: a legal agreement going from October 1947 to January 1995 between many countries, whose overall purpose was to promote international trade by reducing or eliminating trade barriers such as tariffs or quotas.

[3] Areas representing 5% of any farm arable land which should not be cultivated (and thus not receive any pesticides), in order to foster biodiversity

[4] See [this letter](#) sent by 22 members of the European Parliament to Commissioner Hogan and all Ministers of agriculture and the environment of EU member states

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