

Informal Meeting of Agriculture Ministers

1. September 2020 Koblenz, Germany

“Lessons learned from the coronavirus crisis - resilience of the agricultural and food sectors, appreciation of food, agriculture, and animals”.



1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest global challenges of our age and has already fundamentally changed society, politics, and the economy. We must learn from our experiences of the COVID-19 crisis and together lay the groundwork to ensure that the European Union can respond even better to challenges of this kind in the future.

During the current coronavirus crisis, many people have become more acutely aware of the role that agriculture and rural areas play in ensuring food security. The sight of temporarily empty shelves has made consumers more aware of how important a reliable food supply and the food's origin is and of how valuable safe food and the work of food producers is. It has become clear how important a productive agricultural sector, functional food chains and a crisis-proof food supply are. The coronavirus crisis has highlighted the food chain's systemic importance.

The increased appreciation of agriculture and its products must be maintained and nurtured. In the next few years, agriculture will be faced with the challenge of bringing together food security and the provision of services in the areas of environmental conservation, climate change mitigation and animal welfare that society demands. Agriculture will only be able to do so, however, if providing these services is profitable and can be implemented at farm level in a feasible way. Policymakers must set the framework conditions for corresponding investments by providing support and incentives under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This also presupposes that the consumers are willing to pay higher prices for more services in the fields of environmental conservation, climate change

mitigation and animal welfare. It is therefore crucial that the services provided by agriculture are clearly visible: Providing reliable information and transparent labelling is key to enhancing appreciation of food and consequently enhancing consumers' willingness to pay higher prices.

2. Resilient supply chains – strengthening food security

Including in crisis situations, consumers must be able to rely on a steady supply of food. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been bottlenecks and disruptions regarding the free movement of workers, the transport of perishable goods, the supply of packaging materials and the formalities of cross-border trade.

It is only the cross-border integration of supply and production relationships for final, intermediate and important input products such as seeds, planting material or fertiliser that allows for a needs-based supply that consumers from all Member States expect. If such well-established supply chains are interrupted – as happened during the COVID-19 crisis – companies as well as policymakers must make great efforts to rebuild them. It has become evident that a functional European internal market and open international markets are key prerequisites for resilient supply chains. At the same time, there is growing interest at regional and EU level in making the supply of food, feed and vital intermediate goods more independent.

Restrictions in the flow of goods and the freedom of movement of workers thus jeopardise the vital strategic goal of dependably supplying the population with food – in particular if they are imposed in an uncoordinated manner and without involving the competent bodies for the agri-food industry. Policymakers should respond by strengthening the

European internal market and maintaining diversified, rule-based trade relations while promoting regional economic cycles and strengthening self-sufficiency.

The COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to identify structural deficits in the supply of agricultural goods, food and means of production and to address these with targeted and sustainable solutions.

For example, the EU is highly dependent on imports of protein feed or certain active substances for veterinary medicinal products from third countries. There may be a need for a joint initiative to tap the potential of domestic production, leading to greater stability of the supply chains while taking into consideration the rules of the internal market, international trade agreements and production efficiency. This initiative could be based on targeted CAP support or the expansion of research and development in respect of innovative and sustainable production methods and production technologies. Developing new site-adapted plants could offer a solution, while the opportunities provided by new breeding techniques could also play a role. Greater digitalisation could contribute to making processes within the food supply chain more efficient and stable.

Question: In your opinion, what do we primarily need to change to make the food supply chain more resilient to crisis-related disruptions in the future? Do you see any need for action to strengthen the independence of food supply within the EU, ranging from inputs, production and processing to marketing?

3. Fostering regionality – Making the origin of products visible

The coronavirus crisis has also shown that eating and shopping habits change in times of crisis. The importance and appreciation of regional food have increased. Consumers are showing great interest in the origin of products and many wish to buy regional products. It is important to pick up on this trend for regionality and regionally produced food since it contributes to strengthening regional value chains, particularly in rural areas. Regionality strengthens the link between consumers and agricultural producers, shortens transport routes, helps to close nutrient cycles, fosters regional value added and protects jobs in rural regions.

Origin or provenance must be reliable and clearly visible. EU law, i.e. the Food Information Regulation, already stipulates that mandatory information on origin and provenance must be provided for fresh, chilled and frozen pigmeat, sheepmeat, goatmeat and poultrymeat. There are specific provisions on the declaration of origin, for example for honey, certain fresh fruit and vegetables, beef, eggs and fish. The EU launched provisions relating to regions, such as the protection of geographical indications, to protect and foster traditional and regional food products. Businesses have developed their own labels that provide information on the origin of products.

Still, when doing their daily food shopping, many consumers wish for improved readability and comprehensibility and better information on the origin of processed ingredients such as eggs.

In connection with the trend towards regionality, there are also discussions on whether there is a need for an additional, reliable, readily comprehensible and non-discriminatory label, in particular regarding the

country of origin for milk and for products containing milk and meat. This label would need to protect and strengthen the European internal market, which is the cornerstone of our agri-food industry's success story. It would need to be non-discriminatory, to not hinder cross-border trade, and to comply fully with WTO rules.

Question: In your opinion, in which areas should the labelling of origin be improved first? How can better labelling help consumers without impeding the free movement of goods within the internal market and while being compliant with WTO rules?

4. Animal welfare and animal protection on farm and during transport

While society's appreciation for the services provided by agriculture has risen during the pandemic, expectations regarding animal-welfare friendly livestock husbandry have also grown. Many consumers wish food labelling to provide information on the welfare of the animals during husbandry, transport and slaughter. According to surveys, the willingness to pay more for such factors has increased. For this to happen, consumers must be guaranteed that the food is produced to animal welfare standards that are clearly higher than the minimum statutory requirements.

Having a statutory system based on animal welfare criteria for labelling food of animal origin enables consumers to decide what to buy based on this label, while farmers have the chance to tap new sales markets and improve animal welfare in livestock husbandry.

There are already labels at European level, such as the EU organic logo which gives organic products a uniform visual identity throughout the EU. So far, there are only a few labels at national level that focus specifically on animal welfare. A European animal welfare label could close this gap.

In its Council conclusions on animal welfare of 16 December 2019, the Agriculture Council stated that the positive animal welfare labels already established in some Member States have been well received by consumers. The Council highlighted that it was necessary to ensure transparency and credibility regarding the animal welfare labels that already exist.

It is one of the presidency's particular aims to discuss and proceed with the introduction of an EU-wide animal welfare label. To this end, the presidency is seeking to establish a European legal framework with mandatory criteria for animal welfare labelling.

Question: What does an EU-wide animal welfare label need to deliver? How should the label be structured? What criteria should the label be based on?

With regard to animal transports, there are a number of well-known animal-welfare problems in addition to the crisis-related challenges. Central is the authorisation for the transport of the animals; the quality of information regarding duration and route as well as concerning staging points is often questionable. Conditions regarding loading and unloading, transport duration, care of the animals and staging points must be animal

welfare-friendly. Local authorities often have only insufficient information on which to base their decisions.

Transport conditions for animals must be improved, in the interest of animal protection and in light of citizens' expectations. It must be ensured that no livestock transport from the EU is approved unless it can be guaranteed that animal-welfare regulations are complied with.

Question: What does the EU Commission need to implement so that animal transports can be carried out in an animal-friendly way? How do you see the future of animal transports?