European strategy for the promotion of protein crops - Encouraging the production of protein and leguminous plants in the European agriculture sector

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted the own-initiative report by Jean-Paul DENANOT (S&D, FR) on a European strategy for the promotion of protein crops - encouraging the production of protein and leguminous plants in the European agriculture sector.

The report noted that the European Union is suffering from a major deficit in vegetable proteins due to the needs of its livestock sector which is dependent on feed imports from third countries. It is vital to reduce the Union's massive dependency on imports of protein crops, which are mainly used for animal feed. In addition to the environmental impact in soya producing regions, the current situation carries major risks especially for the EU livestock sector, as price volatility on international markets has substantially increased.

The European production of protein-rich matter rose from 24.2 to 36.3 million tonnes between 1994 and 2014, but at the same time the consumption increased from 39.7 million tonnes to 57.1 million tonnes, increasing thus the Union’s overall deficit from 15.5 to 20.8 million tonnes.

The Union devotes only 3% of its arable land to protein crops and imports more than 75% of its vegetable protein supply, mainly from Brazil, Argentina and the United States.

Overall, Members stressed that it is time to implement a **major strategic European vegetable protein production and supply plan** based on the sustainable development of all the crops grown throughout the EU.

They called for:

- the Commission to take immediate actions aimed at avoiding any reduction in the current production level of protein crops, taking into due account the environmental benefits deriving from the conventional cultivation of nitrogen-fixing crops in EFAs;
- the establishment of a **European platform**, supported by the European Crops Market Observatory to identify protein cultivation areas, determine protein production capabilities and catalogue all research done so far on proteins. The EU should then heavily invest into integrated and targeted research to make protein crops more economically attractive and their production more competitive and to increase their yield.

Plan’s objectives: Members recommended supporting, in particular under the CAP, the **cultivation of soya in the EU** by making it profitable and competitive, as new varieties are currently opening up fresh possibilities for some regions where the crop can adapt.

They also encouraged the need to:

- develop local and regional protein production and processing chains by establishing groups of farmers and by creating closer links between arable crop farmers and livestock farmers;
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- assist, via the CAP, operators taking risks by entering short supply chains for protein-based food and feed;
- support greater self-sufficiency of farms in animal feed at both farm and regional level and for ruminants as well as for mono-gastric animals, including through on-farm feed production;
- increase the profitability of these crops and to develop practices such as crop rotation (over a minimum of three years) and under-sowing for leguminous crops, and increase the mixing of varieties and crops in the pulse (clover/rape, triticale/peas etc.) and forage (grass, clovers, meslins, etc.) production sectors, in order to shift towards a more sustainable agri-food system, supporting a shift from input-intensive crop monocultures within and outside the EU towards a diversified agro ecological system.

Plan's instruments: Members stressed that this plan calls for the mobilisation and coordination of several EU policies: the CAP; research policy; environmental and climate action policies; energy policy; the neighbourhood policy and trade policy.

It is important for the **CAP to support protein crop cultivation** by means of different measures such as the **voluntary coupled payment** – which should not be restricted to crops and regions, in difficulty in order to give scope for more action – and the greening payment, and by means of the second pillar, particularly through agro-environmental measures on organic and other types of farming, investment quality, the Farm Advisory System (FAS), training and of course innovation via the EIP. The report highlighted that the introduction of a **coupled payment has driven protein crop production** in some Member States.

Members stressed the need to introduce **new instruments** to help increase the supply of plant proteins, in particular soya, and to ensure equitable implementation across all the Member States.

The report highlighted the need to **secure autonomy in soya supplies** by cooperating more closely with the EU's neighbourhood. Members supported the establishment of **transparent product labelling systems** based on certified production standards, such as the Danube Soya and Europe Soya standards.

Lastly, Members called for adjustments to the second pillar of the CAP to provide better recognition of and remuneration for the contribution of crops that **feed pollinators** at critical times of the season (early flowering plants in spring) and their role in fighting pollinator decline.