

Referendum of 13 June 2021

"The primary goal of agriculture is to provide sufficient and optimal food"

by Anne Challandes*



Anne Challandes
(Picture pma)

We, the Swiss farming families, do not want to have residues in the water either. Numerous measures are already in force and more are planned to ensure this.

The new regulations adopted by Parliament this spring set ambitious targets that make them the strictest regulation in Europe and a

more appropriate response than the two initiatives that will be voted on in June.

This regulation applies from 2023 and sets a 50 per cent reduction pathway for risks from pesticides by 2027. It is broader in scope as it also includes a nutrient reduction pathway. In addition, it does not promote imports.

Protecting our food

Swiss agriculture is in a process of continuous improvement. In the last 10 years, the use of synthetic substances in conventional agriculture has decreased by 40 percent. Half of the plant protection products used are also approved for organic farming, and more and more non-organic farmers are voluntarily using them. Anyone who has a vegetable garden knows how quickly diseases or pests can destroy the harvest. Therefore, in conventional as well as in organic farming, it is not always possible to do without treatment. Plant protection products are always the last resort to save a crop and thus save our food from destruction. They thus ensure the safety of food, which is also important for its storage and transport.

All plant protection products are examined in an authorisation procedure, by three federal



For the sensitive crops rapeseed, sugar beet and potatoes, there are still no alternative natural solutions.

(Image keystone)

offices: the Federal Office for Agriculture, the Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office and the Federal Office for the Environment. The latter will be given further powers and will oversee this procedure from 2022. Farmers treat according to the motto: "As little as possible, but as much as necessary" – and only as a last resort when the intervention threshold is exceeded. More and more often, they are opting for alternative methods, if they exist. Agriculture is determined to continue its development with the planned new regulations to reduce the risks of pesticide use.

Feeding the population sustainably

In organic farming, we have not yet found optimal solutions for all issues. This is especially true for the sensitive crops of rape, sugar beet and potatoes, for which there are still no alternative natural solutions.

In our country, the genetic engineering moratorium rules out new and faster breeding techniques. The only way for Swiss research to find new disease- and pest-resistant varieties is through natural and traditional breeding methods. These developments take far longer than 10 years to deliver useful results.

The primary task of agriculture is to feed the population sustainably, which Swiss farming families do professionally, strictly regulated and regularly controlled. Switzerland is densely popu-

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lated and the population is growing. At the same time, agricultural land is shrinking by almost one square metre per second. It is therefore a daily challenge to still produce enough food in good quality and close proximity. Currently, we manage this every second day. – Swiss products are impeccable, unlike imported food.

Drinking water is strictly monitored and controlled

In our country, drinking water is strictly monitored and controlled. If samples prove to be problematic, the responsible authorities take immediate action.

However, problematic substances other than pesticide residues do not receive the same attention and are nevertheless present in our water in sometimes even much higher proportions. The EAWAG (Water Research Institute of the ETH Domain; formerly: Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology) and the Association of Cantonal Chemists of Switzerland declare that Swiss drinking water can be consumed without hesitation, especially since the maximum residue limits are set very low as a precaution.

Although initial analyses sometimes indicate the presence of pesticides, residues from other human activities are much more numerous – if they are looked for. For example, an analysis of Rhine water by the same institute showed that 99 percent of the residues found came from industry, households and numerous medicines. In addition, we humans expose ourselves daily to many chemicals that are neither regulated nor controlled, unlike the substances used in agriculture.

More imports mean more environmental pollution

Several studies have shown that if the pesticide and drinking water initiatives were adopted, food production would decrease by 20 to 40 percent. 20 percent less production in relation to the Swiss agricultural area of about 1 million hectares would mean the amount of products of 200,000 hectares of land that we would have to get abroad, “to colonise” so to speak, if consumption did not change. This would mean, for example, more beef from Brazil, more chicken from Eastern Europe or more palm oil imports to compensate for the losses in rapeseed cultivation. This type of “production” clearly demonstrates – especially this year – the risks of forcing production without plant protection products.

In addition, more imports directly result in greater environmental pollution, which is in complete contradiction to the climate goals currently being pursued.

Our responsibility as a rich country – between environmental ideology and realism

All this also raises questions about our responsibility as a rich country, questions between environmental ideology and realism. According to the FAO,¹ the concept of sustainability encompasses much more than just preserving the natural resource base. To be sustainable, agriculture must meet the needs of present and future generations for their products and services, ensuring a balance between the three aspects that constitute it. In other words, the primary goal of

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Darum sagen wir
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agriculture is to provide sufficient and optimal food.

Before we vote, we have a responsibility as citizens to ask ourselves some questions. How will we feed the ever-growing population? What guarantee do we have that we will be adequately "fed" in the event of a global food crisis? But the essential question that reveals the incoherence of these two initiatives is, above all, how can we justify a rich country like ours going to other

countries to help itself to the food that, for ideological reasons, we no longer want to produce ourselves and sufficiently in our own country?

In summary, and taking all aspects into account, I will vote 2 x NO.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ Building a common vision for a sustainable nutrition and agriculture, principles and approaches, FAO, Rome 2014, <http://www.fao.org/sustainability/background/fr/> and <http://www.fao.org/3/i3940f/i3940f.pdf>