

Rome, 5th December 2023

FESASS' position paper on the European Farm to Fork Strategy

Animal Health is a key factor for sustainable food production

FESASS has welcomed with great interest the European Commission's proposal for a " Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally - friendly food system" (F2F). In our view, animal health is a key factor determining the quality and sustainability of livestock production. Even if animal health is not prominently mentioned in the document, this should be reflected in the implementation of the Farm to Fork strategy. Therefore, our Federation wanted to take part in the Commission's approach while relying on the expertise and experience of its member organisations. To this end, our Board asked Mr Reimer BÖGE, President of ADT and former Member of the European Parliament, to lead the reflection within our organisations. Despite the difficult conditions due to the pandemic, we organised two conferences on the links between health and sustainability, the involvement of our organisations and farmers in this area and on international aspects. In the light of this work and after internal consultations, our federation has adopted the present position with strong and concrete commitments from its members. For us, it is a question of both contributing at the European institutional level to the implementation of a more balanced strategy and of providing effective support to livestock farmers on the field in the face of these challenges.

Integrating a broader and more balanced approach

The European Commission's Farm to fork Strategy is a real roadmap for European action with a series of concrete objectives for agriculture and livestock farming as well as for the entire agri-food chain to be achieved by 2030. It therefore completes and broadens the field opened up by the Green Deal and the new CAP.

Generally speaking, the implementation of the Green Deal and the F2F Strategy must not be solely focused on climate action but also consider all aspects that are necessary for a sustainable development of the EU agricultural sector. It is true that climate change is a major concern. Livestock farmers and their farms are among the first to be exposed to the consequences of the serious climatic events that are multiplying. But the problems and challenges we face go far beyond that. It is in fact an inseparable triptych: economy - ecology - social balance. None of the components of this triptych should be neglected, which requires a truly holistic approach.

Firstly, food security and safety are public goods which must be acknowledged and ensured. This is a common priority for all societies and requires ensuring a viable economic future for European farms. As former Commissioner Franz Fischler has said, only economically healthy farms can produce public goods in a reliable way.

Secondly, from an ecological point of view, the positive contribution of livestock farming is essential and must be encouraged. It allows the use of plant products and by-products from the production of food that cannot otherwise be used for human consumption. Livestock production keeps grasslands in use that capture more CO₂ than arable land. Therefore, the total balance of greenhouse gas emissions and removals must be evaluated in a complete "input and output" approach. Moreover, *animal production contributes importantly to a balanced human nutrition*.

While acknowledging that the adoption of global targets for the reduction of fertiliser, plant protection product or antibiotic needs a precise reference periods and data from the different sectors and member countries, we insist that previous achievements are respected. FESASS would like to underline the positive trend of reducing inputs, undertaken by the livestock sector, through the continuous improvement and investments in biosecurity, prevention and diagnosis techniques, so as to continue to guarantee good animal health and welfare, and ultimately a high quality of food products. For example, in June 2021, a report by EFSA, EMA and ECDC indicated that antibiotic use decreased by 30% between 2014 and 2018 in animal production, while it increased by 7% in human medicine. According to the same report, human consumption of antimicrobials is now, on average, higher than that of food-producing animals¹. The report also illuminates the large differences between Member States, pointing to significant margins of progress that remain possible and should be assessed according to risk exposure. The latest ESVAC report published in November 2022 confirms the decreasing trend of antimicrobial use in animals.

Animal Health is a key factor for the sustainability of production and is not limited to the debate on antibiotics and animal welfare. In fact, many other areas are part of it and should be encouraged in terms of disease control and prevention by relying, for example, on genetic progress, precision farming or improved surveillance techniques and health qualification of farms.

It is important that the F2F strategy will allow EU production to contribute to global food security and not lead to distortions of trade. Unilaterally raising EU standards without considering the effects on our position in a globalized world (with respect to imports as well as exports of intermediate goods and final products) risks to distort global supply chains and to expose the EU agricultural sector to "unfair" competition from Third countries (as it could potentially encourage them to sell more products of a lower quality, but at a cheaper price to the EU). As has been demonstrated at the conference on "health and production guarantees in international trade" that we organised with the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 30 March 2022, sustainability should be seen as a global concern. Countries or regions in the world should not be played off against each other, but rather work together to address the many simultaneous and considerable challenges we are facing right now. The EU must not push aside its responsibilities and therefore carefully consider the need for greater equivalence of international standards, ensuring a fair income for the farmers.

FESASS would like to stress that any changes in EU legislations regarding animal health and welfare standards must be based on a solid scientific basis, and it should consider the economic sustainability of livestock farmers. The latter is essential in order for the farms to keep investing, to the benefit of animal health and welfare, of the environment and to respond to the growing societal demand for sustainability. With respect to the different scientific EFSA's opinions on welfare, FESASS underlines

¹ Consumption expressed in mg/kg of estimated biomass; source: ECDC/EFSA/EMA REPORT Antimicrobial consumption and resistance - JIACRA III, 2021, page XVII

the EFSA transparency efforts and we recommend that all stakeholders are duly involved in the assessment and decision process.

Moreover, FESASS believes that the EU should keep a high level of ambition and serve as an example to the world in terms of improving sustainability, animal health and welfare throughout the globe without losing sight of the repercussions for its own agricultural sector. The EU should promote its production standards and try to push Third Countries to improve their performance and to invest more in animal health and welfare, the more as common international engagement will foster the "One health" approach. In addition, it is crucial to ensure the coherence with other EU policies and strategies.

In view of these different elements, FESASS considers it essential to have an objective and comprehensive assessment of the consequences of the F2F strategy. Beyond the impact at European level of the 27 measures of the action plan, the evaluation will also have to include the provisions of the National Strategic Plans.

The stakes are extremely high. It is about our food and our ability to produce it sustainably. It is about the future of our children, our health in a "One Health" vision and the future of our planet. The economic future of the entire food sector is also at stake. Our Federation therefore asks the Commission to proceed urgently with this evaluation. It already appears that some pillars of the F2F strategy will have to be supplemented and adapted to the different types of farming that can be found across the EU, in order to make the approach more pragmatic and feasible.

Our commitments for the future

In this spirit and aware of the issues at stake, **FESASS and its member organisations are committed to working at their level to contribute to the implementation of priority objectives. These objectives are in line with the logic of the Farm to Fork Strategy and respond to the principle of the European Animal Health Strategy "*prevention is better than cure*".** Protecting and strengthening the health status of European livestock is our main priority. By reducing the risk of disease in livestock production and the extent of the consequences of contamination, farmers improve the sustainability of their production, the welfare of their animals and effectively combat the development of antimicrobial resistance. We have identified five priority areas of intervention based on our competences and traditional fields of activity:

1°) Inform and sensitize farmers through meetings organised at the local level to raise awareness on prevention, the importance of biosecurity adapted to each farm, animal welfare and the proper use of veterinary medicines. It is not just a matter of holding a one-off information meeting for farmers, but of including these meetings in a long-term awareness-raising process involving the various Animal Health stakeholders. These meetings will therefore be carried out by our organisations according to their own structure and their work and collaboration habits in the field. For example, on this occasion, the partnership with veterinary practitioners could be valued and reinforced.

2°) Organise training sessions for farmers, technicians and veterinarians on biosecurity, animal welfare and/or the fight against antimicrobial resistance. It is indeed necessary to allow and encourage farm managers and other stakeholders in livestock farming to deepen and update their knowledge of these issues. The prospects for technical and regulatory developments call for an increase in training in these areas. Of course, this action should also consider the experience gained by the farmers and

other concerned actors. It will necessarily be based on existing training tools or those to be developed in our organisations and on partnerships in the field.

3°) Support farms in implementing the necessary adaptations to meet the new health and welfare challenges. In addition to raising awareness and training people, we know how necessary it is to develop strong expertise to provide technical support to farmers. This is also part of the job of our animal health organisations. We wish to emphasise this support priority throughout the coming years, while respecting the competences of each individual and in partnership with other livestock farming stakeholders. Our aim is to offer support tailored to the needs of each farm while ensuring an effective collective response from the entire livestock sector. For example, it would be helpful to support (or establish where not existent) advisory services for technical assistance targeted at biosecurity, but also the prevention, management and eradication of zoonosis. Such advisory services, where possible, could be led by farmers' organisations and work in cooperation with the competent national and/or local veterinary and health authorities.

4°) Contribute to research and innovation needed to improve the day-to-day management of animal health and welfare. Indeed, the improvement of prevention supported by the adaptation of surveillance and the development of biosecurity requires more research and innovation. FESASS member organisations are conducting or participating in various projects in these areas. We are committed to ensuring that these initiatives are strengthened and better coordinated in the future. In this respect, FESASS will encourage partnerships between our organisations, research entities and the main financial actors regarding priority needs in applied research. In addition to animal health initiatives, our organisations are also keen to develop livestock farming practices that promote sustainable production. We are looking with interest at the possibilities offered by biogas production in the livestock sector.

5°) Ensure, at European level, the promotion and follow-up of these actions as well as the support to member organisations. FESASS will have to develop the tools for cooperation and follow-up of these actions. It shall put in place the necessary means of communication to ensure the promotion of these commitments and the mobilisation of livestock farmers.

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As a technical organisation for livestock farmers, we are convinced that European livestock farming will be able to adapt to the evolving health, economic, environmental, and societal challenges. Since the introduction of the CAP and its many changes, farmers have not ceased to adapt their farms and production methods, thus demonstrating their full capacity and resilience. However, this ability to adapt can only be perpetuated with respect for people and confidence in the future. This cannot simply be decreed from above but needs to be based on concrete elements and strong commitment from all everybody involved. Our organisations contribute to this at their level and are committed to it.

The Union and the Member States have a considerable responsibility because the future of European food security and safety depend on their will and their ambition.