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President

Jože Podgoršek

Slovenian Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Food

P R E S S

CONTENTS¹

ITEMS DEBATED

AGRICULTURE	4
New EU forest strategy for 2030	4
Market situation	6
ANY OTHER BUSINESS.....	7
EU-UK consultations on fishing opportunities for 2022	7
2021 Farm to Fork conference	7
EU Pollinator Week 2021	8
Contingency plan for ensuring food supply and food security	8
12th World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference (MC12)	8
Volcanic activity on La Palma	9
Brown bear and wolf populations	9
CAP strategic plans.....	10

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

FISHERIES

– Mediterranean and Black Sea fishing opportunities for 2021	11
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AGRICULTURE

– EU position on trade standards.....	11
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¹ • Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
 • Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
 • Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the Council's internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL AFFAIRS

- Council Decision approving the external auditors of the Central Bank of Ireland..... 11

TRANSPARENCY

- Transparency - Public access to documents 11

ITEMS DEBATED

AGRICULTURE

New EU forest strategy for 2030

The Council adopted conclusions on the new EU forest strategy for 2030. In their conclusions, ministers welcomed the strategy and recognised the need for forests to contribute more to the European Green Deal and global targets such as the 2030 Agenda. In particular, they highlighted the essential role of forests for human health, animal health and a healthy natural environment under the ‘One Health’ approach. They also agreed that forestry could play a key role in the EU’s transition to a green, climate-neutral and competitive circular bio-economy. Moreover, they welcomed the new strategy’s emphasis on promoting sustainable wood-based products and the proposal to set up a new partnership for forestry research and innovation.

Nevertheless, the delegations highlighted the need to strike a balance between the environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainable forest management, and stressed the importance of respecting and maintaining the diversity of forests and forest management practices in different member states and regions. Moreover, the member states expressed doubt about the value of developing national strategic plans for forestry, as envisaged in the Commission’s communication, and encouraged the use of existing international monitoring and reporting processes. Finally, ministers felt that a new EU forest strategy should include an international dimension aimed at curbing global deforestation.

Background

On 14 July 2021 the European Commission published the new EU forest strategy for 2030. As one of the flagship elements of the European Green Deal, the initiative built on the EU’s biodiversity strategy and aimed to form a key part of efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. In its communication, the Commission set out a number of proposed measures aimed at increasing the size and quality of Europe’s forests and improving their resilience to challenges such as climate change, while also supporting communities whose livelihood depends on forestry.

The measures proposed by the Commission to restore Europe's forests and protect forest-based industries include:

- promoting sustainable forest management (SFM), including by encouraging the sustainable use of wood-based resources
- providing financial incentives for forest owners and managers to adopt environmentally friendly practices such as those linked to carbon storage and sequestration
- improving the size and biodiversity of forests, including by planting 3 billion new trees by 2030
- promoting alternative forest industries such as ecotourism, as well as non-wood products such as cork, honey and medicinal plants
- encouraging the take-up of financial support under the Common Agricultural Policy, which can help forests and forest-based industries mitigate against climate change
- providing education and training for people working in forest-based industries and making these industries more attractive to young people
- establishing a legally binding instrument for ecosystem restoration
- protecting the EU's remaining primary and old-growth forests

Next steps

In its communication, the Commission set out a timetable detailing the concrete steps it would take during the period 2021-2023 to achieve the aims of the new EU forest strategy. It announced its intention to review the strategy by 2025 in order to assess progress and determine whether further action was needed. The Council's conclusions also called on the Commission to provide annual updates on the implementation of the strategy, and to involve the Council in any further action that may be taken on the basis of the review.

Market situation

Based on information provided by the Commission and member states, ministers held an exchange of views on the market situation with regard to agricultural products. The discussion focused in particular on issues in the pigmeat sector and the impact on agriculture of rising energy and feed costs. The Lithuanian delegation also took the floor to present a common declaration, supported by the Austrian, Belgian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Cyprus, Czech, Estonian, French, Greek, Hungarian, Latvian, Polish and Slovak delegations, requesting urgent exceptional EU support measures for the pigmeat sector under the Common Market Organisation Regulation.

On the whole, the Commission reported, the EU's agri-food sector had continued to recover following the gradual lifting of COVID-19 restrictions. Export rates to the US and China had been high, especially for dairy, pigmeat and olive oil. Bilateral trade with the UK had also recovered, although a number of uncertainties remained as regards future border controls.

Nevertheless, factors such as the recovery of the EU, US and Chinese economies had contributed to rising energy prices, in particular for natural gas in Europe. This had affected fertiliser prices, which had virtually doubled in the space of a year. High energy prices and disruptions to supply chains caused by COVID-19 had also led to a rise in transport costs.

Inflation was generally on the rise, particularly for energy, raw materials, fertilisers and freight costs. While the European Central Bank remained optimistic, the Commission noted, market developments in these sectors needed to be monitored closely.

In response to the common declaration presented by the Lithuanian delegation, the Commissioner for the environment, oceans and fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius, outlined the measures available to member states to address the issues in the pigmeat sector, including State aid and rural development funds, and encouraged delegations to make use of these tools.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS**EU-UK consultations on fishing opportunities for 2022**

Ministers held an exchange of views on progress made in consultations on fishing opportunities for stocks shared with the United Kingdom for 2022, based on information provided by the presidency and the Commission. The ministers provided further political guidance to the Commission on the position to be taken by the EU during these ongoing negotiations. In particular, they stressed the importance of concluding the negotiations in a timely manner. A number of delegations also noted their priorities in terms of species.

Following the UK's withdrawal from the EU, consultations between the EU and the UK on shared fish stocks will take place annually in line with the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement. The role of the Council is to provide guidance to the Commission on the EU's position in the consultations, while also receiving regular updates on the progress of the negotiations.

2021 Farm to Fork conference

The Commission briefed ministers on the second annual Farm to Fork Conference, which took place in Brussels on 14-15 October 2021. This year's conference, which attracted thousands of viewers from nearly 70 countries around the world, focused on the progress made to implement the farm to fork strategy and achieve a global transition to sustainable food systems. The event brought together representatives from the Commission, the Council and the United Nations, as well as key stakeholders including public authorities, international organisations, primary producers, retailers and food business operators.

Over the course of the two-day conference, participants stressed the need for ambitious measures to facilitate the transition to more sustainable food systems, while also taking into account the social and economic aspects of sustainability. They highlighted the importance of technology and knowledge transfer and the need to share examples of best practice.

During the Council discussion, a number of member states took the floor to reiterate their support for the goals of the farm to fork strategy. Some delegations also stressed the need to ensure that the EU's trade policy was aligned with these goals.

EU Pollinator Week 2021

The presidency informed ministers about 2021's EU Pollinator Week, which took place on 27-30 September. This four-day event brought together speakers from the Commission, the European Parliament and the member state administrations, as well as academics and NGO representatives. The event explored ways to step up EU action to reverse the decline of pollinators by 2030. Recommendations included the need to enhance communication and cross-sectoral dialogue at EU and national level, including via engagement of key stakeholders and civil society.

As part of this event, the Commission organised a workshop entitled 'EU actions for pollinators in agricultural landscapes', which involved key stakeholders from farming, environmental bodies, public authorities and civil society. The workshop generated a number of concrete policy proposals that had the potential to inform member states' CAP strategic plans.

During the Council meeting, a number of member states took the floor to express their support for the main messages of the workshop, highlighting the importance of protecting pollinators and the invaluable role they played in maintaining biodiversity and ensuring the pollination of a large majority of crops. Many delegations also called on the Commission to provide safe alternative non-chemical pesticides that could protect pollinators without endangering food security.

Contingency plan for ensuring food supply and food security

The Commission gave a presentation to ministers about the contingency plan for ensuring food supply and food security. The recent pandemic had highlighted the need to safeguard the EU's food supply against potential future threats. The farm to fork strategy envisaged a contingency plan for ensuring food security, which would be activated in the event of a crisis. The plan would involve stakeholders from every stage of the food chain, from primary production to input and food processing, transport, the retail and wholesale sector, and consumers. Other relevant aspects of food security, such as food safety and labour issues, would also be taken into consideration.

12th World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference (MC12)

The Commission informed ministers about the ongoing preparations for the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC12), which would take place in Geneva from 30 November to 3 December 2021. Discussions touched upon a number of agricultural issues, including domestic support, public stockholding, market access and a review of the Bali decision on tariff rate quotas. In particular, delegations discussed the transparency initiative, the proposal to exempt World Food Program purchases from export restrictions, and the negotiations on fisheries subsidies.

Volcanic activity on La Palma

The Spanish delegation informed ministers about the recent volcanic eruption on the Canaries island of La Palma and its impact on local farming. It also requested financial support under the Programmes of Options Specifically Relating to Remoteness and Insularity (POSEI) scheme, which supports the EU outermost regions facing specific challenges due to remoteness, insularity, small size, difficult topography or climate.

The delegation reported that lava had continued to pour from the Cumbre Vieja volcano since a crack opened in the side of the mountain on 19 September 2021, leading to the destruction of neighbouring villages and farmland. More than a thousand homes had been completely destroyed, along with basic infrastructure, schools, agricultural land, livestock farms and fruit plantations. The volcanic eruption had had a huge impact on the island's agricultural production, with banana plantations most severely affected.

A number of member states took the floor to express solidarity with Spain and support the delegation's request for financial assistance. In response, Mr Sinkevičius indicated that the Commission would be willing to consider all possible solutions for supporting La Palma. He went on to outline several relevant tools, both under the Common Agricultural Policy (exceptional POSEI programme modifications, support for natural disasters under the rural development programmes) and outside it (Solidarity Fund, state aid).

Brown bear and wolf populations

The Slovak delegation provided information about difficulties experienced in handling the populations of brown bears and wolves. They explained that under the Habitats Directive, member states were required to maintain or restore the favourable conservation status of large carnivores such as bears and wolves, which had led to significant growth of carnivore populations in certain EU regions. The impact on livestock farmers of conflicts with these species could amount to hundreds of thousands of euros per year. Although measures such as herd protection and compensation under the Common Agricultural Policy went some way towards addressing these issues, in many cases farmers were still forced to give up farming altogether, leading to employment issues and rural-urban migration.

Slovakia, with the support of Austria, Czechia, Finland, Germany and Romania, called on the Commission to develop a long-term strategy and seek consensus at EU level on ways to deal with this issue. A number of member states took the floor to express their support for Slovakia's request; many of them called for an EU-wide solution that would balance both the conservation needs of large carnivores and the need to protect livestock.

CAP strategic plans

The Hungarian delegation presented a joint declaration on behalf of the ministers of agriculture of the Visegrád Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania. The declaration called on the Commission, inter alia, to allow for greater flexibility in the deadline for submitting strategic plans, ensure that the procedure for adopting the plans was fair, objective and transparent, and avoid additional administrative burden when introducing the new delivery model.

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

FISHERIES

Mediterranean and Black Sea fishing opportunities for 2021

The Council adopted a regulation amending Council Regulation (EU) 2021/90, fixing for 2021 the fishing opportunities in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. [12915/21, [13125/21](#)]

AGRICULTURE

EU position on trade standards

The Council adopted a decision on the position to be taken by the EU regarding trade standards at the November 2021 session of the International Olive Council. [13285/21 + ADD 1, [12772/21](#), [12781/21](#)]

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL AFFAIRS

Council Decision approving the external auditors of the Central Bank of Ireland

The Council adopted its decision to approve Mazars as the external auditors of Banc Ceannais na hÉireann/the Central Bank of Ireland for the financial years 2021 to 2022. [[12465/21](#)], [[12464/21](#)]

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency - Public access to documents

On 15 November 2021, the Council approved the letter of reply to the Ombudsman concerning Complaint 717/2021/DL (doc. 13397/21).
