

'We are fed up': Protests call for climate smart food as ministers launch UN digital council

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22-Jan-2019 - Last updated on 22-Jan-2019 at 11:37 GMT

Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of Berlin on Saturday (19 January) to put pressure on political leaders to promote climate smart agriculture, higher animal welfare standards and farming practices that promote biodiversity.



Organisers *Wir haben es satt!* said 35,000 protestors, including farmers with more than 170 tractors, made their way through Berlin under the slogan *"we are fed up with the agribusiness industry"*. The protest coincided with the Green Week food fair and an international meeting of agricultural ministers taking place in the German capital.

The protestors, which were made up of a coalition of organisations including organic agriculture association Bioland, called for the *"cash tap"* for damaging industrial agricultural practices to be *"turned off"*. In particular, they want EU agricultural payments under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to promote environmental objectives.



2019 protest gathers to call for greener EU CAP ©Wir haben es satt!

Jan Plagge, president of Bioland, argued that the current CAP system is used to *"enhance land ownership"* by providing a *"lump sum"* based on land under cultivation instead of investment in *"healthy land, biodiversity and climate change"*.

CAP 'failing' to promote green food systems

Food production is both an industry vulnerable to climate change and a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. However, there is growing optimism that agriculture can be part of the solution. By adopting climate smart practices and focusing on soil health, producers can not only reduce their contribution to emission levels – they can actually take carbon from the atmosphere and sequester it in the soil.

When the European Commission (EC) detailed its proposal for the CAP in its new budget period after 2020, it stressed that environment and climate objectives would be a high priority. However, current proposals for the CAP-2020 reform would still see direct payments to farmers, based on a given amount of hectares of land owned or used, account for the lion's share of the budget.

This approach has faced sharp criticism, with detractors arguing that the CAP should be a catalyst for change towards climate smart systems.

In a recent opinion from the EU Court of Auditors, the Court stressed the EC's environmental ambitions are not clearly defined or translated into quantified targets. This translates to a lack of accountability with no provision for measuring, assessment and reporting mechanisms, the opinion suggested.

"There is a need for targeted compensation for environmental, climate and animal welfare benefits," Plagge argued yesterday.

Germany's agriculture minister, the Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) Julia Klöckner, has *"lacked the courage"* to promote more ambitious environmental objectives in Brussels, Plagge continued.

A spokesperson for the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) rebuffed these accusations, insisting that Klöckner has taken a clear stance in the need for environmental goals to inform the CAP.

"Minister Klöckner has stated clearly, that she aims for a higher level of environmental actions within the CAP. Also within the EU Council, she supports the suggestions of the EU Commission to foster the orientation of the CAP towards stronger aims as regards environment, climate and nature protection as well as animal welfare," the spokesperson told FoodNavigator.

Agriculture ministers see digital food future: 'The decision is a breakthrough'

The protest was staged as international agriculture ministers met to discuss promoting sustainable food systems at the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA).



German Federal Minister Julia Klöckner called for international organisations to actively shape digitisation. Source: BMEL / Photothek

According to the BMEL, never before have so many country delegations and international organisations accepted the invitation from the federal minister to attend the GFFA. Representatives from 74 countries joined the high-level International Conference of Ministers of Agriculture.

For the first time, these countries concluded the conference having agreed a concerted approach, Klöckner said.

With the global population set to increase to just under 10 billion people by 2050, sustainable intensification of agricultural production is needed. The meeting of agricultural ministers concluded that digitalisation will be an important part of this effort.

Delegates agreed to set up an international digital council under the auspices of the United Nations. The body's aim will be to increase access for smallholder farmers to digital technologies.

"Together with all 74 agricultural ministers present, we have... initiated a process for an international framework for digitisation in agriculture. This is an international alliance, because digitisation and the flow of goods do not stop at borders," Klöckner said.

The Conference of Ministers of Agriculture proposed that the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) develop a concept for an international digital council. This will advise countries on digitalisation and promote the exchange of ideas.

The risks and rewards of digitalisation for agriculture should be *"weighed up"* and the FAO has been tasked with developing a method to measure digitalisation in order to overcome the *"digital divide"*.

The final communiqué, signed by 74 agriculture ministers and 13 international organisations, was handed over to the director-general of the FAO, José Graziano da Silva.

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