

Report says end meat and dairy subsidies, tax meat in shift to crop protein diet

By Sara Lewis

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The EU and the UK after Brexit, should end subsidies for meat and dairy production and tax meat and other animal products, to encourage a necessary shift to growing pulses and other protein crops, according to a report released at a lunchtime debate in the European Parliament this week.

The 27 February event, Protein Crops and the Future of Agriculture, saw the UK-based Vegan Society unveil the report it commissioned from the New Economics Foundation on [‘Grow Green – Solutions for the farm of the future’](#) that calls for an end to subsidies for animal farming and taxes on meat, eggs and dairy produce.

Keith Taylor, who co-hosted the debate with fellow British Green MEP Molly Scott Cato, kicked off by explaining the need for the move from animal to protein farming. “Climate change, diet-related chronic diseases and antimicrobial resistance, are some of the biggest threats to people on the planet,” Taylor said, adding that “Over reliance on animal products is a big part of the problem.”

Taylor noted that animal product consumption was responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than transport. He added that the average environmental footprint per calorie of beef is 50 times greater than starches.

Griffin Carpenter, Senior Researcher at the New Economics Foundation, explained that while the report was originally conceived in a UK context it can be seen in the wider EU setting, and the conclusions apply elsewhere.

Protein crops are plants that naturally contain protein (8-12 grams) such as flax, hemp, some cereals, pulses or millet. In the UK they account for just 1% of protein and 5% across the EU as a whole.

Such a low percentage of production, “already creates a problem for research,” Carpenter pointed out as research budgets tend to be determined by market share. The report calls for funding for research aimed at boosting the yields and profitability of protein crops.

The report demands not only an end to subsidies for animal farming but creating a protein aid scheme.

The report further says that the UK and EU also needs to make protein crops the focus of a new farm entry scheme to help young farmers start up.

Radical change required

Carpenter told the assembled audience of MEPs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that it is “important to recognise that there’s radical change required” to the food production and consumption system.

He said that even food waste resulted from food being “so cheap that it doesn’t matter if we throw it away.”

Carpenter argued that “we haven’t figured out how to do low carbon agriculture yet.”

“We haven’t figured out how to do low carbon agriculture yet.” – Griffin Carpenter

He went on to say that “we need an entirely different system.” Carpenter stressed that protein crops are important because of nitrogen fixation into soil, which was “a huge benefit” as it meant they did not need fertiliser, which was very energy intensive to produce.

Protein crops also featured in the UK’s ‘live well’ plate recommendations for a healthy diet and similar initiatives in other countries. Protein crops are “a win, win, win, win solution here so quite unique,” Carpenter stressed, adding that they “tick all the boxes” when it comes to healthy eating, the environment and costs.

Carpenter noted that the EU is currently consulting on a plant protein strategy at the moment. The consultation will feed into a Commission report by the end of 2018 in which it will give its verdict on whether an EU plant protein strategy is needed.

Commission launches public consultation to prepare Protein Plan

By Pieter Devuyt - 19 Feb 2018

Agriculture Commissioner Phil Hogan has announced the launch of a public consultation to gather the necessary information and input from key stakeholders to prepare the EU’s Protein Strategy by the end of the year.

One key benefit that is floated in the consultation is that a strategy to boost protein crop production in the EU would allow the bloc to end its reliance on soy imports. Home-grown protein crops could replace the soy.

Most soy imported goes towards animal feed, Carpenter noted, but the aim mapped out in the report is to replace the animal-based food with plant-based products.

Taxes and subsidies

Undoubtedly the most controversial message from the report is the demand for taxes, but Carpenter said this did not have to mean a tax on animal food products. Rather it would be better to end subsidies for animal farming as it was “a bit counter-intuitive to give money then take it back.”

Carpenter said that policy makers could also look at using public procurement to encourage a shift from animal to protein crop farming and consumption. He pointed out that Denmark had used this tactic to boost organic food and farming “with some success.”

Carpenter noted that his home country, Canada was the number one pulse producer in the world, and that this had been “a deliberate decision of government.”

Critical to this success had been a 1-2% levy on pulse production, which was ploughed back into research and development. This created a positive cycle of more revenue leading to more research funding leading to improvements in the industry so more revenue and research funding.

CAP reform

Dutch animal rights party MEP Anja Hazekamp, who sits with the European United Left group in Parliament, said that with the upcoming reform of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), it was of “high importance that policy makers take a closer look at protein crops.”

Hazekamp argued: “The cost of global climate change can be cut in half if we refrain from eating meat, fish and dairy.”

The Dutch MEP continued that farmers should be paid the full price for the products and that “millions of subsidies for production of agricultural products should be downsized immediately,” adding that “subsidies keep prices too low.” Any subsidies should be reserved for plant-based products.

Hazekamp said that her colleagues on the Agriculture Committee (ComAgri), which she described as “quite a conservative committee,” had asked her “how are you going to feed the world?” Hazekamp said that she had replied that current world production was “more than enough” but was unsustainable because a lot of food produced was being used to feed animals. “That’s food waste,” said Hazekamp.

The MEP ended with a message: “Remember a fork and a knife are our mightiest weapons to feed the world.”

“Remember a fork and a knife are our mightiest weapons to feed the world.” - Anja Hazekamp MEP

Event co-host Scott Cato, who also sits on ComAgri, said “what I’m seeking to secure in my work in the Agriculture Committee” is a shift in diets with people eating less meat and more plant-based meals, rather than the goal of everybody turning vegan.

Later Scott Cato said: “We’re all changing our diets. We’re all on a continuum to eating less dairy, less meat and moving towards a plant-based diet.”

Scott Cato criticised export subsidies for dairy products to China, saying that when 80% of South-East Asians are lactose intolerant, “they don’t think of that.”

But the British Green MEP recognised that “without subsidies most farmers in Europe would not be in business,” so it is an important policy.

“Without subsidies most farmers in Europe would not be in business.” – Molly Scott Cato MEP

Land only suitable for grazing

Carpenter was unable to answer IEG Policy's question about whether it is true that "something like 30%" of land in the UK, and elsewhere, is only suitable for livestock and not growing crops. He replied: "I'm sceptical but probably not the best [person] to comment on that."

He continued: "I don't think that's the relevant question." For Carpenter the question was whether some additional land could be used for protein crops. Most change would be from cereals to protein, he said.

Carpenter added that a change to a five-year rotation between potatoes and wheat for example, getting in pulses could be the way forward. Another question was whether animal grazing was necessary for land or whether it could be left wild.

Hazekamp noted that in the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany, animals were mainly kept indoors, "we don't let them graze." She said the last decade had seen a massive rise in cows being kept indoors with an average unit housing 150 cows, but some over a thousand.

The MEP said that the Netherlands was the second largest exporter, after the US, of agricultural products in the world, with the majority pigs, chicken and dairy products. This was why the Netherlands was a good base for experiments with different food crops.

Later Griffin acknowledged that it is "not always clear if you're grazing sheep in a field in Wales how you change overnight to protein crops," going on to say that this is where research is needed.