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Organic production: the right ground rules for a growing sector

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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

BIOFACH Organic Food Fair

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure to join you here at Biofach.

Among the things that strike me at this event – the largest organic fair in the world - are its astonishing variety and colour. Ever since it first took off, the organic sector has been sustained by a constant stream of energy and fresh ideas, and nowhere do we see that more clearly than here.

If any member of the public thought of the sector as a marginal movement characterised by beards, sandals and oddly shaped carrots, a visit to Biofach would quickly put them right. They would see serious thinking turned into serious business.

This business continues to grow steadily. In 2005 in the European Union of 25 Member States, around 6 million hectares were either farmed organically or were being converted to organic production. This marks a healthy increase of more than 2 per cent on 2004.

Over the same period, the number of organic operators grew by more than 6 per cent. And there has been particular interest in organic production in many of the New Member States.

It is very clear to me that this growing sector has an important role to play. It addresses a range of expectations on the part of the public and consumers: expectations about food quality, care for the environment, animal welfare and rural development.

The organic approach is not the only possible answer to these expectations, but it is certainly one of those answers – a very significant one. So my commitment to the sector is strong.

With that commitment in mind, what is my role? I believe it is to help set the framework within which the organic sector can develop to its full potential.

In that respect, I think we are currently moving forward with strong momentum.

It was back in 2004 that we launched the European Union's Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming. This strategic view of the future of the sector was based around three themes:

- stimulating the organic food market by improving available information;
- making public support for organic farming more effective; and
- improving our organic farming standards, as well as our import and inspection requirements.

We are already well underway in carrying out many of the 21 measures which we set out in the Action Plan to achieve those objectives.

We have done a lot of work to improve our statistical data about organic production. This is essential: we must have sound data available if we want a full understanding of how the sector is developing.

At the same time, we have been working closely with Member States to help them support the organic sector through rural development policy in the most effective way. This has not been about interference in choices which are up to national and regional governments. Rather, we have given guidance and examples of best practice, and have encouraged a more coherent approach across the Union.

We have also been preparing a vigorous campaign to promote organic farming and products in the European Union. The crucial importance of this is clear from the fact that it constitutes the first point in our Action Plan.

The campaign will target a range of groups throughout the European Union – individual consumers, canteens in public institutions, schools, and all key players of the food supply chain.

The central message will be that organic farming holds enormous potential benefits, especially with regard to the environment. We will make sure that these groups **know** what organic products are - instead of having vague, perhaps contradictory ideas – and that organic labelling actually means something to them.

The campaign will not replace existing national promotion programmes, but complement and support them. It will also introduce a particular tool for co-ordination: a new website, available in all European Union languages. This will present news on organic food and farming; it will contain a toolbox of promotion measures; and it will provide links to national sites with promotion programmes.

I expect to be able to launch the campaign before summer this year.

Most recently, following agreement by European Union agriculture ministers last December, we have improved the rules for importing organic products. The changes are good news for overseas suppliers, because they make the import process much easier to manage.

We still allow "organic" imports from third countries which have organic standards and a control system officially recognised as equivalent to ours. But from now on, in third countries which are not on this list, we will also accept authorisations from inspection bodies approved by us.

In time, this will free suppliers in "non-approved" third countries from the burdensome obligation of applying to individual European Union Member States for temporary certificates.

However, there is still a lot of work to be done within the Action Plan to help the organic sector fulfil its potential.

There is more to be done in terms of **information**. Many consumers are still confused about what organic farming is, about what organic products can do for them, and about the various standards, logos and labels. As I have said, our promotion and information campaign will attack this problem head-on.

There is also more to be done in terms of **making public support for organic farming more effective**. We have already made some progress, as I have explained. But among other things, we also need to strengthen our research in this area.

And we also have to do more in terms of **improving and reinforcing our organic farming standards and inspection requirements**. Standards are central to organic farming. We need the *right* standards. The standards must also be clear and coherent, and they must cover all necessary areas. Furthermore, our inspection regime would be more effective if we based it more on assessing risk.

So, as you can see, we are advancing on three main fronts. We are still carrying out a number of measures listed in our Action Plan to sustain this advance. Many of these imply changes to our main European Union Regulation on organic food and farming, and I would like to talk briefly about this now.

We have made good progress on finalising a new Regulation. Agriculture ministers agreed on a "general approach" in December. I expect to hear the opinion of the European Parliament in March; the Agriculture Council would then be able to adopt a final version of the Regulation in June.

I believe that the general approach agreed in December was a good one! Certainly, there are some controversial points – because people who are involved in the organic sector are passionately committed to it. But I think the approach is well-balanced and would genuinely improve the framework within which the sector operates.

Let me give you three examples of the elements which I believe would be helpful.

First, it's a good idea to set out the basics of organic farming in Europe more fully, more clearly, more logically. The scope, the principles and the basic production rules should be together in one text – rather than spread out, as at present – and they should cover all the cases that arise in practice.

This is in line with our drive for simpler agricultural legislation. It would also allow us to "sell" the organic approach better to people who may still be sceptical about it. It's hard to sell a product that you can't accurately describe.

Secondly, it makes sense to simplify the rules about the level of organic material needed to make a food product "organic". I believe that a product should carry an "organic" label only if 95 per cent or more of its content is organic. This is a clear standard for the consumer.

However, this does not mean taking an "all or nothing" approach. Where the threshold of 95 per cent was not met, a product could still list individual organic ingredients in the ingredient list on its packaging.

In fact, this approach should allow **more** operators to use some kind of organic labelling. This could be of interest for a number of products – fruit yoghurt, for example.

Thirdly, it would be valuable to introduce a mandatory EU logo for all organic goods produced in the European Union. This logo should also be available to all imported products, which comply with the EU standards and control system. Last but not least, the logo would always be combined with an indication of whether the product had been produced inside the Union, outside it, or both.

This is about clarity for the consumer. **All** organic products on sale in the Union meet certain standards, and the consumer must see this clearly – only then can the Single Market work smoothly.

Nevertheless, under the provisional new general approach, national and private logos would still be permitted, in addition to the EU logo.

I should add that we want to redesign the EU logo before it becomes mandatory. One of the main aims in doing so would be to make it distinct from other European quality logos, and therefore easy to recognise for the consumer.

Who would design the logo, is an open question. We could organise a public competition – of the sort that gave the European Union its "Together since 1957" logo. Or we could ask Member States to suggest a logo, or ask a consultancy for ideas. Whichever option we might choose, I would of course want to hear the views of a broad range of stakeholders.

Ladies and gentlemen, among other things, I have talked about rules and regulations. This could be misleading: it could give the impression that I want to limit what the European organic sector can do. But I hope it's clear that the opposite is true. I want the sector to reach its full potential – and it can do this only if the framework is right.

If we get that framework right as we update the rules, and if we stick to the objectives of our Action Plan with determination, the future should be bright.

I look forward to continuing that work, in the months ahead.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, I have been asked to say – "I hereby declare BioFach and Vivanness 2007 open!"