



# OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

## **Action Plan for the development of EU organic production**

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions  
on an Action Plan for the development of EU organic production  
[COM(2021) 141 final]

**NAT/818**

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**EN**

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Adopted in section	09/09/2021
Adopted at plenary	22/09/2021
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Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	185/3/4

## 1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC):

- 1.1 recognises the role of organic farming in achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal and welcomes this communication from the European Commission on an action plan for the development of organic production. The EESC sees this a solid basis for developing the organic sector in a sustainable manner;
- 1.2 considers the European Green Deal target of making 25% of agricultural land in the EU organic by 2030 to be very ambitious;
- 1.3 supports in particular the Commission's market-oriented approach to further increasing consumer demand and confidence in organic products. A balance between demand and supply is crucial for the sector's successful development;
- 1.4 recommends establishing a kind of "twinning mechanism" to step up exchanges of experience between Member States, since they are starting out from different positions. Exchanges between farmers should also be encouraged. The EESC would be happy to take part in any activities to raise awareness of organic production (for example as part of an annual EU organic day);
- 1.5 calls on the Member States, with the involvement of the relevant stakeholders, to draw up national/regional organic action plans and make use of the opportunities available under the common agricultural policy (CAP) to support organic farming. Particular attention should be paid to the challenging period during the conversion to organic farming;
- 1.6 considers the proposed measures for improving market transparency and the data available in the organic sector to be important. In this context, the EESC would suggest that DG AGRI's annual Agricultural Outlook conference should also appropriately reflect developments in the organic sector;
- 1.7 emphasises that consumers are increasingly setting store by regional food. The EESC believes that shorter and local organic production and marketing chains that also take account of seasonality could be a promising way of generating more added value along the food chain. The EESC also sees potential for additional employment opportunities in rural areas;
- 1.8 points out that organic products usually cost more than conventional products. This is an obstacle for certain low-income social groups. The EESC therefore suggests that appropriate accompanying measures be put in place to ensure that organic products are also accessible to socially vulnerable groups;
- 1.9 believes, in particular, that the public sector (local, city, regional and federal authorities) should make greater use of regional organic food products in public procurement (e.g. in canteens). In doing so, they should also take account of seasonality;

1.10 stresses the need for sufficient financial resources for research and innovation to support the organic sector.

## 2. Background

2.1 As part of the European Green Deal, the European Commission has set an ambitious target with the Farm to Fork Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy for organic production in the EU: at least 25% of agricultural land is to be farmed organically by 2030. On 25 March 2021, the European Commission published an Organic Action Plan<sup>1</sup> to support Member States in the implementation of the target.

2.2 According to the European Commission, the new Organic Action Plan builds upon the achievements of the 2014-20 action plan and takes into account the outcome of a public consultation on organics held between September and November 2020<sup>2</sup>. It is divided into three interlinked priority areas:

- Axis 1: stimulate demand and ensure consumer trust
- Axis 2: stimulate conversion and reinforce the entire value chain
- Axis 3: improve the contribution of organic farming to environmental sustainability

2.3 The three priorities are underpinned by 23 actions and various funding sources are to be brought into play. Financial support for organics will continue to be offered through rural development commitments (pillar 2), with an additional stream of funding to be made available through eco-schemes (pillar 1). In addition, an ambitious budget in the EU promotion policy will be dedicated to boosting the consumption of organic products.

2.4 Farm advisory services will be strengthened to promote relevant knowledge exchange on organic farming. To support the ambitions of the action plan, the European Commission intends to dedicate at least 30% of the budget for research and innovation actions in the field of agriculture, forestry and rural areas to topics specific to or relevant for the organic sector, such as increased crop yields, genetic diversity and alternatives to contentious products.

2.5 In more detail under the three different axes the proposed actions aim to:

### **Axis 1: stimulate demand and ensure consumer trust**

- a) promoting organic farming and the EU logo;
- b) promoting organic canteens and increasing the use of green public procurement;
- c) reinforcing organic school schemes;
- d) preventing food fraud and strengthening consumer trust;
- e) improving traceability;
- f) facilitating the contribution of private sector.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/organic-farming/organic-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/organic-farming/organic-action-plan_en)

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12555-Organic-farming-action-plan-for-the-development-of-EU-organic-production\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12555-Organic-farming-action-plan-for-the-development-of-EU-organic-production_en)

## **Axis 2: stimulate conversion and reinforce the entire value chain**

- a) encouraging conversion, investments and exchanges of best practices;
- b) developing sector analysis to increase market transparency;
- c) supporting the organisation of the food chain;
- d) reinforcing local and small-value processing and fostering short trade circuit;
- e) improving animal nutrition in accordance with organic rules;
- f) reinforcing organic aquaculture.

## **Axis 3: improve the contribution of organic farming to environmental sustainability**

- a) reducing the environmental footprint and mitigating the contribution to climate change;
- b) enhancing genetic diversity and increasing yields;
- c) developing alternatives to contentious inputs and other plant protection products;
- d) enhancing animal welfare;
- e) making more efficient use of resources.

2.6 For the implementation, the European Commission recommends that the Member States draw up appropriate national organic action plans with clear objectives and taking into account regional circumstances, and incorporate these accordingly in the national CAP strategic plan.

2.7 This opinion has to be read in the context of previous EESC opinions related to sustainable food production and consumption (among others on the compatibility of EU trade policy with the European Green Deal<sup>3</sup>, on the Farm to Fork sustainable food strategy<sup>4</sup>, on short food supply chains and agroecology<sup>5</sup>, and on healthy and sustainable diets<sup>6</sup>);

### **3. General comments**

3.1 The EESC considers the European Green Deal target of making 25% of agricultural land in the EU organic by 2030 to be very ambitious. At present, the figure is around 8.5%. In other words, the area organically farmed is to be roughly tripled by 2030. By way of comparison: between 2009 and 2019, the area organically farmed rose from around 8.3 to around 13.8 million hectares (+70%), with a progressive trend. The 25% target entails expanding the organically farmed area to around 40 million hectares, well above the current trend.

3.2 The EESC welcomes the Commission's market-oriented approach to further increasing consumer demand and confidence in organic products. A balance between demand and supply is crucial for the organic sector's successful development.

3.3 The expansion of organic production must also be demand-oriented. Care should be taken to anticipate an increase in supply with a corresponding development of the demand side. If

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<sup>3</sup> EESC opinion on *Compatibility of EU trade policy with the European Green Deal*, [OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 66](#)

<sup>4</sup> EESC opinion on *A From Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, health and environmentally-friendly food system*, [OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 268](#)

<sup>5</sup> EESC opinion on *Promoting short and alternative food supply chains in the EU: the role of agroecology*, [OJ C 353, 18.10.2019, p. 65](#)

<sup>6</sup> EESC opinion on *Promoting healthy and sustainable diets in the EU*, [OJ C 190, 5.6.2019, p. 9](#)

organic food production is driven more than demand, this inevitably leads to negative competition on the market and, consequently, to a fall in producer prices.

- 3.4 Organic farming usually means higher per unit production costs (due to extra costs and lower yield) compared with conventional farming. These additional costs also have to be covered by corresponding market revenues if the development of the organic sector is to be sustainable. However, as professionalisation along the whole organic food chain progresses, the price/performance ratio should develop positively.
- 3.5 Member States are starting out from very diverse positions. On the one hand, there are those where organic farming and its marketing are already well established. On the other, there are those where the percentage of organically farmed areas is only in the low single figures. Due account must be taken of these different regional starting points in the planning of the measures. The EESC recommends establishing a kind of "twinning mechanism" to step up exchanges of experience between Member States. Member States with a well-established organic sector have often adopted a "push-pull" approach and taken both measures to promote production and measures to increase demand for organic products. The food retail sector also plays an essential role in the further development of the organic sector.
- 3.6 The wide variety of structures and significant regional differences in Europe repeatedly lead to complex situations and issues in the implementation of the provisions of the EU Organic Regulation. To successfully develop the sector, a balance needs to be found that meets the need for consistent application of the rules across the EU, fulfils consumers' expectations and provides the necessary flexibility to take appropriate account of local differences and circumstances, where possible under the Regulation.
- 3.7 The European Commission's Organic Action Plan here under discussion, which focuses on three priority areas (promoting consumption, increasing production and further strengthening sustainability), provides a solid basis for the sustainable development of the organic sector. Implementation in the Member States should be accompanied by a continuous monitoring and evaluation process.
- 3.8 The Member States, with the involvement of the relevant stakeholders, should draw up national/regional organic action plans and make use of the opportunities available under the CAP (including when drafting the national CAP strategic plans) to support organic farming.

#### 4. **Specific comments**

- 4.1 High consumer confidence is a prerequisite for the success of organic farming. Consumers must be able to rely on compliance with applicable production standards throughout the food chain, from production to processing and consumption. The measures provided for so as to prevent fraud and improve traceability are therefore especially important. In particular, it is a good idea to also make use of the opportunities offered by digitalisation.
- 4.2 The planned measures to improve market transparency and the data available in the organic sector will help economic operators to draw the right conclusions in this process. So far,

statistics at European level have in the main not distinguished between conventional and organic product segments. The inclusion of organic production in the analyses carried out by DG AGRI's market observatories is a step forward. In this connection, the Committee would suggest that DG AGRI's annual AGRI Outlook conference should also appropriately reflect developments in the organic sector.

- 4.3 The planned strengthening of farm advisory services and measures to promote the exchange of knowledge on organic farming are important flanking measures. Exchanges between scientists, advisory services, the education sector, farmers and society should be stepped up. Regional and international exchange programmes can be very beneficial, especially for young farmers.
- 4.4 Consumers should also be informed about the benefits and challenges of organic products through appropriate awareness-raising measures (ideally beginning in school). The EU's school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme<sup>7</sup> provides a good point of reference in this regard.
- 4.5 In order to raise awareness of organic production, the European Commission plans, among other things, to introduce an annual EU Organic Day and to organise prizes for excellence in all sectors of the organic food chain. The EESC would be happy to be a partner on this.
- 4.6 Consumers are increasingly setting store by regional food. The COVID-19 pandemic has made people even more sensitive to food quality. Shorter and local organic production and marketing chains, in combination, could therefore be a promising way of generating more added value. With regard to sustainability, where possible, organic production, regionality and seasonality should be considered together. A further strengthening of the EU organic logo should be possible in step with the strengthening of established national/regional organic labels. The information provided on the origin of food (raw materials) should be as specific as possible; it should go beyond labelling of "EU/non-EU agriculture", and where possible should indicate the country or region.
- 4.7 There could be great potential for organic products in tourism and gastronomy. This requires transparency and credible certification schemes.
- 4.8 Organic farming is often accompanied by an increase in the workforce due to the greater variety of production processes and thus also has the potential to provide additional employment opportunities in rural areas. On the other hand, the higher labour costs can hamper the development of the organic sector.
- 4.9 Organic products usually cost more than conventional products, though the price difference is tending to narrow (in part due to rising productivity in organic farming and in part because environmental requirements in other forms of agriculture are increasing as the CAP evolves). This is an obstacle for certain low-income social groups, such as pensioners, younger people and families from lower-income social classes. The EESC therefore suggests that appropriate

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[https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/market-measures/school-fruit-vegetables-and-milk-scheme\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/market-measures/school-fruit-vegetables-and-milk-scheme_en)

measures be put in place to ensure that organic products are also accessible to these social groups.

- 4.9.1 Consumer watchdogs point out, for example, that percentage margins in retail are in some cases significantly higher for organic products than for non-organic products, which may affect the pricing of organic products in relation to conventional food products. Trading margins should be reasonable.
- 4.9.2 In some Member States, the – at times significant – price gap with conventional products is a major obstacle to the growth of the consumer market for organic products. Organic food prices also include higher standards for public goods, such as biodiversity on farmland or animal welfare. Against this backdrop, the inclusion of externalities (true-cost pricing) in all products could be a way to support the organic farming sector.
- 4.9.3 The EESC believes, in particular, that the public sector (local, city, regional and federal authorities) should also set a good example here and make greater use of seasonal and regional organic food products in public procurement (e.g. in canteens). Many European cities<sup>8</sup> (including Copenhagen, Vienna and Nuremberg) have already implemented very successful ideas in this regard.
- 4.9.4 Shorter food chains, as well as direct marketing opportunities, offer opportunities to set prices that are reasonable for both producers and consumers.
- 4.10 An increasing share of organic land will bring new challenges. Monitoring arrangements should be established to track the trends in pest pressure and plant diseases as climate change advances. Sufficient funding for applied research is needed to cultivate varieties suitable for organic farming, and develop effective phytosanitary measures and innovative solutions. The EESC stresses that free access to varieties and seeds must be ensured.
- 4.11 In animal nutrition, there have been difficulties for a number of years now in obtaining sufficient organic protein feed and essential amino acids (vitamin B). The promised stepping-up of research into alternatives in this area is urgently needed and warmly welcomed.
- 4.12 For farmers, the conversion period represents a particular challenge because, during this time, their expenses are already higher (e.g. for control costs, organic inputs), but they cannot yet market their products as organic goods. The Member States should provide for appropriate support measures in this regard. The possibility of establishing a market for "conversion-period products" (between organic and conventional) should also be assessed.

Brussels, 22 September 2021

Christa Schweng

The president of the Section for European Economic and Social Committee

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<https://www.organic-cities.eu/>.