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Organic food and farming

Driving force towards paradigm change for our broken food system

Crucial role of organic farming in a sustainable food system



The promotion of organic food and farming has been one of the European Greens' core values since entering the European Parliament in 1984. Green activists have become involved in a broad range of citizen's initiatives for more sustainable farming practices, healthy food, animal welfare, bans on agro-chemicals, preservation of soil fertility, clean water and sustainable use of biodiversity. Green parties have supported these movements throughout the past thirty years. Likewise, the Greens/EFA group's European food campaign has promoted organic farming as a viable alternative to further industrialisation of agriculture, which is ever more dependent on fossil fuels, pesticides and artificial fertilizers. Moving towards organic production methods and a better balanced relationship between plant and animal production is also the foundation for a more resilient food system in times of [climate change](#). No single political party in the European Parliament would today question the extraordinary success story of the organic sector. The market for organic products has [expanded](#) fivefold in the past 20 years with higher growth rates than reached in the conventional sector. Supermarkets also use organic food to lure additional consumers. However, this success carries substantial risks:

- Consumer demand is much higher than what European farmers can offer.
- The rate of conversion towards organic is relatively slow, given the risks farmers face during conversion time and due to the narrowing profit margins for organic farmers compared to conventional farmers;
- Costs for labelling and controls are still mainly carried by producers;

- Smaller and decentralized facilities needed for smaller production quantities also increase the disadvantages of smaller producers on the market.
- Competition with conventional farmers for land and market access has increased significantly. On top of that, imports from third countries have created a trend towards structural change in the food processing and marketing scene which raises questions about the survival of smaller organic farms and shorter food chains.

Commission proposal heavily criticised

The European Commission published its [proposal](#) for a new organic regulation in March 2014, just before the end of the former legislative period. Former Agriculture Commissioner [Dacian Ciolos](#) had earlier raised concerns about irregularities in the fast growing organic food chain. He argued that consumer confidence in organic products could be undermined by increases in detection of fraud at larger animal production units and in imports from third countries. The Commission also highlighted possible problems with parallel production chains of conventional and organic products in primary production, processing, trade and marketing, which could carry the risk of undetected non-compliance with the organic regulation. The Commission's proposal came in for criticism, especially from the organic sector. Firstly, it was questioned whether a completely new regulation was really necessary, only a few years after the last regulation came into force. Critics instead expressed preference for a recast of the regulation currently in force. Secondly, the new structure and certain new rules for production, control and marketing were criticised for making the life of organic farmers more difficult and complicated, with as possible consequence organic farmers leaving the sector rather than new farmers entering. Thirdly, the proposed stricter rules on thresholds for pesticide residues were rejected on the basis that the organic sector cannot be made responsible for contamination from conventional farming or other sources and thus carry costs of additional controls or market withdrawal. The organic sector argues that as long as there are no clear and reliable provisions for precautionary measures or compensation for losses incurred by organic farmers, there should be no specific residue thresholds for organic farming.

Greens support the dynamic and innovative development of the sector

Over the past months, we have discussed these concerns with the organic movement but also with animal welfare groups and a wide range of stakeholders. We believe that we have taken into account a broad range of concerns and proposals and have chosen not to go for a complete rejection of the Commission proposal - as some representatives of the organic sector suggested - because we believe it is better to try to seize this opportunity to improve the proposal. We hope that by supporting the main line of our proposals, the Parliament can create a more ambitious approach for the future of organic farming than is in the current regulation. While our [report](#) deals mainly with technical questions concerning the regulation's scope, production rules and control requirements, we also wish to use it to widen support for organic farming as a driving force towards paradigm change and a shift away from the current broken food system. As Greens, we have taken up the challenge of drafting the report on organic farming for the following reasons:

- We want to make sure that the success story of growing organic markets does not weaken the viability of organic farmers in the same way as conventional farmers who are increasingly losing out, with shrinking margins in the food chain and dependence on increasingly unfair marketing conditions and contracts;
- We want to ensure the sector maintains its good reputation and consumers' trust even when doubts are raised about overly flexible interpretation and implementation of production rules and controls, while imports of cheaper raw material from third countries jeopardise the quality of organic production;
- Longer-term, we must make sure that organic farming plays a pivotal role in a complete paradigm shift towards an EU sustainable food policy. Organic farming is currently tolerated as a niche sector or exception from the existing conventional system. However, it must continue to

fundamentally challenge the conventional farming system and the CAP and demonstrate its validity as an alternative to an intrinsically unsustainable conventional farming system.

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