



PRESS CONFERENCE
IN RESPONSE TO THE 21 MARCH 2022 AGRIFISH COUNCIL MEETING ON UKRAINE
AND EU AGRI FOOD PRODUCTION

Balanced EU Food Security/Food Safety Decision Including Immediate Market Access for Low-Risk Microbial Plant Protection Products

Summary of Presentations and Speeches

<https://www.microbialpptaskforce.eu/events>

Press Conference Hosted by Mr Martin Hlaváček, MEP (Renew Europe, CZ), 31 March 2022;
28 registrations, of which 17 including the most prominent participated

Welcome statements

Mr Martin Hlaváček MEP (Cz, Renew Europe, AGRI Committee)

- **I share what madam Commissioner Kyriakides has recently said: this is a moment where we need to consider what are the pathways going forward.** *We should not question our targets and objectives that we know are set for making our production sustainable going forward, and to secure resilient and sustainable food and feed production in Europe and globally going forward. It goes without saying that without this sustainability, we will be facing even more difficulties going forward in the future.* We should strategically consider what elements we have at our disposal to accelerate and what elements we need to adapt in the pathway to get to the objectives that we have set for ourselves in the future.
- The advanced techniques and products that we are going to discuss today are available immediately. This requires us to address the key and very responsible issue: how to renew our regulatory framework to put them in full scale and to full potential in use.
- The European Commission's own website says that microbial plant protection products are "**inherently safer than chemical pesticides**". So let's use them. **Let's also refer to our efforts of last week when the European Parliament Resolution has quite clearly put them into an equation of our immediate solutions.**
- The speakers in the press conference will highlight each angle of our food safety and food security approach from soil and environment degradation to disease allergens, and towards an optimised and safe agricultural productivity through the most advanced technologies that the EU should actively promote, while not creating administrative and regulatory burdens. This is especially critical in times of challenging food security issues.
- **The two documents [[Legal Opinion](#) and [potential European Commission 'Communication'](#)], which you have received in advance, identify which steps the European institutions both at Member State level and at Council and Commission level can immediately take to materialize the promise of safe, sustainable and natural plant protection products.**
- **I will engage with the incoming Czech EU Presidency on the possibility to organize a science-based conference on the realization of at least parts of these two documents.**

Opening message

Prof. Mark Eyskens (Chair of the PA International Foundation; Minister of State; former Prime Minister of Belgium)

- I feel privileged to receive what may well be elements for the European Commission to rapidly update the **working of Regulation EC 1107/2009**. I emphasize the word **working** because, as my friends at Arnold & Porter have stated: *no change in this Regulation is required to secure a fast-track access to the market of safe and effective microbial plant protection products. It would testify of enormously appreciated and applauded goodwill of the European Commission, if these elements would indeed be used as part of the current process of improving and making more sustainable Europe's agriculture.*

- I shall be pleased to bring these two documents to the attention of the Presidents of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, imploring them to create the right and forward-looking dynamic balance between chemical and microbial plant protection products.

Statements

Mr Ad Melkert (Vice Chair of the PA International Foundation and Senior Political Advisor to the Microbial Plant Protection Products Task Force; former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations)

- [The Arnold&Porter] presentation outlines how the European Commission has all the necessary instruments and the **political duty** to now publish the proposed draft Communication, or at least key elements thereof in a Guideline or another expression of policy implementation.
- It is worthwhile to refer to a European Union Court of Justice decision of 2015, and I quote: “The regulation reflects the balance desired by the legislature between an improvement in the functioning of the internal market by the harmonisation of the rules concerning the placing on the market and use of biocidal products, on the one hand, and the preservation of a high level of protection of human and animal health and the environment, on the other. In the exercise of the powers delegated to it by the legislature, the Commission cannot call that balance into question”. After four European Parliament Resolutions calling for an immediate fast-track access for MPPPs to the European market, there seems no cause for the Executive to call the balance as indicated in those Resolutions into question.
- It is dramatic if the most advanced agricultural technologies invented in Europe can mostly be used outside Europe. In this connect, I refer to the words of former Belgian Prime Minister and top economist Prof. Mark Eyskens. He cautions all of us about the risk of ‘oligopolistic structures’ that appear to effectively delay the marketing of what they may see as competitive products that shorten the economic lifetime of their sometimes antiquated and potentially damaging products for both human health and the environment. Or in even more plain words, it is in my view, the chemical industry lobby that strangles innovation and SMEs, and in doing so is harming health and the environment for European citizens, like me, and you, and everybody listening.
- *The acceleration of the approval of the use of microbials is a test case for the Farm to Fork Strategy of Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans.* We have to be serious about the Farm to Fork Strategy. It struck me that the *European Parliament again expressed through a Resolution the desired direction to take by the European Commission.* This Resolution has been recently adopted and I quote the paragraph 45 in the resolution of 24 March 2022 on the need for an urgent EU action plan to ensure food security inside and outside the EU in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: “[the European Parliament] Stresses that, at the level of production, strengthened measures and incentives will be needed to build resilience, such as increasing circularity and self-sufficiency in inputs, while not undermining the productive capacity and competitiveness of EU agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture, as well as moving towards precision farming and developing and fast-tracking access to markets of alternative proteins, organic fertilisers, microbial protection of crops and agro-ecology. The majority is clearly pointing towards the direction that it should take. So how on Earth is it possible that we have lost already 13 precious years in moving in that direction, and if we don’t do that now, when?
- The largest EU Member States of course play a big role in this process. We count on the institutions, the European Parliament, but also the next EU Presidency, the Czech Presidency, in the second part of the year to really make it happen.

Presentation of Legal Opinion and Introduction of potential European Commission Communication on Market Access for Microbial Plant Protection Products (PPPs)

Arnold & Porter

- In its legal opinion, Arnold & Porter submits that the Commission could supplement the existing legislation by issuing a Communication that would (a) advocate certain *practical action points* for Member States within the framework of the *existing* legislation and (b) float *preliminary ideas* concerning *amendments* to the existing legislation.

- Regulation 1107 is, in part, based on Art. 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union which covers public health. This Treaty provision stipulates, among other things, that the Commission may take *any useful initiative* to promote the coordination of the Member States' public health policies, for instance by adopting *guidelines* or discussing *best practices*.
- In Arnold & Porter's view, **Art. 77 [of Regulation 1107/2009] therefore enables the Commission to liaise with the Member States (via the advisory procedure) in order to discuss with them practical action points or clarifications that can contribute to quicker market entry and increased use of microbial pesticides within the framework of the current legislation.**
- Point 5 in Annex II of the Regulation only specifies when an active substance *is not* low-risk, but the drafters of that point only had chemical active substances in mind. *It should be possible to clarify that microbial pesticides can be presumed to be low-risk if they are not a human pathogen and do not contribute to anti-microbial resistance.*
- Member State authorities should be able to confirm the low-risk nature of microbial pesticides at an earlier stage, i.e. the stage of the draft assessment report.
- Under the current Regulation, the entire approval/market authorization process for pesticides has largely been in the hands of *chemical experts*, given the Regulation's focus on the health risks involved in the use of *chemical pesticides*. *Given that the EU is now striving towards a 50% reduction in the use of these pesticides, it would make eminent sense to set up dedicated expert teams for chemical and microbial pesticides.*
- Given the strong focus of the current Regulation on chemical pesticides, *it would make a lot more sense to have separate regulations applying side-by-side to these two entirely different types of pesticides -- with assessment criteria, expertise and procedures tailored to each type of these pesticides.* The Commission could kick off that process by conducting an impact assessment later this year with a view to demonstrating the need for such a separate Regulation.

The future of safe and cost-effective farming in the European Union: the role of microbial plant protection products

Ms Diana Lenzi (President, European Council of Young Farmers-CEJA)

- I know on my own skin, what it means to be a young farmer today and what we really need to be able to succeed in what I believe is a mission for all. Since last year, I also have the immense privilege of being the President of the European Council of Young Farmers, a body that represents over 23 Young Farmers associations from all over Europe. **Even if we are what I consider a minority because we're only about 2.8 million young farmers in Europe, we are the ones who will be carrying out this mission for the future.**
- We are in an ever-changing and challenging world, and the challenges we are facing as farmers seem to be getting greater and greater every day – whether it is about adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change, preserving natural resources, delivering high-quality production or facing market disruptions that make our day-to-day activity more uncertain, and inherent to all farming activities.
- *The European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy*, in that context, *need to address the constraints we are facing. They need to answer and give us the tools that we need to reach out and manage to succeed in these important challenges, giving us the enabling tools and help us reach sustainability while keeping in sight, at all times, that our economic stability is the fuel, the primary condition of our capacity for action. If we are not economically stable, we will not succeed. Because we, the young farmers, are truly the ones taking stock of the progress we have made in the horizon 2050.*
- This is the pathway CEJA has taken. For the next two years, our organisation is committed to build the young farmer-driven way to sustainability.
- **In this context, finding all the possible alternatives, all the possible solutions to improve our farming systems, and to broaden the toolkit as farmers is absolutely essential. And this is why we exhort the Commission to accelerate the approval process of Biological Plant Protection Products (PPPs) that can be an essential tool in sustainable agriculture in Europe.**

- **As components in effective Integrated Pest Management (IPM), together with further investment in knowledge and good practice sharing**, they can most definitely contribute to environmentally responsible production systems.

Improving the screening of chemical plant protection products by including the testing of their effects on the mice's nerve system

Dr Jobien Wind (biochemical scientist with Parkinson's Disease and Policy officer, Parkinson Vereniging)

- **As Prof. Bas Bloem stated: "Parkinson's disease (PD) is the fastest-growing brain disease in the world, including in Europe. Numerous European and other international scientific studies consistently show a link between the occurrence of Parkinson's disease and prior exposure to pesticides. This is not a mere association: exposure of rodents to pesticides causes degeneration of the nerve cells in the substantia nigra, which is the brain area involved in causing Parkinson's disease. Farmers show a higher percentage of PD prevalence. But also, people living nearby sprayed fields".**
- For me, I suspect that peeling flower bulbs in summer, in a shed, with no ventilation, has contributed to my Parkinson's. Flowers are exposed to a lot of different pesticides. Also, during my PhD, I worked with pesticides in the lab, even when I was pregnant.
- I am not the only one. *Parkinson's disease numbers are exploding. At the Dutch PD association, we have documented over 150 stories of people with PD who suspect pesticides caused their PD. Half farmers, half 'bystanders'.*
- As I stand before you, this is not for me. I already have PD. I stand before you for our children. For those who cannot choose *not* to be exposed. **I urge you to rigorously improve the evaluation procedure, both for individual chemical pesticides and for cocktails of such pesticides.**
- **I urge you to proactively support farmers in finding new sustainable, innovative ways for crop management ASAP, for example by securing access to the market for low-risk alternatives.**
- *For me it's too late. But if I can make you listen to the heart of the matter and act accordingly, at least it will not have been in vain.*

Microbial plant protection products help improve growing wheat and cereal in a sustainable way in the EU

Dr Willem Ravensberg (Corporate Senior Regulatory and Governmental Affairs Manager of Koppert BV and Member of the Microbial Plant Protection Products Task Force)

- What is not in the hands of a product developer is the registration process. That is the job of the authorities. Did they adapt? Did they see the new innovative biologicals coming? Did they develop new methods to assess these new products? No, they did not, at least not enough and not in time. Even to date, **European Commissioner for Health Dr Stella Kyriakides formally acknowledges that national authorities still do not have the appropriate knowledge or experience to deal with microbial plant protection products.**
- Since at least 5 years the majority of new active substances submitted in the EU are biologicals! Every authority knows this. But why have the procedures not been adapted to this trend? One could speculate on the reasons. Is it fear for the unknown? Interests of vested industry and its connections that cause delay? Is it lack of expertise and experts? Lack of resources? Why not repair this in time?
- *[The EU] needs a dedicated system for those products with experienced scientists in the fields of biology and ecology.* The European Commission has recently adapted the data requirements for applications of microbial. They suggest it will also speed up approvals. But they have not adapted the system, the procedures with its long timelines and have not prioritised the biologicals to achieve the goals of the F2F and Green Deal: a more sustainable agriculture that our society wants and needs.
- This [Microbial Plant Protection Products] Task Force was established about a year ago based on the concern that two microbial PPPs are going to be lost in the renewal process. Two products, one based on a bacterium and one on a fungus, that have their use in arable crops, in cereals like wheat. They have been used for over 15 years as seed treatments, against soil diseases and as foliar treatments for other diseases. *They are the about the only ones approved for arable crops where we desperately need*

alternatives to chemicals. Koppert may lose its product completely and with that all our investments of many millions of Euros.

- In some markets these products are the only non-chemical solutions available. *Chemical fungicides are disappearing from the market and the toolbox of farmers is getting emptier all the time.* The products have the potential to increase strongly in coming years. **They are the few biological products for arable crops where IPM and biocontrol is urgently needed. And now they are threatened to be taken from the market, just because the wrong questions have to be answered, questions appropriate for synthetic chemicals, but not for living microorganisms.**
- **However, EFSA, Member States and the European Commission apparently need to still build and develop their expertise on biologicals and improve and speed up the procedures. The only remedy is a fast-track procedure. As Arnold & Porter have demonstrated, this can be done within the framework of and without changing Reg. 1107/2009. Anyone who chooses a longer road plays into the hands of further delay, more research and more time for chemical pesticides to continue their sometimes harmful use.**

Q&A Session

Q1) *What is the added value of microbial PPPs? Aren't chemical pesticides cheaper?*

- **Willem Ravensberg:** Firstly, biologicals are used as good tools and farmers use them more and more because the chemicals do not work and the resistance management is very important and also to keep the combination of chemicals and biologicals within an IPM system alive. Secondly, with regards to the question on the cost of chemicals, **chemicals are put on the market too cheaply because there are major external costs on the environment, on health, that are not paid by the polluters – by the products itself – but by our society.** Our biologicals are part of nature, they are broken down by nature which, is not the case for many chemicals

Q2) *Does CEJA think that young farmers need IPM + agroecology and biopesticides to overtake the share of the market currently held by synthetic pesticides, especially to protect nature and prevent disease such as Parkinson? If so, what would be a realistic timeline to achieve this, especially for farmers in areas where chemical pesticides play a big role, such as wine-growing?*

- **Diana Lenzi:** What we need as young farmers is alternatives. I truly believe in the power of science, and science gives us more insights concerning the correlation between harmful pesticides and diseases and we need to acknowledge this. When it comes to the timeline, **we are as you know on a ticking clock. We are on a ticking clock when it comes to climate change, to food security, and when it comes to ensuring a healthy environment for the farmers and for the civil society at large.**
This Commission really needs to take this into their hands. It is not through easy fixes that we can tackle this problem. There needs to be a lot of common sense, reason and practicability in the solutions put forward. The farmers need more information. We need to train, we need to start from schools, we need to reshape the whole knowledge system that is behind the farming community. What they need to know is “what alternative, what farming practice can I use that has the same effect”.
- **Ad Melkert:** You are hitting a very important point. Indeed, **the training and knowledge sharing is something very important which should have started yesterday, and the day before yesterday already. This is something which could be accelerated through the (Proposed Draft) Communication that we advocate and that the European Commission should now publish.** We can and should do it now.

Q3) *What is the main problem with the current approval procedure? Why does it take so long between the start of the application and the final approval?*

- **David Cary (scientific advisor of the Microbial Plant Protection Products, Board Member of PAN Europe):** We have seen already that farmers in other parts of the world are getting access to these microbials and they are using them successfully, and therefore we need to make those available

now for our European farmers. We tried to fit the biologicals and particularly the microbials into the same regulatory pathways and streams for chemicals. It hasn't been successful. Now we are trying to change data requirements: it may address some more specific points but it does not answer all the questions and this is where the problem lies. We have to think differently. We can't think as chemists and we can't think of big multi-use products. What we have not been looking at is that there are often some niche products, and these cannot pass through the same stream, with the same people taking the same amount of time to do it. We have to change it now. The science is already there, and we need it now, either in the French EU Council Presidency or during the next Czech Presidency. Diana rightly stressed we won't meet the objectives for climate change and for the Farm to Fork strategy unless we change NOW.

Q4) Regulation 1107/2009 promotes biocontrol agents over synthetic and risky chemical pesticides, so why is there no dedicated authorization procedure for them?

- **Willem Ravensberg:** I have been working on this field for 40 years and since the beginning I realized that the authorities were not equipped to deal with microorganisms. As I have always said, *innovative products need innovative regulations.* I worked with the Dutch Ctgb, the authority in charge of approving the products to the market, and they have finally established a green team composed of specialists in the field of microorganisms, natural substances, pheromones. Through that system, the applications are judged much faster. *25 years ago, the US did that, and they have a separated stream dealing exclusively with biologicals vs chemicals.* We see other countries that are adopting the US system. It is very difficult to understand why Europe has not done this. We are completely blocked by the different chemical application procedures. Look at the time dealing with glyphosate takes. Today we have to wait three years to submit a dossier on microbials because the authorities are too busy with glyphosate and other chemicals.

Q5) Is the difference in the regulation of micro-organisms between EU and non-EU apparent in all areas where microorganisms are intentionally added to the food chain (such as food additives, probiotics, bio-stimulants) or is it a specific issue for plant protection products?

- **Willem Ravensberg:** As far as I know this is mostly the case in plant protection products. Bio-stimulants are quite new as a product category, and I see that Europe is also struggling with them, and in other regions of the world there is no good legislation on that. On the other hand, I even asked the Commission a question on this because we see that microorganisms are getting increasingly important in these areas but also for medicines intended for human beings. I am talking about bacteriophages that are tackling bacteria resistant to antibiotics. Also there, I think that Europe is really behind other parts of the world. We have a sort of fear of microorganisms, but we have used them in our food since human beings are alive and evolved with them.
- **David Cary:** Today we see an increased use of microbials in complementary medicine, ordinary medicine but also in probiotics and feed additives. These are being used everywhere but there is not the scare that exist in plant protection. This is because of our experiences *with chemical* plant protection products. *Of course there are microorganisms that are pathogens of human health. These are well known and identified; there aren't new ones.* It is something that we can proceed with safely on.

Closing Remarks

Mr Martin Hlaváček MEP (Cz, Renew Europe, AGRI Committee)

- We can no longer live with the current approach. It would be as if we are still checking emissions of electric cars today using the same metrics of the combustible cars.
- We are not asking for getting into a market without security. We have a legislative framework, we are quite confident that the legislative framework can be used very effectively – as counselled by the top experts of Arnold&Porter to allow this to happen very soon. I will do my utmost efforts to ensure that during the Czech EU Presidency we will organise a follow-up conference on this topic. This can bring all stakeholders together for a reasonable, useful, more durable solution for problems that we all are facing.