News | 13.06.2017

More food needed?

Just replace pesticides with biodiversity!

Every day we hear about biodiversity loss. But did you know the EU can also help slow it down?

Recently, the European Commission proposed to ban pesticides on ecological focus areas (EFA). Those areas were originally intended, as part of the last Common Agriculture Policy reform, to bring back biodiversity on a tiny portion of conventional farms (5% of the arable land), and to deliver key ecosystem services useful for farming. Unfortunately, a group of conservative MEPs want to block this progressive move. The European Parliament will vote on this on Wednesday June 14th at noon.

Making biodiversity work for farmers is good for farmers, good for bees, good for climate, good for the economy, good for you ... and the Greens/EFA group has always been a frontrunner in pushing in this direction. It has been shown (*) that so-called functional biodiversity on farms increases yields 12% for wheat, 26% for peas, 32% for carrots. Impressive, isn't?

So how does that functional biodiversity work to increase yields? Here's the science: to name a few examples, it's due to increased pollination efficiency because more flowers (or "weeds") and less pesticides means more pollinators; or it's due to more regulation of populations of crop pests by natural predators, so they are kept in check and don't boom (think of ladybirds eating aphids, or parasitic wasps laying their eggs inside caterpillars then the larvae devour them from inside!); or it's due to more beneficial species underground in the soil defending crops and helping deliver nutrients to their roots, and so on.

The rule of thumb is: the greater the abundance and variety of species, the stronger and more resilient are these emergent ecosystem functions, provided "for free" for farmers. These ideas are fundamental to what is called "agroecology".

These agroecological processes based on biodiversity already occur in principle on organic farms, and for that reason organic farms were considered “green by definition” and so are not obliged to fulfil the CAP greening measures that include EFA. But in conventional agricultural systems, where lack of natural fertility, productivity and pest control are replaced by dependency on chemical inputs, we desperately need to strengthen these processes such as pollination, topsoil formation, nutrient cycling and carbon sequestration, regulation of the water cycle reducing flood and drought risk, as well as controlling pest populations via predation, in order to be more resilient against climate change and to ensure productivity in the long term.

A major benefit is that rather than reducing yields by “taking away farmland” from the primary aim of growing crops, it actually increases yields by making the existing farmland more efficient and productive. This is what some conservative MEPs don’t want to see happen because they cannot see the bigger picture and are towing the agro-chemical line that doesn’t want to challenge the status quo of extreme pesticide dependency that ensures profits for the chemical corporations.

Because pesticides kill not only the intended pests but also non-target species of animals, plants, bacteria and fungi as collateral damage, and we need the biodiversity in order for those ecosystem functions to work, it stands to reason that we should not be using products with detrimental impacts on biodiversity. So when the Commission came along with the idea of making the Greening rules fit for purpose by prohibiting pesticides on EFAs, we welcomed it: we had been calling for it back during the last CAP reform, so that these areas could actually work properly in the agroecological sense.

Along with of a dozen simplification measures also included in this one delegated act which will make life easier for farmers and the administrations implementing the rules on greening the CAP, the European Commission is for once showing an enlightened and strong political will.

On Wednesday we are calling upon MEPs to vote against pesticides in EFAs by voting against the rejection motion. On the day of the vote but also in the future CAP and food policy reform, our group will try to build alliances to create and preserve long term productivity and intrinsic fertility of our food production systems through agroecology.

(*) https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/sites/agri-eip/files/eip-agri_fg_ecological-focus-areas_final-report_en.pdf

See Wäckers *et al* in that bibliography

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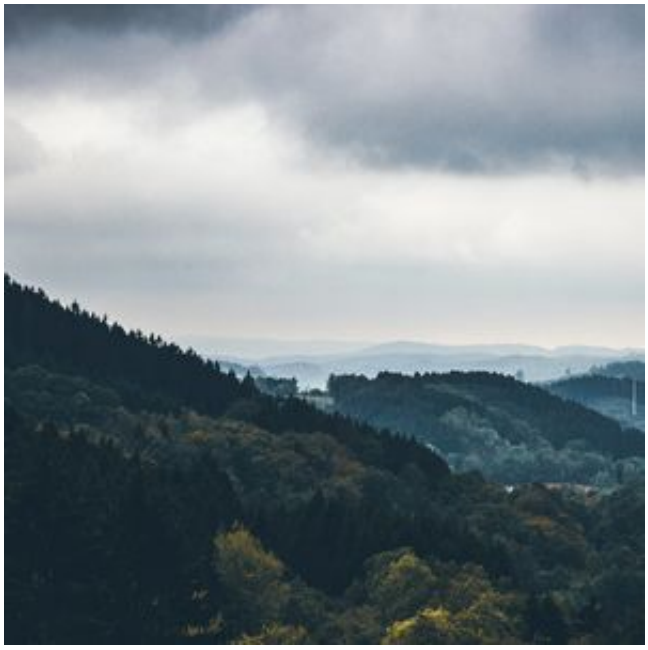


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