



## Next generation agriculture – Harnessing alternative solutions for the SUR



Wednesday 5 July 2023, 16:15 – 18:00 CEST

Hybrid Event (Brussels, Belgium & Online)

**Co-hosted by MEPs Franc Bogovič  
& MEP Ulrike Müller**

**Vice-Chairs of the European Parliament Intergroup on ‘Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development’**

### Speakers:

**MEPs Franc Bogovič, Ulrike Müller**

**MEPs Juozas Olekas, Sarah Wiener**

**Andrew Owen-Griffiths**, Head of F3 Unit on ‘Plants and Organics’, DG SANTE, European Commission

**Laurent Oger**, Deputy Director General, CropLife Europe

**Peter Meedendorp**, President, CEJA

**Heinz-Joachim Höfer**, Member of the Municipal Council of Altenkirchen (Westerwald) & Rapporteur for the Opinion on SUR, Committee of the Regions (CoR)

**Elena Ambühl**, EU Affairs Manager, Agroecology Europe

**Carsten Schmidt**, Chair of the Agriculture WG, EurEau

**Jelte Wiersma**, Secretary General, CEMA

## Welcome Remarks – MEP Franc Bogovič

***“The EPP group does not see the proposal as suitable for further consideration, as there are still solutions missing”***

To begin the event, **MEP Mr. Bogovič** stated his shared commitment to the protection of our environment and sustainable agriculture, as a small farmer himself. Mr. Bogovič emphasized that the EPP group sees the proposal as unsuitable for further consideration. One of the reasons for this opinion is that the group does not think that agriculture is the sector where big revolutions are possible and clear some solutions are still missing. Mr. Bogovič also pointed out that the use of pesticides decreased about 33% in the EU within the last four years. Another important aspect for him are smaller farmers for whom it is not easy to introduce new procedures like precision farming. Mr. Bogovič also mentioned issues related to financing and the lack of adequate fundings in the EU on agriculture, while also stating that farmers are not enthusiastic to be dependent on EU fundings for their economic stability.

## Panel Discussion

***Andrew Owen-Griffiths, Head of F3 Unit on ‘Plants and Organics’, DG SANTE, European Commission***

***“The proposal is not a total ban on pesticides but a transition towards a more sustainable use of them”***

**Mr. Owen-Griffiths** said that the SUR is part of a package of actions, held in the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies of the European Commission, that are necessary for a more sustainable agriculture in Europe. Sustainable agriculture is necessary to protect biodiversity, water, soil, wildlife, pollinators but also human health. Mr. Owen-Griffiths emphasized that the Commission is not proposing a total ban on chemical pesticides but that the proposal is part of a transition towards a more sustainable use of pesticides and the use of lower-risk alternatives.

***Laurent Oger, Deputy Director General, CropLife Europe***

***“The SUR is a piece of legislation that can further unlock the potential of innovation”***

**Mr. Oger** explained that CropLife Europe believes that innovation can be a possible future solution for the farmers. The SUR is a piece of legislation that can further unlock the potential

of innovation, mainly in terms of bio-pesticides and digital-farming. CropLife Europe would prefer to go a step further, for example in the suggestions made in the proposal concerning **Integrated Pest Management (IPM)** that were overall positive, but an extra layer adding the digital angle to this uptake would be a big plus.

*Peter Meedendorp, President, CEJA*

***“Young farmers have been committed and pro-active to the use of sustainable plant protection products and the application of integrated pest management”***

**Mr. Meedendorp** introduced CEJA as the association representing **European young farmers**. CEJA hopes to see the establishment of **a clear pathway towards use and risk reduction** inclusive of all farmers. Moreover, the implementation gaps of the 2009 directive add a lack of clarity surrounding the definition of integrated pest management. Mr. Meedendorp emphasized that the translation from theory to practice needs to be made. Alternatives to chemical protection are needed and Mr. Meedendorp hopes that this gives CEJA the opportunity to uptake **liable, reliable and affordable alternatives**. At the moment, CEJA highlights a lack of adequate tools for farmers particularly when it comes to knowledge and investments.

*Heinz-Joachim Höfer, Member of the Municipal Council of Altenkirchen & Rapporteur for the Opinion on SUR, Committee of the Regions (CoR)*

***“In order to produce more to insure food security in the long term, biological control is THE solution”***

**Mr. Höfer** said reducing the use and risk of chemical pesticides would help to **better fight against pests**, help **farmers to become more resilient** as these pesticides are now very expensive and to **protect our health, environment and biodiversity**. Mr. Höfer pointed out that in order for us to be able to produce more to **insure food security** in the long term biological control is THE solution. He mentioned the Solar Cut project that shows that there are many examples of pests that cannot be controlled by chemical pesticides anymore, since they have become totally resistant. Mr. Höfer stressed that in cases like this **biological control is the only effective tool remaining** for intensive production systems.

*Elena Ambühl, EU Affairs Manager, Agroecology Europe*

***“Agroecology can maintain and improve agricultural productivity, produce healthy food, reduce the negative impact of agriculture on ecosystems and human health”***

**Ms. Ambühl** said that agroecology is a systemic response to not only the questions that are concerned with pesticides but also for the different challenges that our food system in Europe is facing. Ms. Ambühl said that they have the scientific evidence that shows that agroecology can **maintain and improve agricultural productivity, produce healthy food, reduce the negative impact of agriculture on ecosystems and human health**. It can also **improve the economic viability of EU farms and improve the adaptation and mitigation towards climate change and provide responses to the loss of biodiversity**. For Agroecology Europe the SUR is the occasion to **align EU policies regarding agriculture and food systems with scientific evidences**.

*Carsten Schmidt, Chair of the Agriculture WG, EurEau*

***“Groundwater has a long memory. Once contaminated it takes years or decades to regenerate”***

**Dr. Schmidt** explained the importance of SUR for the drinking water sector. Pesticides are found in several ground water bodies and surface waters all over Europe. Dr. Schmidt emphasized that groundwater has a long memory and once contaminated it takes **years or decades for the pesticides levels to improve again**. As multiple previously non-relevant metabolites were classified as relevant from one day to the next he said that we cannot rely on this kind of classification and as a consequence EurEau and other actors have to comply with other limit values from one day to the next as well. This means that there is **no sufficient planning reliability** and they are not able to quickly adapt the drinking water treatment. As a consequence EurEau hopes for a strong SUR that covers the drinking water protection zones.

*Jelte Wiersma, Secretary General, CEMA*

***“It is important to take care of the farmers, as they are the ones who provide us with food”***

**Mr. Wiersma** highlighted two points regarding the SUR in his intervention. The first one being that farmers are also entrepreneurs, and therefore they cannot take too many risks related to

their yield production. Secondly, Mr. Wiersma said that the European Commission did a great thing with how technology can play a part in this. If there would be one framework for sprayers at the European level, their production would be simpler and standardized, allowing for cheaper costs of production. Moreover, the newer techniques of the sprayers would be more precise and less chemicals reliant.

**Question to Mr. Owen-Griffiths: Could you shed some light on the political deadlocks surrounding the SUR and provide some insights whether the European Commission will be able to successfully deliver on the SUR before the end of its term?**

**Mr. Owen-Griffiths** answered that there are very extreme and polarized views on pesticides which is why it is difficult to align different stakeholders' views. He said that the central answer to that question should be found in the response of the European Commission to the request of the Council for additional data on the sustainable use of plant protection products published that day. So far the more sensitive topics, like setting up targets seem to be the most difficult issues to engage with. Ultimately whether they can and will deliver within this term comes down to the cooperation and the response of the Parliament and the Council.

**Question to Mr. Oger: How can we effectively combine the tools available to farmers, including the promotion of IPM and the advancements in innovation and technology while simultaneously improving authorization timelines?**

Mr. Oger noted that it was very positive to see the publication by the Commission a few months earlier on the first centralized database of IPM practices and specific guidelines per crop. Mr. Oger said the lack of resources or even the lack of trust between member states are key known bottlenecks when it comes to authorisation of further solutions. He also mentioned that, accessibility for farmers for bio-pesticides can take up to seven years, so it can be a very time consuming process. He also called for adaptations of guidelines and scientific evaluations to their specificities.

**Question to Mr. Meedendorp: Considering digital and precision agriculture, does CEJA perceive the SUR as a catalyst for developing alternatives that benefit future farmers?**

Mr. Meedendorp explained that four aspects need to be tackled. **Responsibility** terms of public and private research and development, as well as market placing. **Adaptability** of solutions which means user friendly, integrated within existing systems and equipment and of course

scalable. **Inclusivity** of all sectors, as well as **accessibility**. Alternative tools often come with a higher cost, so investments are needed. Training programs and advisory services can support farmers to uptake these tools.

**Question to Mr. Höfer: What strategies can be employed to maximize the utilization of funds for promoting innovation, fostering alternative development, and driving the transition towards more sustainable agriculture, all while ensuring local-level development without affecting CAP funds?**

**Mr. Höfer** answered this question by stating that the national strategic plans lack ambition when it comes to reducing the quantities of pesticides and that the CAP budget for agri-environmental measures will not be sufficient. The proposal of CoR is the creation of a new national fund for pest management that could be financed by a risk-based taxation on pesticides, by contributions of retailers, or by penalty payments. He also stressed that farmers have to be protected from unfair competition. Mr. Höfer criticized that for most bilateral agreements the measures set out are non-binding and no penalties are provided for non-compliance.

**Question to Ms. Ambühl: In the context of the challenges faced in building a fair framework for farmers, how does agroecology offer solutions that promote resilience, sustainability and equity in the agriculture sector and what are some concrete examples of successful agroecological practices and their benefits for farmers and the environment?**

Ms. Ambühl explained that the agroecological transition is a process with three main logics: improving efficiency, substitution and redesign. She said the redesign of agri-food-systems is the most efficient logic for more sustainability and resilience and agroecology can be put in this stage. When it comes to agroecological cropping practices, restoration of soil health, organic fertilization and intercropping are very important. Ms. Ambühl ended by stating that agroecological systems are fit for the next generation agriculture because they can sequester carbon, maintain and restore biodiversity, create jobs and help with generation renewal as well as improve farm working conditions.

**Question to Dr. Schmidt: Is it possible for innovation and alternatives to a conventional pesticide such as biopesticides to play a role in mitigating the impact of agricultural practices on the quality of drinking water?**

Dr. Schmidt said that when it comes to biopesticides the market and areas of applications are very limited so far and they need to prove that they are as effective as the chemical pesticides and need to be affordable. It is also important that there is proper risk management and regulation for these substances in order to avoid “regrettable substitutes”. Substances need to be non-toxic and fully degradable. EurEau does not think that one solution is enough but that a mix of measures is needed.

**Question to Mr. Wiersma: Could you discuss the role of DPA and machinery in reducing the reliance on conventional solutions. What are the latest innovations in machinery and what do you see for the future?**

Mr. Wiersma explained how electronic-nose technologies are very important for better and more precise spraying, as chemicals have to be as effective as possible while as little as possible are used. He pointed out that crop mapping, as well as permits and bureaucracy are important. Mr. Wiersma said that the transition has to be slow and taken step by step. He also mentioned the example of Austria that has 25% ecological agriculture but also uses the toolbox of forbidden chemicals the most.

## Reactions of MEPs Sarah Wiener and Juozas Olekas

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**MEP Mr. Olekas** mentioned that our society also has to provide food for the poorer population and preserve land and resources for the future generations. He talked about the importance of cooperation between beekeepers and farmers to preserve pollinators, reduce the use of chemicals and keep our bees and farms healthy and happy. Mr. Olekas also pointed out that 25-40% of the annual crop production is lost to pests and diseases, without protection these losses could be doubled, so farmers should be given the opportunities to protect their crops by other means, like bioproducts or agroecology. Research and innovation play a key role to make agriculture systems more sustainable and resilience. He also said that more funding and adjustment periods for farmers are needed to find alternatives and implement them. Differences between the different countries of the EU in terms of the use of pesticides need to be taken into account as well, so the regulations will be fair.

**MEP Ms. Wiener** started by responding to Mr. Wiersma’s statement about Austria. She said that the fact that there are 25% organic farmers and the fact that neonicotinoids are used there can’t be put into relation with each other that easily, as organic farming means that no

chemical-synthetic pesticides are used. Ms. Wiener then went on to saying that technologies like precision farming are not the central point and ambition of the SUR. Farming practices should change in such a way that the need for pesticides is significantly reduced. The key is implementing IPM based on sound agro-ecological principles across the EU, so as to free farmers from their dependence on expensive and harmful chemical pesticides. While technological innovations can certainly help us on the way to reducing pesticides by making the application more precise, they do not help us to tackle the systemic issues that have hampered the uptake of truly sustainable farming practices thus far.

## Q&A

A question from the German farmers association asked Ms. Wiener a question about the progress in her negotiations. **Ms. Wiener** said that they are still in negotiations and there is a lot of pressure and many discussions, so she cannot give precise information, as she takes it day-by-day. There is progress, but the result will only be seen at the end.

A representative of the **International Biocontrol Manufacturers' Association (IBMA)** mentioned that Europe is one of the worst places for bio-control practices, many of their partners would rather invest into practices like this elsewhere (US, Canada, Brazil) and this has to change. He asked the MEPs if they think that a compromise can be reached in this important legislation and that allows them to do something about this unfortunate situation? **Mr. Bogovič** agreed with his statement and stated the importance of smaller farmers again. He said that agro-ecological practices have to be driven forward to be able to reduce synthetic pesticides and funding for such practices is important.

## Closing Remarks – MEP Ulrike Müller

***“To achieve a more sustainable agriculture a systemic approach is needed”***

Ms. Müller explained that when discussing the SUR, we need to take a step back and move towards system thinking. Local farmers need access to all the tools to further improve and adapt the integrated pest management flexibility. This will include new alternative plant protection products, but it will also require other tools such as more resilient crop varieties precise agriculture technologies such as drones, digital agriculture and so on. Only a combination of different approaches can lead to success. Ms. Müller thinks that **two key mistakes were made in the SUR proposal**: the proposal sets reduction targets before all



necessary steps were taken to ensure that all the alternatives find a way to the fields. She said that we are missing guidance on promising categories of substances, the approval process is far too lengthy and we need a fast track procedure. Secondly, the proposal missed the chance to be an encouraging and enabling framework for farmers to do better. There are barely any incentives for farmers, aside from the advisory services that already exist. Instead, the proposal seeks to achieve its goal by a punitive approach, by reducing flexibility and adding loads of administrative burdens. She ended by saying that we need to overthink our approach and stop looking at the proposal in an isolated manner.