

# SUSTAINABLE FARMING

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*Two women are shown better farming techniques at one of a hundred gardens in Cape Town. [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade/Flickr]*

## Agriculture holds key to UN Sustainable Development Goals

Agriculture will play a crucial role in addressing the planet's future needs – whether on food production, health or the preservation of the environment. But transforming the dominant agricultural model could be the greatest challenge of all.

Last year the United Nations adopted its post-2015 agenda, setting out 17 Sustainable Development Goals to tackle contemporary global challenges by 2030.

The goals span the whole range of policy areas, from rural poverty to global hunger, climate resilience, and population growth. Nine of them are directly or indirectly connected with farming, conferring a special multi-dimensional status to agriculture.

Achim Steiner, the United Nations' Under Secretary General and Executive Director, stressed that agriculture was key in a world of 9 billion consumers, with climate change and resource constraints becoming more present.

"Agriculture needs to be an integral part of the solutions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,

which requires a systems approach," he told the 9th Annual Forum for the Future of Agriculture (FFA) in Brussels last month (22 March).

### A mammoth task

The UN projects that the global population will rise to more than 9.7 billion in 2050 and will exceed 11.2 billion by 2100.

However, access to food remains an issue for many around the globe. An estimated 780 million people were undernourished across the developing world in 2014–16, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

In contrast, a recent study showed that about 640 million people – mainly from high-income countries – are overweight or obese, including 375 million women and 266 million men.

"While it's important to also tackle food waste and obesity, these do not change the fact that we will need to produce much more food on the same number of hectares in order to feed a growing population without further encroaching on the world's remaining natural spaces," said Brandon Mitchener, Public Affairs Lead for Monsanto Europe.

At the same time, agriculture has been a heavy emitter for the environment.

The latest FAO estimates of greenhouse gas data show that emissions from agriculture, forestry and fisheries have nearly doubled over

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the past fifty years and could rise by an additional 30% by 2050 if immediate measures are not taken.

Total annual emissions from agriculture hit a record 5,335 metric tons of CO2 equivalent in 2011, almost 9% higher than the average during the previous decade (2001-2010). Asia comes first with 44% of agriculture-related greenhouse gas emissions, followed by the Americas (25%), Africa (15%), Europe (12%), and Oceania (4%).

On an EU level, agriculture accounted for 10% of the EU's total greenhouse gas emissions in 2012.

### “Sustainable intensification”

According to Monsanto, “sustainable intensification” can provide the solution to produce “much more food” on the same number of hectares. “This is not a misnomer – contrary to what is taught in French, German and Italian public school textbooks,” Mitchener told EurActiv.com.

So what is sustainable intensification? According to Mitchener, this includes techniques like “No-till farming and expanded use of cover crops and smart irrigation” which he says “can help farmers produce more, create healthier soils, trap carbon and save energy all at the same time.”

On its website, Monsanto also cites genetically modified crops, saying they help reduce carbon dioxide emissions “because farmers don’t have to till their fields as many times to control weeds or apply as much insecticide to protect crops from pests.”

### Reforming the agri-model

Transforming the global agricultural system in order to adjust to the modern needs and feed the world is a lengthy process that will take years, if not decades. This is why agri-food giants like Syngenta, Unilever and Monsanto have also taken a long-term approach to tackling these challenges.

Most agri-food giants have set up partnerships with farmers aiming to ensure the sustainable sourcing of their products and raw materials, taking account of environmental, social and economic considerations at the same time.

Farmers act under specific “code” rules for cultivation and production while participating in the schemes on a voluntary basis.

Known as sustainable farming, the aim of those industry-led initiatives is to produce, via innovative practices, the greatest amount of food using the fewest resources possible.

One example is Syngenta’s Good Growth Plan, a strategy aligned with the UN’s SDGs. Its objective is to make a measurable contribution by 2020 on six commitments focusing on making crops more efficient, rescuing more farmland and enhancing biodiversity. Protecting and empowering smallholders also take center stage.

“Since we launched the Plan in 2013, 4 million hectares of farmland has been enhanced through biodiversity or soil preservation initiatives,” Syngenta Chief Operating Officer Jon Parr told EurActiv. So far, the scheme has helped more than 17 million smallholders improve their productivity through training and technology while improving sustainability.

Asked by EurActiv what is happening with the farmers who do not respect the sustainability rules and produce out of the agreed context, he replied: “The Good Growth Plan is inclusive and interactive where the feedback of farmers and growers about what is and isn’t working is critical [...] It is important to note, however, that participation in The Good Growth Plan is completely voluntary.”

He added that after the second year the company has “a very good retention rate of the growers working with us”.

Other agri-food companies focus on raw materials. Unilever, a British-Dutch multinational corporation, has set an ambitious target to source 100% of its

agricultural raw materials sustainably by 2020, with intermediary targets set for 2010 (10%), 2012 (30%) and 2015 (50%).

“55% of our agricultural raw materials are now coming from sustainable sources, up from 14% in 2010,” said Freek Bracke, Corporate Communications Manager at Unilever Benelux.

The company announced in February an achievement of sending zero non-hazardous waste to landfill across more than 600 sites, in 70 countries.

### Concentration of production

But the activities of agri-food companies have come under heavy criticism from environmental activists who point to their excessive influence on global commodity markets.

“Deregulation in agricultural markets over the last 20 years has led to the increased concentration of the food chain into the hands of a few corporate giants who now are controlling the chemicals, seeds, trading, manufacturing and retailing of our food system,” said Stanka Becheva, food and agriculture campaigner at Friends of the Earth Europe.

The colossal bargaining power of those agri-food giants gives them the capacity to weigh on “both policies and the prices of agricultural products,” she told EurActiv.

Becheva was also sceptical about the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals saying they are not sufficiently centered on human rights. In her view, the implementation of the SDGs risked promoting a conventional model of development without addressing the root causes of poverty, hunger and malnutrition, “resulting in business as usual”.

“The new agenda is still biased in favour of the action of the corporate sector, which uses niche markets to increase their profits, without advancing any concrete attempt to redirect the currently unsustainable business model.”

## UN chief: Food chain shows peoples' fate 'interdependent'

Humankind needs to take a more collaborative approach to agriculture in order to sustain its future nutrition needs, while at the same time minimising environmental harm to the planet, global leaders and luminaries have warned.



Ban Ki-moon [UNclimatechange/Flickr]

Agriculture should be made an integral part of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in order to address global challenges like food production and environmental protection, according to several speakers at the Forum for Future Agriculture, which took place in Brussels last month.

"The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a declaration of interdependence. The food chain is a perfect example of how people's fates are linked in this globalised world," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said in a video message on 22 March.

Several speakers at the forum

backed Ban Ki-moon's call and urged scientists, the agri-food industry, policymakers and civil society to get rid of their "past prejudices" and start working together.

Transforming food systems by making them resilient to climate shocks are among the objectives of the UN goals. World hunger can only be ended "if we change how we grow, process, distribute and consume food," Ban Ki-moon stressed. "We also have to better manage our natural resources, land, and water. And we have to preserve the world's rich biodiversity," he said.

### Bringing stakeholders to the table

However, bringing all agriculture-related stakeholders to the same table will be a tall order for policymakers, mainly because of their different perspectives on the planet's future.

Jon Parr, chief operating officer of Swiss pesticide and seed maker Syngenta, told EurActiv.com that partnerships were required between all actors, including industry and NGOs, in order to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

"We need to abandon our old

prejudices and ways of working and find ways to collaborate like never before," he stressed.

Environmental activists see such partnerships with suspicion, however. "We criticise European and international initiatives, including UN institutions and projects, when their main focus is limited to easing the way for corporations to invest in under-developed countries where there are great business opportunities," Greenpeace EU agriculture policy director Marco Contiero told EurActiv.

According to Greenpeace, the investment focus of some of those UN-backed agriculture projects "will not benefit the people who are in need".

### Rising population and food production

Although they may share the same goals, it is no understatement that agri-food businesses and civil society groups like Greenpeace often differ significantly on how to reach them.

Calls to increase food production to meet the world's growing population illustrates this dichotomy like no other subject in global development.

The UN projects that the global population will rise to more than 9.7 billion in 2050 and exceed 11.2 billion by 2100, calling for a dramatic increase in food production.

This is the main argument of the agri-food industry, which has expanded its activities across the world focusing in densely populated and "forgotten" agricultural markets, like in Asia and Africa.

Via partnerships with smallholders who follow specific sustainable cultivation protocols, big agri-food multinationals are trying solutions to feed a fast-growing population, while keeping climate change in check.

But environmental NGOs often see the challenge in very different terms

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Referring to data by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Greenpeace argues that the world already produces more than 1 ½ times enough food to feed everyone on the planet.

The agency notes that for the past two decades, the rate of global food production has increased faster than the rate of global population growth and attributes high hunger levels to poverty and inequality, not scarcity. There are people who earn less than \$2 a day and cannot afford to buy this food, Greenpeace points out.

### Innovation-driven practices

Still, producing more with less takes centre-stage in agri-food industry strategies.

Agri-food businesses claim that biotechnology and precision farming practices are crucial to the sustainability of agriculture as it can improve productivity, secure yield and produce higher quality crops.

"We strongly believe that food and environmental security are indivisible... that is to say, we have no chance of achieving one without the other," Jon Parr, Syngenta's chief operating officer, told EurActiv.

If food production is to increase to meet projected population growth, genetic modification and other biotechnologies should be available to growers as an option, the argument goes.

Syngenta has created a network of "reference farms" across crops and regions in specific markets. Farmers are collaborating with crop experts and trialing new solutions to raise productivity and make crops more efficient.

On its website, the company notes that it is currently gathering farm data from 21 crops in 42 countries. In 2015, the global average productivity increase on reference farms was 2%.

This "open data" and the best practices on productivity are then published in an online database accessible to all in order to speed up the innovation knowledge transfer and reach new people and communities.

### Precision farming

The agri-food industry also gives special emphasis to precision farming practices as an innovation-driven solution.

Precision farming is based on the optimised management of inputs in a field according to actual crop needs. It involves data-based technologies, including satellite positioning systems like GPS, remote sensing, and the internet, to manage crops and reduce the use of fertilisers, pesticides and water.

Yara, a fertiliser company, uses precision farming to increase accuracy of fertiliser inputs and simultaneously reduce negative environmental impact.

The company developed the N-Sensor for the site-specific management of nitrogen application. N-Sensor is mounted on the tractor roof and is 'on the move' measuring light reflection from the crop, translating this into an optimum application rate enabling the application equipment to apply the required rate for that specific part of the field.

### A wrong production model

But Greenpeace's Contiero takes the debate to a different level. In his view, the issue is not to produce more in order to feed a growing world population. Rather, he points out that farming output is currently "wrongly produced" and that this needs to change in order to address the environmental issues of agriculture.

"Claiming that there is a need to intensify agricultural productivity is false," Contiero said.

"The focus should not be in providing

external and non-renewable inputs to these farmers, making them dependent, as European or US farmers are, on agrochemical companies products," he continued, wondering what will happen to those farmers when governments and agri-business will stop their funding projects and operations.

"Farmers will be left alone, with no means to buy expensive inputs," he claims, saying "they will become totally exposed to the volatility of input prices."

Rather than supporting farmers with costly subsidies and programmes, governments should focus their efforts on making them self-sufficient, Contiero stressed.

"These farmers need to be able to sustain themselves in the centuries to come, thanks to modern and sustainable agricultural practices, not just in the next few years, thanks to temporarily-subsidised inputs," he claimed.

According to Contiero, the productivity challenge should be seen and measured differently — in the amounts of people nourished per hectare, not the amount of tons produced per hectare. "In that way you are really tackling the problem of feeding the world," he stressed.

For Greenpeace, agriculture development should be based on agronomic practices and rules, which focus on the fundamental role of the soil. "How can a farmer in a specific region ensure that the soil becomes richer in organic content? Because when it is rich in organic content, its plants will grow much stronger."

# Africa's farming potential hinges on infrastructure boost

Africa's huge agricultural potential holds the promise of covering much of the planet's nutrition needs, but the continent is hampered by lack of infrastructure and intricate local politics.

In an effort to respond to the global food security issue, agribusinesses have expanded their activities in the developing world, with a special focus on Africa's rich soils.

The move is seen with suspicion by environmental campaigners, which warn that turning to a Western type agri-food production model will only increase farmers' dependence, leading them to long-term deadlock.

## Declining poverty and rising population

The economy of the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region has seen remarkable improvements over the past decades.

World Bank figures show that the number of people living on less than \$1.25 a day, has declined by 23% between 1993 and 2015.

According to the latest estimates in the 2015 State of Food Insecurity in the World, hunger in the region declined by 31% in the period 1990-2015, by no means a small achievement. Today, approximately one out of four persons in SSA is estimated to be undernourished, considerably less than in the 1980s.

But the food and farming conundrum in Sub-Saharan Africa is far from being solved. First, the region is challenged with rapid population growth which affects the ability to ensure stable



Farming in Malawi. [Find Your Feet/Flickr]

supply and access to food.

Second, Sub-Saharan Africa's current population is 800 million and its economy remains deeply rooted in traditional farming. Agriculture employed 62% of the population and generated 27% of GDP in the region in 2005.

## Smallholders dominate

Smallholder farms, defined as being two hectares or less are dominant in the region's agriculture model. According to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), 80% of farmland in sub-Saharan Africa is managed by smallholders working on up to 10 hectares.

The issue does not only concern Africa. On a global level, the UN says more than 90% of the 570 million farms worldwide are managed by an individual or a family, producing more than 80% of the world's food.

Scientists have warned that in order to prevent a food crisis, pre-emptive measures should be taken to make

these small-scale farms sustainable while avoiding intensive resource use.

## Africa's "green" revolution

To help meet those goals, the 10-year-old Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) focuses on smallholder farms to meet the various environmental challenges of the region, like seed production and soil health. A further objective is to open up a rich agriculture market which has been neglected all these years.

It brings together public and private sector working directly with African farmers, businesses, and governments.

AGRA argues that it has helped African farmers increase their production, resulting in direct household consumption and surpluses for the market.

According to AGRA's 2015 report, in 2015 smallholder households produced about 3.4 million additional metric tons of cereals, soybeans and groundnuts for their own consumption as well as 1.5 million metric tons surplus for the

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market.

“Over the past nine years, AGRA and its partners have worked across 18 sub-Saharan African countries to deliver a set of solutions that have reached 18.2 million farm families,” AGRA’s Dr Richard Jones told EurActiv.com.

However, many challenges still lie ahead, mainly on a logistical level.

## Infrastructure

According to Dr Jones, the rapid population increase and high rates of urbanisation have exacerbated the need to increase local production through increased productivity.

“Local growth and development will come about not only from production but from aggregation, transport and value addition. The volumes required to meet the growing food requirements cannot be met by imports alone for the simple reason that the existing infrastructure is already challenged,” he stressed.

He added that the large numbers of widely-dispersed smallholder farmers who are poorly organised make it hard to deliver services and productivity-improving technologies on the input side.

“The costs of aggregating small quantities of surplus production from these widely dispersed smallholder farmers is logistically challenging,” he said, adding that the high costs of transport often make locally-produced grain more expensive than the imported one.

Another problem for smallholder farmers is the lack of access to productivity enhancing technologies such as quality seeds of superior varieties, mineral fertilisers, and crop protection products.

“The limited number of commercial seed companies, inappropriate government policies hindering the release of farmer-preferred varieties, lack of enforcement in quality control,

and limited support for commercial distribution systems are some of the reasons,” he noted.

## Tanzania’s agricultural “corridor”

Attempts to overcome these myriad of local obstacles have focused on the creation of local transportation and distribution corridors.

One of them is the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT), an agricultural multi-stakeholder partnership between the Tanzanian government, agri-corporations, donors, and NGOs.

Its main objective is to develop the region’s potential including productivity, food security and livelihoods and achieve a “Green Revolution” in Tanzania.

Initiated at the World Economic Forum Africa summit in May 2010, several stakeholders try to go beyond raising agricultural productivity and attract investments in several areas – roads, electricity, policy reform – to create an efficient and well-functioning agricultural chain.

Oslo-based fertiliser company Yara recently invested \$25 million in a terminal in Tanzania and wants the country to become a national and regional hub for fertiliser distribution. Yara currently supplies 120,000 tons of fertiliser annually to the East African region, including through a network of distribution outlets across Tanzania.

Environmentalist NGOs, however, are concerned about such activities in Africa.

## Increasing farmers’ dependence

Greenpeace EU agriculture policy director Marco Contiero told EurActiv that G8 governments’ investments in developing countries’ agriculture, such as via the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa (NAFSN), have indicated that they operate in close contact with the private sector.

“This has, for instance, led country

beneficiaries of international funds to modify or put in place biosafety legislation to set up the right legal framework allowing agro-chemical companies to market their patented seeds.”

He said that instead of external inputs such as seeds, chemical pesticides and synthetic fertilisers, the focus of governments should be on the actual needs of the population, “namely building infrastructures, storage facilities and irrigation systems”.

“These countries do not need (GM) seeds, even if it is true that they have very poor quality seeds, but their problem is that they don’t have silos to store their harvests, nor streets to bring their harvest to the market, nor functional markets where to sell their products”.

“This sends a very worrying signal,” the Greenpeace activist said, underlining that focusing Africa’s development on input-dependent agriculture is the “opposite of sustainable”.

The agri-food industry’s activities in Africa often come under environmentalist NGOs scrutiny.

One recent example is the British company Agrica which received millions in support from international aid donors to establish an industrial rice plantation in Tanzania as part of a SAGCOT project.

According to a research by The Oakland Institute in collaboration with Greenpeace Africa and Global Justice Now, the project had a devastating impacts on local communities.

“Although Agrica is portrayed as a responsible investment venture, its takeover of fertile land has brought misery to local communities,” Anuradha Mittal, Executive Director of the Oakland Institute said.

She claimed that smallholders were forced off the land, received meagre compensation for their losses, and had to face debts resulting from doing business with Agrica.

An official response was sent by Agrica, denying the accusations.

## INTERVIEW

## Potocnik: Farmers and consumers 'equally responsible' for agricultural transformation

Every food producer should help make agriculture sustainable, Janez Potočnik told EurActiv.com.

*Janez Potočnik served as European Commissioner for Environment from February 2010 to November 2014. He is currently chairman of the Rural Investment Support for Europe (RISE), an independent foundation whose main objective is to support a sustainable and internationally competitive rural economy across Europe.*

*Potočnik spoke to EurActiv.com's Sarantis Michalopoulos.*

**The UN's Sustainable Development Goals specifically highlight the need to develop a more sustainable agriculture system. Why do you think change in agriculture is being marked out as essential for achieving them?**

Our current agricultural system is clearly unsustainable. Soil erosion, the over usage of scarce water resources, reliance on finite fossil fuel and mineral resources and the rapid destruction of ecosystems are just some of the characteristics of the way we produce our food today.

If we continue to produce in this way, it will not only affect our ability to produce in the future but also our resilience to produce in the face of the changes that will inevitably come on the back of our changing climate; all of



Janez Potočnik [European Commission]

this in a world where demand due to population growth and change in diet is growing faster than in any moment in our history.

If we do not work, right now, to make our agriculture more sustainable, we will fall seriously behind in our attempt to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, and will have to face up to dire consequences of that failure.

It is important to remember that food and environmental security are interlinked. These goals go together, and without the long term responsible care of our ecosystems, we cannot produce the food we need to feed our growing population.

**You have always been a strong advocate of the circular economy concept. How can this help us achieve the SDGs?**

I firmly believe that the fundamental answer to these challenges is in addressing the way we produce and consume. Our current economic model is wasteful; we take, consume and dispose of resources, and repeat.

The essence of the circular economic model is trying to keep resources, be they water, soil, nutrients or other raw materials, within the system as long as possible by improving resource use efficiency, reducing waste and recycling. A circular economy approach can make significant inroads into reducing our reliance on non-renewable resources,

and reduce GHG emissions and the pollution of our environment.

We need to integrate the ideas of the circular economy into every aspect of our land management systems. An important example of how this can be applied to agriculture can be seen in the latest RISE report on Nutrient Recovery and Reuse. The report focuses on two of the essential nutrients for crop growth, nitrogen and phosphorus and how by recovering these nutrients from waste streams, such as manure, waste water and food waste, we can reuse them as fertilisers on crops. In doing so, we not only create an intelligent diversification of nutrient sources, but also make a significant contribution to reducing the amount of nutrients leaking into and damaging the environment.

**Clearly, if the SDGs are to be realised by 2030, significant change is going to be required across all sectors. What needs to be done to drive this change?**

First of all, I think it is important to point out that greatest impact of agriculture on our environment has occurred in the last 150 years due to a complete global system change in production that is unprecedented in any other industry. This shows that fundamental systems change is entirely possible. However, this time we do

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not have 150 years, but rather the agricultural system will be required to transform itself in a period of decades.

Secondly, it is also important to highlight that the responsibility to change our agricultural system does not fall solely at the feet of the farmer. Decisions about how we farm are not made in a vacuum, but come about as a result of a series of inter-related influences such as regulatory forces, economic and market forces and available products. Therefore it is important to highlight that change in our agricultural context will only come about by engaging the whole food system, and that consumers will have as much a responsibility in change as the farmer.

But farmers need to be paid for, compensated and enabled to manage the very ecological assets that underpin our food production system. Our current system does not recognise the true costs of producing food and the costs to our environment of our food production need to be internalised and spread throughout the food chain.

And whilst it is true that a major role in supporting change will be the

development of enabling regulatory and policy frameworks (of which the Commission's package of the Circular Economy is a major step forward), small and large businesses will have a major part to play in driving research and innovation. And, finally, we as consumers can encourage change through our food choices, diet and attitudes to food waste.

#### How can European policy specifically support reaching the SDGs?

Whilst the Sustainable Development Goals are designed to benefit the entire world, all countries have the responsibility to make the plan a reality and their achievement should be at the very heart of European policy development.

The Common Agricultural Policy, EU policy fully funded from Brussels, can provide an excellent opportunity to contribute to reaching the SDGs. Whilst the latest reform and the inclusion of the greening payments may go some way towards greater agricultural sustainability, there is still a long way to go. The SDGs are solid pillars upon which future reforms can be based.

regulate NPBTs is "not yet clear", Commission officials admit.

But in any case, time has come to "move away from a GMO-centered discussion" when it comes to innovation in plant reproductive materials, an EU spokesperson told EurActiv.com.

The executive's attempt to downplay the issue comes as EU and US officials prepare for a new round of negotiation over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in New York next week.

The European Commission comments came in response to revelations by Greenpeace suggesting that the US has pressured Brussels not to apply GM legislation to New Plant Breeding Techniques.

The environmental group issued

If we base our reforms on the SDGs, it will not only allow Europe to step up to its responsibilities in playing its part in achieving them, but could also provide an example for other countries in the development of their own national policies.

In this context, the European Union should also make full use in its research programmes of all opportunities to tackle the collective world problems addressed by the SDGs and foster the relevant knowledge.

#### What is the key message that you want readers to take forward from this interview?

I feel that the most important message to highlight here is that change does not necessarily have to be negative. We will have no choice but to change the way we produce and consume, so let us take this opportunity now to change it for the better and make real progress towards achieving the SDGs. The transformation of our current economic model can bring great opportunities both for our economies and for our quality of life.

a statement on Thursday (21 April), claiming that the Juncker Commission has shelved a long-awaited internal legal assessment which asserted that plants produced through gene-editing and other new breeding techniques should fall under EU GMO law — and therefore follow stringent testing and approval procedures.

Referring to internal Commission documents obtained by Greenpeace, Corporate Europe Observatory and GeneWatchUK said this happened due to "intense lobbying by US representatives for the EU to disregard its GMO rules, which require safety testing and labeling".

"The documents show that US

## Fresh EU-US trade spat brewing over new plant breeding techniques

After Europe's decision to keep its door shut to GMOs, the European Commission is trying its best to avoid opening a new trade row with the United States over how to regulate so-called 'new plant breeding techniques' (NPBTs).

The EU's decision on how to

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pressure is focused on potential barriers to trade from the application of EU GMO law. They suggest that the EU should ignore health and environmental safeguards on GMOs to pave the way for a transatlantic trade agreement," Greenpeace said.

A new round of TTIP negotiations starts on 25 April in New York and this development will likely heat up the debate related to the agriculture chapter of the trade deal currently under negotiation.

### No foreign DNA

New plant breeding techniques (NPBTs) focus on developing new seed traits within a given species through genetic engineering. For the agri-food industry, the plants resulting from these new breeding techniques should not be considered as genetically modified because no foreign DNA is present in their genes, which might have developed naturally.

Agribusinesses also claim that breeding new crops is essential for ensuring food security by developing new varieties that are higher-yielding, disease resistant or drought-resistant.

To opponents, they are just another attempt at selling GMOs to Europeans through the back door.

As EurActiv reported, the European Commission has delayed a much-awaited legal analysis several times, on whether new plant breeding techniques should be considered GMOs.

But the document obtained by Greenpeace suggest NPBTs were put on the agenda of at least three meetings between the Commission's health directorate (DG SANTE) and US representatives between 7 and 28 October 2015.

"Commissioner Andriukaitis and US representatives met on 23 and 25 November 2015, although it is unclear whether new GMOs were discussed.



Plant breeding at the IAEA laboratory, Seibersdorf, 2012. [IAEA Imagebank/Flickr]

However, new GMOs were on the agenda for the commissioner's visit to the US between 30 November and 4 December 2015, where he also met US trade representative Michael Froman," the statement reads.

"On 3 November, the US mission also sent a letter to the Commission warning it of 'unjustified regulatory hurdles' for New Breeding Techniques. It added that "different regulatory approaches between governments to NBT classification would lead to potentially significant trade disruptions."

### EU decision on NPBTs "not yet clear"

Contacted by EurActiv, a European Commission spokesperson said that the executive was still proceeding with a legal analysis to decide whether organisms produced by new breeding techniques fall under GMO legislation.

"Reflection on breeding techniques is ongoing inside the Commission but the outcome is not yet clear," said Enrico Brivio, EU Commission spokesperson for Health, Food Safety, Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

"In any case, in that context we would like to invite to move away

from a GMO-centered discussion, when it comes to innovation in plant reproductive materials," the EU official stressed, underlining that "we should not treat all new techniques as 'hidden' GMOs".

Referring to allegations that the decision to shelve the legal opinion is linked to TTIP, Brivio ruled out any connection with the trade pact.

"We can only reiterate what was said before — the breeding techniques have strictly nothing to do with TTIP."

### Liberals support NPBTs

Jan Huitema, a Dutch MEP from the liberal ALDE group in the European Parliament, said that the EU should keep an open mind about new breeding techniques in biotechnology.

"We should see what the promising effects are before we say no," Huitema told EurActiv in an interview. "We really need to have a discussion on science-based effects to make a decision on this," he said .

He added that plant breeding techniques could be very promising, because in a way "we are accelerating

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the classical breeding of plants”.

“In a lot of those techniques, we don’t talk about GMOs that use genes of others species into plants, but we stick to the gene of the gene cocktail of the plant itself. So the outcome of those new breeding techniques is not different than we could have with classical breeding.”

### Need for a “robust” legal framework

Jon Parr, Chief Operating Officer at Swiss agri-food giant Syngenta, agrees that Europe should take a science-based approach.

Speaking to EurActiv, he said innovation in plant breeding is critical to improving crop productivity without compromising on the quality or environmental sustainability of production.

“In this respect, new breeding techniques that bring together the best which nature has to offer are critical. Such techniques can help to improve the nutrition and taste of food or ensure it is more tolerant to climatic stress or can resist better the diseases which destroy crops,” Parr said.

Europe, he commented, is blessed with some of the best breeders in the world, whether they work at large companies like Syngenta, or independently.

“Together, they have helped put Europe in a leadership position. What I think we need now is a robust, predictable, and science based legal framework to ensure that Europe can maximise its competitive advantage and enable all stakeholders to share in the social, economic and environmental benefits that can be delivered through new plant breeding techniques,” Parr stressed.

### A GMO fate for NPBTs?

It is not the first time that Europe has infuriated its trading partners with

its reluctance towards innovation-driven solutions in the agriculture sector.

The GM crop industry is unwanted in Europe. Despite the huge amounts of EU money already spent on GMO research, it still represents just the 0.1% of agricultural land in the bloc.

Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Italy, Hungary, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia have all rejected GM crops while in Britain, only England cultivates GM crops.

Jon Parr said that it was hard to argue that growers who have used the technology for nearly two decades now are not doing so safely.

“Equally, however, many Europeans clearly have concerns that need to be addressed if the technology is ever to be accepted here. In the meantime, I think we need to make sure that growers have access to other innovative tools and practices to farm sustainably.”

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