

Brussels Bulletin: Incoming European Commissioners talk food, farming and fishing

By Oliver Morrison and Katy Askew

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FoodNavigator's latest rundown of the wheelings and dealings in Brussels come as an in-coming group of nominees set out their plans and priorities before the European Parliament ahead of joining the College of Commissioners. Some telling things were said about the direction of travel on future food, farming and fishing policy.

EU needs 'long-term vision for European agriculture': new commissioner Wojciechowski

In an important period for European institutions, the European Parliament has kicked off its series of commissioner hearings, grilling the nominees to the College of Commissioners.

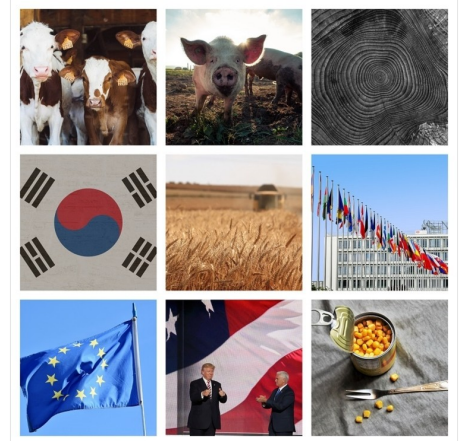
The EU needs a 'long-term vision for European agriculture', inspired by current EU climate and energy strategies, according to EU agriculture commissioner, Janusz Wojciechowski.

During his introductory speech, Wojciechowski said the first step should be a 'special report' looking into the 'true picture' of the current situation on the ground. He called for further support for EU farmers, better environmental protection and for animal-welfare standards to be improved.

MEPs put forward several questions on the ongoing reform of EU farm policy, on how to make sure it remains a truly common policy that delivers both for farmers and consumers and how to make it more environmentally sound. Wojciechowski said he was 'open to discussions' to improve legislative proposals on the reform of the EU's farm policy already on the table.

But concrete plans from Wojciechowski lacked detail. When questioned by an MEP on whether he plans to put forward a new animal welfare strategy, Wojciechowski answered: *"I prefer to have 1000 farms with one hundred pigs than 100 farms with 1000 pigs."*

Members also questioned the Commissioner-designate on ways to ensure that EU farmers and consumers are better protected in free-trade talks, specifically mentioning for instance the ongoing EU-Mercosur negotiations, and asked him how foreign countries' protectionist measures should be handled. They also discussed strengthening farmers' position in the food supply chain, fairer distribution of direct payments within and among member states and measures to tackle anti-microbial resistance.





EU agriculture commissioner nominee, Janusz Wojciechowski, fields questions from MEPs

Turf war over biodiversity?

Wojciechowski also said there would be no change on CAP for biodiversity. When questioned by Green MEP Martin Haeusling if the new commissioner would make a new proposal for CAP reform to preserve biodiversity, Wojciechowski said that 'no change is foreseen'.

In sharp contrast, Lithuania's Virginijus Sinkevičius, commissioner-designate for environment and oceans (see below), insisted that protecting biodiversity was vital for the future sustainability of the bloc.

During his three-hour grilling before MEPs, Sinkevičius said: *"The biodiversity strategy will be one of the key pillars of the Green New Deal."*

He committed to stopping mass extinction of species in the areas of 'agriculture, industry, transport and energy' because all these sectors contribute to biodiversity loss.

Sinkevičius also addressed the need to tackle deforestation in supply chains. 'Forests have to be protected and maintained,' he said, stressing the importance of developing the right monitoring and mechanisms to promote a 'deforestation free supply chain'.

You say ocean, I say fisheries... Let's call the whole thing off!

At 28-years old, Sinkevičius is the first millennial in line to become a European commissioner.

The commissioner-designate for environment and oceans set out his stall during his hearing this week. It included a package of proposals that fed into themes that are certainly fashionable in Commission circles.

from the circular economy to biodiversity.

However, he also had to grapple with a deal of controversy, with some MEPs – particularly from the centre-right EPP – unhappy that ‘fisheries’ have been dropped from his official title.

Sinkevičius stressed that the focus on ‘oceans’ doesn’t mean he won’t be looking out for the interests of fishing communities.

The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), like CAP, faces some strong criticism. Not least because EU ministers have historically set fishing quotas above the scientific advice on what fish stocks can sustain.

Quizzed on reform of the CFP, Sinkevičius clearly didn’t want to rock the boat too much, somewhat ambiguously stating that he would address the issue of sustainability with an eye to the socioeconomic aspects of fisheries.

Nevertheless, the idea that short-term economic gain at the expense of long-term sustainability is undesirable was clearly embedded in his outlook. *“Sustainability is the long-term game that can attract young people to a sector... They need to see future for themselves, for their families.”*

This theme was echoed in his closing remarks. Sinkevičius concluded: *“This mandate will be the greenest that Europe has ever seen ... It will be also be very blue.”*

“The European Green Deal is a thread that runs through the next Commission portfolios. But the deal is not only about policies, it is not only about the environment, and it is certainly not only about economics ... It’s about the fishermen and women who can no longer go to the sea.”

The first revision of the CFP will take place in 2022.

Greenpeace demands more action on deforestation

According to the European Commission, 1.3 million square kilometres of forest was lost between 1990 and 2016, the equivalent of a football field every 4.5 seconds. Forest destruction is a major environmental problem, accelerating biodiversity loss and climate change, and often associated with human rights violations against indigenous peoples and local communities. Agricultural expansion is responsible for 80% of global deforestation.

At this somewhat pivotal time, Greenpeace is calling on the EU to introduce new laws that would ban products from the European market if they are linked to forest destruction, and prevent European companies or financial institutions from investing in projects that drive deforestation or leading to violations of the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In addition, Greenpeace argued action is needed to change EU farming policies to reduce Europe’s production and consumption of meat and dairy, and to ensure that the meat and dairy produced and consumed is ecological and not linked to deforestation or human rights abuses.

Earlier this year, [the outgoing European Commission published a statement which acknowledged the EU’s role in global deforestation](#) due to consumption and investment, but fell short of proposing concrete policies to address the problem, leaving that to the next Commission.

Greenpeace EU legal strategist Andrea Carta said: *"The EU must urgently clean up its markets: the incoming Commissioner must propose new laws to ensure that no soy, meat, palm oil or other products sold in the EU drive forest destruction or human rights violations any longer."*

EU beef exports to Korea resume after almost 20 years



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South Korea lifted its import restrictions beef products from some EU countries after almost 20 years. Producers from Denmark and the Netherlands are the first to be able to resume exports.

Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis, in charge of health and food safety, welcomed this announcement, stressing: *"This is another sign that trade partners acknowledge that the battle against BSE has been won and that the quality of EU's beef and beef products is recognised around the world. Additional access to this important market is excellent news for EU producers."*

Commissioner for agriculture, Phil Hogan, said: *"This is a very welcome development and an important statement of confidence by the South Korean authorities in the safety and quality of European beef. Following confirmation of access for Danish and Dutch operators, I hope that it won't be long before operators in other EU Member States are approved for export to this important and valuable market. Securing access for other EU Member States will continue to be a priority for the European Commission in bilateral trade relations with Korea."*

The Commission said that the removal of the trade restrictions imposed in 2001 in reaction to the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) outbreak is a sign of well-deserved trust in the EU's 'comprehensive, multi-layered and very efficient food safety and animal health control system'. The Commission said it will continue to work closely with the Korean authorities to secure market access for the remaining Member States that are still awaiting export approval for beef and beef products.

EFSA continues transparency drive in open meeting with pesticide experts

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) continued its drive to build consumer confidence through open and transparent decision making with its 101st Plenary meeting of the Panel on Plant Protection Products and their Residues (PPR), which was open to observers.

EFSA's PPR portfolio found itself in the eye of the storm in recent years when the row erupted over the licensing of controversial chemical glyphosate. This is often viewed as a tipping point when European citizens began to question the legitimacy of authorisation procedures en-mass, with petitions calling for a glyphosate ban attracting more than a million signatures. The outcry paved the way for the introduction of reforms to the General Food Law, with a focus on building trust through transparent decisions.

Antonio Hernández Jerez, chair of the PPR, said that there were some standout topics raised in a packed agenda for the meeting. The first was cumulative risk assessment, looking at *"effect of pesticides present in food items... the nervous system and also on the thyroid."* This has been a growing area of concern for European shoppers.

The second area that stood out due to its 'novelty' was a discussion of testing for developmental neurotoxicity. *"There is a growing concern in the scientific community and also in the population regarding the potential of neurotoxicity effect of some chemicals including pesticides... We tried to develop case studies with the pesticide applying in vitro testing... in order to address whether or not it is fit for purpose."*

Endocrine disruptors, another issue that is no stranger to controversy, were also on the agenda.

Exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals, which are used in food packaging and on pesticides and biocides in food production, has been linked to decreased fertility, a rise in endocrine-related cancers, low sperm quality, obesity and cognition deficit and neurodegenerative diseases, [according to one 2015 study published in the Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism](#).

In 2017, [MEPs stepped in to block an EC proposal](#) that would have exempted some chemicals from being identified as endocrine disruptors.

PPR's more detailed look at endocrine disruptors was 'based on the recent guideline which was adopted in the past year between EC and EFSA,' Hernández Jerez noted.

Trump turns the screw in EU trade tiff

The US has slapped tariffs of 25% on EU agri-food exports, including Scotch whisky, Italian cheese, Spanish olives, German coffee and British biscuits.

President Donald Trump's administration plans to impose retaliatory tariffs on \$7.5bn (€6.8bn) of goods it imports from the EU on 18 October, in response the WTO Airbus subsidy case, which has been rumbling for 15 years. This has provoked the EU food sector to stress that it faces becoming collateral damage in a trade dispute to which it is unconnected.

The tariffs include 25% duties on various cheeses, olive oil, olives, whey protein concentrates and frozen meat from Germany, Spain and the UK; 25% tariffs on sweet biscuits, waffles and wafers from Germany and the UK; 25% tariffs on certain pork products, mussels, cockles, clams, clementines, cherries, butter and yogurt from multiple countries; 25% tariffs on liqueurs and cordials from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain and UK; and 25% duties on single-malt Irish and Scotch whiskies.

Brussels has threatened to retaliate similarly against US goods.

The move is typical of President Trump's aggressive defense of American trade interests. The country is also in an ongoing trade war with China.

[More detailed reporting on this story and reaction from across Europe can be found here.](#)

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