



**AGRICULTURE
& PROGRESS**

Agriculture & Progress Platform on Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive: Innovation is a Necessary Step Towards Reducing the Use of Plant Protection Products

The Agriculture & Progress platform brings together sugar beet growers, sugar manufacturers and maize producers in order to promote sustainable agricultural production. The Platform's mission is to provide society and decision-makers with a good understanding and suggestions on the needs and challenges of guaranteeing sustainable agricultural production and the important role of innovation for the farming community.

European farmers' achievements towards sustainability

Reducing the use of plant protection products (PPPs) is an objective that maize and beet growers have set themselves already years ago by committing to Integrated Pest Management. This has in turn led to the use of techniques that have a positive effect on biodiversity such as optimising crop rotation, precision agriculture, and the use of pelleted and treated seeds. This allows for a much more targeted use of PPPs and thereby limiting their use. Other methods include avoiding spraying after crop emergence and tackling target organisms while having no or little effect on non-target organisms. Developments with regard to robotics and digital farming are also extremely promising.

Integrated Pest and disease Management (IPM) is widely implemented in for instance sugar beet growing in Europe. Here, seed treatment is an excellent plant protection practice as young beets are highly susceptible to pests and diseases that have been proven to be present in the fields. For this and other species, development of combined mechanical and chemical weed control is progressing, and weekly controls are carried out on monitoring sides. This allows growers to receive alerts to inspect their fields and measure whether control thresholds are exceeded or not.

Current developments are still insufficient to compensate the reduction in the use of PPPs

For European farmers the next decade will bring increasing difficulties and pressures resulting from for example climate change, whilst having to deal with an ever-shrinking agricultural toolbox as more and more PPP active substances will be removed. Statistically, about one new PPP active substance will come onstream while four disappear, drastically reducing farmers' access to efficient and innovative toolboxes. Alternative integrated crop protection measures, involving complex combinations of solutions, will evolve comparatively slowly and appear unlikely to match the pace of the shrinking toolbox. In order to deal with this, the European farming community needs to be prepared and should be aware of how quickly affordable and effective alternative integrated crop protection measures are expected to be developed. In the meantime, farmers need to understand what the tools of their current toolbox for the next five years will look like and if they can access quickly affordable and effective tools such as herbicides, insecticides and fungicides.

Considerable work has been done already trying to develop and evaluate alternative approaches, but so far results have been limited. Comparison of biocontrol solutions aimed at controlling or modifying their behaviour (and indirectly limiting the spread of viruses to plants) has not yet yielded any promising results. Breeding for tolerance takes time and progresses slowly (one variety so far, tolerant against one out of four viruses). Alternative integrated measures of weed control, such as mechanical weeding are being developed and tested, but have not yielded tangible results so far, whilst research and development is only moving slowly.

European farmers need a functional toolbox, developed based on scientific impact assessments on the effects of the reduction in the availability of PPPs

Any regulatory activity with regard to PPPs must be realistic and science-based, as it is the only viable foundation to build long-term, sustainable policy for generations to come. Importantly, a reduction in the use of pesticides (with a specific focus on high-risk pesticides) must be carefully thought through, and take into account efforts already made, as well as the availability of viable alternatives. It must be accompanied by a thorough and appropriate impact assessment to avoid agronomic dead-end situations in which farmers are left without valid solutions to protect their crops against certain diseases and pests, as this in turn will lead to declining biodiversity.

The gap between the rapid loss of active substances and the availability and costs of new tools to ensure crop protection must be addressed. It should be recognized that the reduction of chemical PPPs does not always and automatically allow to reach the objective of reduction of PPPs if alternative sustainable tools do not exist. That is why arbitrary quantitative targets have proven to be unnecessary, unachievable and misleading, while having the potential to severely jeopardize the viability of our sectors.

The Agriculture & Progress Platform encourages regular educational exchanges with stakeholders such as farmers and scientists and calls on the EU Commission to closely cooperate with stakeholders and Member States. We are keen on participating in further discussions on this crucial topic. Please contact us at platform@agriprogress.info.

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