Future of Europe's horticulture sector - strategies for growth

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted the own-initiative report by Anthea McINTYRE (ECR, UK) on the future of Europe's horticulture sector – strategies for growth.

The report recalled that the horticulture industry comprises fruit, vegetables, potatoes, salads, herbs and ornamentals, and whereas the horticulture sector incorporates nurseries, perennial nurseries, gardening services, cemetery gardening, gardening supplies retailers, garden centres, florists and landscape gardening. The fruit and vegetables (F&V) sector receives about 3% of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) aid yet accounts for 18% of the total value of agricultural production in the EU. It represents 3% of the EU's usable agricultural area and is worth more than EUR 50 billion.

Promoting the horticultural sector: Members stressed the importance of promoting the EU horticulture sector and enabling it to compete better in the global marketplace. They emphasised the need to make it **easier for producers to gain access to third-country markets** and called on the Commission to increase its efforts to support exporters of fruit, vegetables, flowers and ornamental plants to overcome the increasing number of non-tariff barriers, such as some third-country phytosanitary standards that make export from the EU difficult, if not impossible.

They also called on the Commission to establish the **same market access conditions**, as regards marketing standards, **designations of origin**, etc. for all market participants in the EU and to carry out checks to ensure that those conditions are observed, in order to prevent distortions of competition.

Promoting POs: Membership of producer organisations (**POs**) should also be increased by making the system more attractive, in view of the fact that more than half of all EU growers still do not belong to a PO despite the Commission's objective of an average rate of 60 % PO membership by 2013. The low rate of organisation in some Member States has been partly caused by the suspension of POs, which creates uncertainty among producers. Given that POs play a key role in enhancing the negotiating power of F&V organisations, it is essential to prevent uncertainty among producers by **clarifying European legislation on the recognition of POs**.

Members stressed however that the establishment of a Union instrument for managing serious crises affecting a number of Member States and stresses that it should be open to all producers, irrespective of whether or not they are members of a PO.

Plant protection products (PPPs): the report stressed that horticulture is reliant on a variety of PPPs. The Commission needs to take a risk-based approach to the regulation of these products. Minor uses are particularly vulnerable owing to the scarcity of the relevant active substances.

Integrated pest management (IPM): the Commission and the Member States are called upon to promote integrated pest management (IPM), support innovation and entrepreneurship through increased research into and development of non-chemical alternatives, such as natural predators and parasites of pest species, and use the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation to fund applied research that supports the development of integrated strategies for pest, disease and weed control.

The Commission is called upon to:

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- **prioritise horticultural crops for funding and research** using new and innovative plant breeding techniques (NBTs), provide clarity about the regulatory status of plants produced using these techniques and ensure that any NBTs that are found not to lead to GMOs will be treated like conventional breeding techniques, and will therefore not be subject to any process based pre-market authorisation procedures;
- **differentiate between cisgenic and transgenic plants** and to create a different approvals process for cisgenic plants so as to recognise that cisgenesis is an accelerated form of conventional plant breeding;
- include **'protected cultivation'** in Horizon 2020 calls in order to stimulate innovation regarding, for example, sustainable crop protection, sustainable water and nutrient usage, energy efficiency, advanced cultivation and production systems, and sustainable transport;
- facilitate **access to long-term funding** for investment in modern horticultural production technologies.

As regards **waste**, Members are deeply concerned that between a third and a half of edible produce is wasted because of its appearance. They called on the Commission to create, as a matter of urgency, possibilities for marketing a wider range of quality specifications of produce. They drew attention to trials conducted in Austria and Switzerland involving the **sale of blemished fruit and vegetables** and called on supermarkets to take into account market research which shows that many consumers are not necessarily worried about the cosmetic appearance of fruit and vegetables and are happy to purchase lower grade produce, particularly if this may appear to be cheaper.

Lastly, the report called on the Commission and the Member States to **make the legislative and political environment as supportive as possible** for uses of horticultural waste.