

WHAT FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR AGRICULTURE - HOW TO BRING AGRICULTURE AND NATURE CONSERVATION TOGETHER

A FIRST ROUND OF TALKS WITH MINISTER MARTINE HANSEN

The Mouvement Ecologique recently had a stimulating two-hour exchange with Agriculture Minister Martine Hansen and her officials.

At the beginning of the meeting, which was the first since the minister's inauguration, the general direction of agricultural policy was briefly discussed. In this context, the Mouvement Ecologique regretted that the fundamental orientation of Luxembourg's agricultural policy did not appear to have been discussed at the recent countryside table.

In the opinion of the Mouvement Ecologique, this would be urgently necessary. The question would be whether agriculture should continue to be under pressure from the world market, from 'bigger and bigger', or whether new prospects for small and medium-sized agriculture should be created. Furthermore, in the opinion of the Mouvement Ecologique, the discussion was too short-sighted, as agricultural policy would appear to have been limited to 'procedural' problems, also due to nature conservation requirements. These undoubtedly exist and must be addressed. At the same time, however, it must also be discussed that the current orientation of agricultural policy contributes significantly to the destruction of our natural resources.

Any discussion about the organisation of agriculture must therefore also include the question of how agricultural policy should be shaped and, in particular, how biodiversity and water quality should be preserved. These are key challenges. It is not without reason that the extinction of farms is occurring in parallel with the loss of biodiversity. There is an urgent need for new future prospects for farmers that respect the natural foundations of life. It was pointed out that the model of the 'Future Commission for Agriculture', where representatives from nature conservation, environmental protection and agriculture, among others, sit together at one table, is working relatively successfully in Germany.

The Minister of Agriculture emphasised that the Agriculture Table was primarily concerned with tackling acute problems, such as the problems of building in green zones, the ammonia and nitrate problem, the regulations in water protection areas, as well as short-term adjustments to agricultural legislation, and that the Agriculture Table aims to exchange ideas with agricultural representatives in a topic-oriented and practical manner.

This is partly understandable from the point of view of the Mouvement Ecologique. However, according to the organisation, the biodiversity crisis is also seen as acute. There is a wish that these aspects could be discussed much more in another agriculture table that includes more stakeholders.

Slowing the loss of biodiversity through agriculture - agriculture as a partner of nature conservation

Luxembourg has a so-called third national nature conservation plan (PNPN3). This aims to ensure the conservation of species and habitats and sets out instruments and specific measures. It is recognised that the objectives of PNPN3 can only be achieved through agriculture. In this context, the Mouvement Ecologique presented key aspects of its recently published statement 'Biodiversity crisis comes to a

head: ministries for biodiversity and agriculture must assume their responsibilities immediately'. Unfortunately, agricultural practice is currently contributing to the further destruction of biodiversity. For example, despite national and European protection status, 800 hectares of valuable lowland meadows would have been destroyed between 2017 and 2021.

This led to a very stimulating exchange in which the Minister and her officials stated that it had unfortunately been established that numerous agricultural areas that are valuable from a nature conservation perspective (so-called A and B biotope areas) are not being managed appropriately. There would be good instruments to support farmers in the professional care of these areas and also to encourage and support them financially by means of so-called 'biodiversity programmes'. However, it would be a fact that for a certain number of biotope areas there would be no corresponding management contracts with the farmers. The basic question is: are the right contracts always in place on the right areas? According to the Ministry of Agriculture, the current contracts need to be screened. In order to make the work of the contracting institutions (nature conservation syndicates, nature parks, Convis, etc.) more efficient and targeted, a convention for the exchange of information on completed support programmes has already been concluded. According to the Minister, nature conservation syndicates and nature parks can use this information to work faster and in a more targeted manner.

Overall, the minister is focussing primarily on voluntary measures on the part of farmers, while the Mouvement Ecologique pointed out that there are also obligations to respect nature conservation goals.

In this context, Martine Hansen also raised the question of whether the goals of the PNP3 were realistic at all. She also referred to the problem of scrub encroachment in various green spaces due to a lack of management. Unfortunately, this problem is not often addressed. She also emphasised that we should not lose sight of food production. Ultimately, the preservation of livelihoods must be guaranteed and this is non-negotiable.

The discussion centred on who is responsible for this situation, as there are numerous stakeholders involved: the two ministries for agriculture and the environment, climate and biodiversity, agricultural advisory structures, biological stations and nature conservation syndicates, nature parks, etc.

The Mouvement Ecologique has raised the issue of controls. The fact is that the loss of 800 hectares of lowland meadows in recent years has not been penalised and has had no consequences to date! This is why the Mouvement Ecologique has also filed a complaint in Brussels.

Which advisory structures for farmers

This discussion once again highlighted the issue of good advisory structures for farmers. The Mouvement Ecologique has been advocating 'integrated' advice for years. This is because there are currently umpteen different advisory actors that farmers have to deal with: those of the so-called COPIL areas, the 'water animators', the traditional agricultural advisors, syndicate advisors.... This would be quite confusing for the farmer and would not actually be expedient. There was a consensus that it was necessary to discuss how the advisory services could be better structured and whether a pilot project should be launched for this type of ongoing, whole-farm advice.

To date, integrated advice has only been provided as part of larger investment projects. However, this would also have to integrate ecological issues to a much greater extent and involve experts in this field.

Softening the environmental requirements of European agricultural subsidies

The Mouvement Ecologique also spoke to the Minister of Agriculture about the fact that some 'conditionality clauses' (the 'mandatory' requirements for receiving support) for agricultural businesses in the area of nature conservation have now been softened at EU level. However, each country is free to decide whether to retain the current provisions or effectively relax them.

For the Mouvement Ecologique, it is regrettable that the Minister stated that Luxembourg would implement the relaxation of the 'GAEC standards' (good agricultural and environmental condition) recommended at EU level, e.g. a certain proportion of set-aside is no longer mandatory, the number of crop rotations on a plot is reduced, etc

Financial aid for lateral entrants and for smaller companies

Another item on the agenda was the provisions of the agricultural law on the promotion of first-time installations. According to the Mouvement Ecologique, there are currently problems with how these are handled, meaning that smaller farms, vegetable growers and newcomers to the sector are particularly disadvantaged. However, the Minister stated that this was not desirable on her part and that the passages of the law and their interpretation would be looked at more closely. In any case, a solution should be found.

Training for lateral entrants, who are urgently needed, was also discussed. The Minister stated that concrete discussions were already underway in this area, for example to ensure that training could be provided alongside work.

Pesticide pollution in Luxembourg

There was also a brief discussion about the pesticide burden in Luxembourg, including the existing statistics on the sale of pesticides. The Mouvement Ecologique would consider it useful if sales figures for pesticides were published more transparently, as in practically all other EU Member States. For its part, the Ministry of Agriculture emphasised that Luxembourg publishes the most detailed information on the use of pesticides in Europe, which is de facto more informative than the sales figures. According to the Ministry, sales figures for plant protection products may not be published in detail in Luxembourg for reasons of data protection, but the Mouvement Ecologique questions this view.

The Mouvement Ecologique is also in favour of introducing serious safety distances from 'sensitive' structures such as nurseries, schools and hospitals when using plant protection products. This is to increase their protection. The Ministry stated that the Ministry of Agriculture was working on this.

The Minister was also recommended to supplement the annual reports of the 'Sécurité alimentaire' on pesticide residues in food so that the differences between organic and conventionally produced products as well as between conventional products produced in Luxembourg and those imported should be published transparently. The fact is that the organic food produced in Luxembourg is free of pesticide residues, while the conventional food produced in Luxembourg is less contaminated than the imported food.

Organic farming, Restopolis / public canteens

The question of how organic farming can be promoted more strongly was also briefly touched on, but this issue will undoubtedly need to be explored in greater depth in a further phase.

The procurement of food in public canteens was also discussed. The Mouvement Ecologique emphasised that it would expressly welcome this purchasing policy, which places greater emphasis on

organic and regional products. This policy must be maintained at all costs and should be extended to other public canteens. According to its own statements, the Ministry of Agriculture is actively involved in this expansion.

The Ministry of Agriculture stated that Restopolis was run under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and that this would be maintained. Cooperation with other public canteens would have to be discussed further and this would be the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture.

The Mouvement Ecologique argued that it would make sense for the Ministry of Agriculture to take its lead from the Ministry of Education in the school fruit programme and send a clear signal to producers that more organic and regionally produced fruit should be purchased in future. The Minister of Agriculture stated that solutions would be sought internally in order to supply more regional products.

All in all, it was a stimulating and constructive exchange. There were different points of view, particularly on how 'mandatory' biodiversity concerns must or must not be taken into account by agriculture. However, there was a certain consensus that there is a need for reform in the concrete handling on site and that new perspectives and paths need to be opened up there.

May 2024