

Save Bees and Farmers official hearing - European Parliament, 24 January 2023

Dr. Helmut Burtscher-Schaden (Global 2000, AT)

Dear Members of the European Parliament, dear Commissioners,

Save Bees and Farmers is only the 7th European Citizen's Initiative (ECI) ever to collect the required million statements of support - but already the 2nd aiming at pesticide reduction - reflecting the great public interest in this topic. A big thank you goes to all who made this possible, to the more than 200 small and big NGOs, and to the 1.1 million Europeans. Thanks also to you, dear decision makers, for having us here today.

We launched our ECI in 2019, the year in which the Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO presented a comprehensive study on biodiversity and agriculture, warning in unusually stark terms of an accelerating biodiversity loss that – quote - “threatens the future of our food, livelihoods, health and environment, and puts food security at risk”. So what can we do to prevent this?

The scientists of the IPCC and the World Biodiversity Council are pretty much in agreement: Transition is the magic word, meaning: If we want to preserve the world as we know it, we have to change the way we deal with it: reduce food waste, switch to more plant-based diet, produce in a climate and biodiversity-friendly way. Reducing pesticide use is a necessary prerequisite for the latter.

This is the reason why Save Bees and Farmers is calling for an 80% pesticide reduction by 2030 (and phase-out by 35), for the restoration of biodiversity in agriculture, and for support of farmers in the necessary transition towards agroecology. For the same reason, in 2020 the EU Commission has made the halving of pesticide use and risk a key measure of its biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategies, followed by a legal proposal to make it binding for member states.

For us, as initiators of Save Bees and Farmers, these were exciting developments: After three decades of repeatedly setting pesticide reduction targets and failing to meet them, the EU finally seemed determined to make it right. Nevertheless, it is with concern that we stand before you today, dear decision makers! Because the EU pesticide reduction plans are under serious threat. The origin of this threat may be that halving the use of pesticides will halve their sales on the European market. For pesticide manufacturers billions are at stake.

It is therefore not surprising that big industries like Syngenta, Bayer or Corteva, while talking a big talk about supporting the Green Deal, in reality pull out all the stops to torpedo its measures, by sponsoring webinars and having them hosted by influential media, by placing ads there and - most importantly - paying scientists from prestigious universities to conduct one-sided "IMPACT ASSESSMENTS" (which then warn of negative impacts on the economy and food security).

Much more surprising to me is when interest groups that are supposed to represent the interests of farmers, join forces with industry to fight the Green Deal. That is exactly what f.e. the biggest European farmers lobby did in October 2021, when it developed a detailed communication plan on how to use industry-paid assessments in order to overturn - at the last minute - an already politically agreed positive position on Farm to Fork targets in a plenary vote in the European Parliament.

Fortunately, this reprehensible action was exposed in time by lobby watchdog Corporate Europe Observatory on the basis of documents that had been leaked or accessed through freedom of information requests. In the end, the plenary vote brought big support for the Farm to Fork strategy and its goals. Thank you for that, dear Members of the Parliament!

However, the attacks on legally binding reduction targets continued, coming from certain Member State governments and some members of this house. Already in 2020, we observed with growing concern how

some MEPs of the currently largest group in parliament used the pandemic as an argument to declare a food crisis in order to postpone the shift to a sustainable food system.

Today, it is the terrible war in Ukraine that serves the same purpose. Even more concerning - and saddening - is when the Chair of the AGR Committee (from the same political group) - who is absent today - tells the media that [quote] "he would prefer the Commission to conclude that its proposal is not tenable and withdraw it completely".

The proposal to reduce pesticides is not only tenable, it is without alternative. Its open questions can be fixed, as with any other proposal, in the course of the co-decision procedure. We simply need to reduce pesticides and restore biodiversity if we want to secure the future of our food, livelihoods, health and the environment.

Therefore, I appeal to you on behalf of the 1.1 million supporters of our ECI, knowing from eurobarometer polls that their concerns are actually shared by a majority of Europeans. I appeal to you on behalf of my kids and all the other kids who will feel the consequences of our actions or inactions the most, and who probably would have signed the ECI if they had been old enough [...]: Dear MEPs, please examine your political decisions, examine every amendment on the pesticide reduction and nature restoration law and every other legal file you vote on to see if it aims to curb biodiversity loss and climate change or if it does the opposite. And if you are unsure, please listen to the science, not the industry. And if vested interests tell you that change is impossible, look to farmers who are already in the midst of transition. And with that, I turn the floor over to the experts.

Dr. Jeroen Candel, associate professor, Wageningen University (NL)

Honourable MEPs,

Thank you for having me here today. On behalf of 700+ scientists, from across European member states and scientific disciplines, I come to share our deepest concern about the recent turn of the political tide in relation to the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation.

As you've just heard from my colleague, prof. Geissen, the heavy use of chemical pesticides in agriculture is strongly linked to declines in insects, birds, biodiversity in terrestrial and aquatic systems and detrimental impacts on global public health. Given the urgent need for mitigating these impacts, it is worrying to observe that a number of Member State governments and MEPs have recently called for the delay or watering down of the new pesticides regulation. Citing questionable 'food security' and 'resilience' concerns, that echo the discourse of vested interests, politicians have called for an additional impact assessment to the thorough assessment performed by the Commission before the outbreak of the Ukraine war.

Let me be very clear: there is not a single, serious scientist in the field, who would argue that the pesticides regulation would pose a risk to European food security. Quite the contrary, there is a high degree of consensus that the rapid loss of biodiversity, together with climate change, constitutes the biggest threat to the sustainability and resilience of our food system, as once more corroborated by the European Commission's recent staff working document on the drivers of food security. It is precisely for this reason that both European citizens and scientists have high expectations of your political leadership.

It is highly questionable whether the required additions to the thorough Impact Assessment performed by the European Commission would result in a gain in knowledge, as the long-term challenges facing the EU food system and state of biodiversity have not changed since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Perhaps the unstable geopolitical environment has made these challenges and the need to act even more urgent. The time to act is now.

And, of course, new legislation will have an impact on the industry and at farm level. It is precisely the point of green legislation to steer the market away from unsustainable business models and production methods, while fostering a scale-up and cost reductions of cleaner alternatives. A lack of binding targets is exactly the reason why investments in Integrated Pest Management have lagged behind since the adoption of the 2009 Pesticides Directive. The adoption of binding targets and a reallocation of public resources, including CAP funds, is expected to accelerate innovation of non-hazardous pesticide alternatives.

Steering our agri-food system towards more sustainable outcomes is no easy political task. Transition processes are non-linear, uncertain and disruptive by definition, which make that current modes of impact assessment have limited predictive value. Tomorrow's solutions are not yet known today. At the same time, the history of the European economy, including the agricultural sector, teaches us that disruptive innovation is possible, and can benefit both the economy and society at large, when politicians dare to take the leap and show seamanship. When drafting the first European agricultural policy, Commissioner Sicco Mansholt aimed for a radical overhaul of the European agricultural sector, but even he may not have foreseen the sheer force of innovation that clear and consistent, long-term regulation and supportive incentives may bring about. At the end of his political career, however, he also saw the downsides of the agricultural system that he helped to create. Already 50 years ago, he called for a transition towards "a production system without pollution and the development of a circular process".

It is now up to you, to finally pick up on Mansholt's calls, and use your political craftsmanship to realise a truly green revolution of the European food system. The undelayed realisation of the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies' pesticides reduction objectives would be a crucial first step in that direction. As scientific community, we will follow the legislative process with great interest, and we stand ready to provide you with advice where and when necessary.

Thank you for your time.

Madeleine Coste (Slow Food EU, Food Policy Officer)

Dear Members of the European Parliament.

Thank you very much for your many questions and statements. I am Madeleine Coste, representing Slow Food, a global grassroots food movement present in over 160 countries, which includes a network of small-scale producers, cooks, citizens, activists, agronomists, working towards a good, clean and fair food system, and I am very happy to be able to speak to you on their behalf.

There were many many questions and statements made so I won't be able to answer to many of them, but I would like to make 4 points to address some of the concerns shared by Members today. First, I take note that many Members of Parliament have chosen to perpetuate a classic FALSE narrative that civil society organisations and environmental organisations are working against farmers.

This is simply untrue – our organisations dialogue closely with producers across Europe, and we know first-hand the challenges that they face, and their desire to work WITH nature and not against it because they know very well that they are the first victims of climate change, and that producing food won't be possible if soils are deteriorated and if pollinators have disappeared. Just this Saturday, the yearly demonstration 'Wir Haben es Satt – we are fed up' took place in Berlin, where over 10,000 people walked WITH farmers who came from all over Germany, to demonstrate against our industrial food system.

Second, The ECI's first demand is to have an EU binding target of reducing the use of pesticides by 80% by 2030, and phasing them out by 2035. Since the implementation of the Sustainable Use of Pesticides

Directive in 2009, pesticide consumption has not decreased, on the contrary, in several EU Member States has increased. We cannot continue on without an ambitious EU wide target. We have heard many say that the target of reducing the use of synthetic would lead to food insecurity in Europe. This was already addressed by Professor Candle at the beginning of the hearing – it is unsustainable food systems that will drive food insecurity, and this was well detailed in the Commission analysis on the drivers of food insecurity which identified that ‘the current high input intensive agricultural model, based on chemical pesticides, is likely to pose a food security threat in the medium term due to a loss of biodiversity, the likely increase in pests, decline in soil health and loss of pollinators which are essential to agricultural production.’ You have just heard from Jean-Bernard Lozier, that he was able to cut out 80% of his own use of pesticides. Not only does it bring him and his family financial benefits, but also health, happiness and meaning. AND, he explained this was relatively easy to do! We could not invite all the farmers who have already made this transition to integrated production, here today in the Parliament. But, of course, there are countless farmers who have made this transition to significantly reduce the use of pesticides, or in the process of adopting agroecological practises. We need to mainstream these practises so all farmers can adopt them.

Third, some Members seem to think we are calling on the Sustainable Use of Pesticide Regulation to act in isolation. But the reduction target doesn't come out of nowhere – it is one of the many pieces of the Farm to Fork Strategy. Is it possible to phase out the use of pesticides with the way our food system currently works? No. Alongside a pesticide reduction target, we need to transform the way we farm animals, reduce the amount of food losses and waste we generate, address trade policy, and make sustainable and healthy diets the easy, affordable and most convenient option. Reducing pesticide use will require a transformation of our food system, but this will bring many benefits for health, environment, animal welfare, and, of course, farmers themselves.

Finally: I started working in this field only a few years ago, but I understand that what we have today is a classic pattern of agro-industry pushing for an intensification of food production whenever there is a natural or geopolitical crisis. We cannot simply delay this transformation of our food system and wait until this crisis has subsided. My generation is not naïve – we know new crises will keep coming, and perhaps even more frequently than today. If EU leaders decide to drop the ambition to cut down on pesticides, the whole EGD will be lost and the credibility of EU institutions towards citizens will equally be lost. With the European elections right around the corner, you cannot afford to refuse to listen to European citizens.

Martin Dermine (PAN Europe), main representative of the ECI

I would like to once again thank the European Parliament for hosting this hearing, and listening to our demands that were massively supported by civil society movements across the EU. I would also like to thank the secretariats of the Agriculture and Environment Committees of the European Parliament, for the organisation of the hearing.

Since the European Commission has published its proposal for a 50% reduction in pesticide use and risk, we have heard a lot of alarming and false information on food security and food sovereignty, that are not backed by science. On the contrary, these scaremongering messages are contradicted by science and empirical evidence show that cutting pesticides in Europe by at least 50% is feasible in practice, by implementing knowledge-based Integrated Pest Management, as well as by bringing back nature into our fields to control pests, rather than destroying it. 50%, 30%, 80%, sometimes these figures give the impression we are in the middle of a game of chance.

This tends to make us forget what pesticides are designed for: to kill. Their aim is to kill pests but they also kill beneficial living organisms: bees, pollinators and other beneficial insects or birds that feed on insects and that in turn help controlling crop pests. They also kill humans or make us sick. No later than last week, a new major US study pointed at the fact that the presence of glyphosate in farmers' urine is highly

correlated with their level of oxidative stress, that favours cancers. Numerous publications also point at the colossal societal costs linked to pesticides: by destroying our health (endocrine disruption, carcinogenicity, toxicity to reproduction), reducing farmers' revenues on the short and long run (costs of agrochemicals, destruction of pollinators and soil biodiversity).

As mentioned by my colleague Helmut Burtscher in his introduction, we have the honour today to represent more than 200 organisations throughout the EU and the 1.1 million Europeans who signed to support a pesticide-free agriculture, where agricultural productions and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive anymore. This movement was preceded by many other actions: at national level, the Marcia Stop Pesticidi, Nous voulons des coquelicots, Rettet die Bienen. Last weekend, the Wir haben es satt movement gathered more than 10,000 citizens in the streets of Berlin, asking for an agriculture that respect health, the environment and farmers themselves. At EU-level, apart from the STOP glyphosate ECI from 2017, regular Eurobarometers (chemical residues in their food) + Conference on the Future of Europe (drastic reduction in pesticide use).

As these numerous actions throughout the EU show, pesticides are a major source of concern among citizens. As civil society organisations, we are often confronted to the distrust of citizens against decision makers, and to the lack of coherence between what is promised and what happens in the field. Why does it take 25 years for the European Union to ban neonicotinoids? Why do they receive derogations if it is shown they are too toxic? Why does it take 5 years to phase out a pesticide once it is classified as toxic to reproduction, and thousands of pregnant women keep being exposed to them for years?

Citizens feel that the EU is not protecting them and their environment. Today, through the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation, the European Commission finally proposes a plan that initiates a journey towards the needed transition of our agriculture towards pesticide-free agroecological practices. The Nature Restoration Law proposal is a clear response to the concerns of a majority of citizens that want to hear good news: that politicians in the EU have the capacity to agree on a positive project, turning their back to the vested interests of some agrochemical companies and the farmer unions that follow them, instead of favouring the long-term well-being of their farmers.

From the questions and reactions we received today, we note that, from a series of political groups, and sadly both, the spokesperson on agriculture and the vice-chairperson of the Committee on Agriculture have confirmed today that they put the interests of 'industry farming' above the interests of farmers' long-term interests, as well as maintain profits on the back of citizens' health, the environment, as well as long-term food security.

Luckily, we also heard today, a series of opinions that are science-based and that give hope for the EU to finally initiate a gradual transformation of its agriculture towards sustainable practices. Overall, constructive feedback from MEPs prevailed. Dear Members of the European Parliament, in October 2021 you welcomed the F2F targets with a broad majority. The European Parliament has over the last 2 decades taken a positive and precautionary position with regards to pesticides, through requests for more protection for pollinators, or through the important work carried out in the frame of the PEST Committee in the previous legislature.

We are therefore confident that this Parliament will also support an effective reduction in pesticides and a restoration of biodiversity. And there is one thing we can promise. Encouraged by the 1.1 million signatories of the ECI, and knowing that the majority of Europeans is actually sharing our concerns, we will not stop demanding pesticide reduction. Because – and here I am quoting Prof. Josef Settele, the Co-Chair of the World Biodiversity Council IPBES (UN): 'The window of opportunity to ensure a liveable future on this planet through decisive and targeted action is closing fast. "By supporting measures to transition EU's agriculture towards agroecological practices, you will not only better protect our health, that of our children and grandchildren, as well as the environment, you will also help reconcile the farming community with the rest of the society, They should not be seen as polluters or destructors, but as the basis of our good health and our future! Let us act now! We count on your support!