The EU Action plan on Organic Agriculture

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted an own-initiative report by Simone SCHMIEDTBAUER (EPP, AT) on an EU action plan for organic agriculture.

In 2019, the EU's total agricultural area under organic farming grew to 13.8 million hectares. It currently accounts for 8.5 % of the EU's total utilised agricultural area and the value of the EU's organic market more than doubled between 2010 and 2019. The retail sales of organic products increased from EUR 18 billion to EUR 41 billion in the period 2009-2019.

The Commission communication on an action plan for the development of organic production (organic action plan, OAP) emphasises that the Green Deal, and the farm to fork and biodiversity strategies under its umbrella, is the key to managing the transition towards a more sustainable food system, in particular strengthening farmers' efforts to protect the environment, preserve biodiversity and tackle climate change. According to the report, the key role in attaining this objective is played by agriculture in general, and organic agriculture in particular.

Regulation (EU) 2018/848 on organic production and labelling of organic products, which will apply from 1 January 2022, aims to increase consumers' trust in organic products through more stringent controls and rules for imports.

General comments

Members welcomed the Commission communication on an action plan for the development of organic production, the objective of increasing the EU's agricultural area under organic farming by 2030 through the development of supply and demand, and the Commission's recognition of organic farming as one of the main components on the EU's path towards more sustainable food systems. They considered that the development of organic farming, which delivers many positive externalities and benefits for climate change mitigation, biodiversity and soil protection, and will contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the farm to fork and biodiversity strategies.

The committee is of the opinion that legislation and the OAPs must provide sufficient room for **flexibility** to take into account the differences in the nature and conditions of organic agriculture in the Member States. It urged the Commission to pay particular attention to supporting the Member States which are lagging behind. Furthermore, there is also a need to remove excessive **administrative burdens**.

The report stressed that the environmental benefits of organic farming should not only be supported by consumers of organic products willing to pay a higher price, but the CAP budget should also properly reward organic farmers for the specific public goods that they deliver through the protection of the environment and of natural resources.

According to Members, for an EU action plan to succeed, it must stimulate and mobilise the Member States, as well as regional and local authorities. Member States are encouraged to establish their **own national strategies** for organic farming and to develop their own national and/or regional OAPs, in coordination with the National Strategic Plans.

Stimulating demand and ensuring consumer trust

Members support the Commission in further promoting and sharing information about the **EU organic logo** among consumers, including through school schemes, which should give a larger share to organic products when the school schemes are revised, as well as in other institutions such as nursing homes. They expressed concern about **misleading labels**, **packaging and advertising** that makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish conventional products from organic products. According to the report, frequent **independent controls** are the basis for consumers' trust in organic products and they called on the Member States to communicate clearly on the EU organic logo.

The report highlighted the importance of improving **transparency** in the organic food supply chain and of better **traceability** in all production and distribution processes in line with the demands from European consumers to have more information on the origin and production methods of the foodstuffs they consume.

Incentives and reinforcing the entire value chain

Members consider that, in order to fulfil the ambitions of the National Strategic Plans, an adequate CAP budget, as well as compatibility with other European funds or programmes, is essential to create incentives to encourage farmers to convert to and maintain organic farming practices, through adequately resourced rural development measures or financially attractive **eco-schemes**, or a combination of the two.

The report noted the potential of **short, local and seasonal, and smart food supply chains** and direct marketing opportunities, including farmers' markets, for organic producers and rural economies to deliver environmental and animal welfare benefits, while also securing incomes, preserving and creating employment, ensuring the vitality of rural areas and bridging the gap between EU producers and consumers. Member States should allocate sufficient resources to investments easing the development of short food chains, such as through increasing the number of mobile slaughterhouses or on-farm processing facilities.

Stressing that innovative digital tools have the potential to significantly increase transparency and traceability, thereby combating fraud and illegal production methods, as well as improving consumer confidence, Members encouraged the Commission to ensure greater deployment of digital technologies, such as **precision farming and blockchain** in organic farming.

Improving sustainability

Members stressed the need for research and innovation to encourage the conversion to organic agriculture and to further develop robust farming systems and increase tolerance to drought, pests and disease. They encouraged a science-based approach regarding soil fertility and the need to develop, accept and incentivise innovations in novel plant nutrient sources in organic farming.

The Commission is called on to ensure that sufficient financial resources are allocated to research into **organic seeds and animal breeding**.

Lastly, the report called on the Commission to conduct comprehensive studies and analyses of the impact that an increase in organic farming would have in terms of both climate change and food security in the European Union.