

Press briefing: EU’s first legally binding pesticide reduction targets under threat

IFOAM Organics Europe & Global 2000 press briefing on the background and threats to the EU Sustainable Use of Plant Protection Products [Directive]

December 2022

“The window of opportunity to ensure a liveable future on this planet through decisive and targeted action is closing fast. “

Josef Settele, Co-Chair of the World Biodiversity Council

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Introduction

In December 2019, the European Commission presented the [European Green Deal](#) to address accelerating biodiversity loss ([IPBES 2019](#)) that is "putting the future of our food, livelihoods, health and environment under severe threat" ([FAO 2019](#)), and is interlinked with the climate crisis ([IPCC 2019](#)). The EU Green Deal is the first holistic approach Europe has taken to address the major environmental challenges that lie ahead of us. It has been hailed as a project of hope by the scientific community and civil society.

The biodiversity crisis is addressed in both the [Farm to Fork](#) (F2F) and [Biodiversity Strategies](#). These contain a bundle of measures targeted to decrease greenhouse gases, agricultural nitrogen emissions, pesticides and antibiotics use. The strategies also aim to protect pollinators, restore biodiversity-enhancing features on agricultural land and in protected areas, and expand organically farming to 25% of all cultivated land by 2030.

These goals are still to be ensured through concrete legislation. Regarding pesticide reduction targets, which provide in particular for "50% reduction in the use and risk of pesticides by 2030", on June 22, 2022, the EU Commission presented the draft regulation on the sustainable use of plant protection products ([SUR](#)). This provides for:

- Legally binding pesticide reduction targets for all member states, compatible with the EU-wide reduction target of 50% by 2030;
- A ban on all pesticide use in sensitive areas;
- Ensuring all farmers practice [Integrated Pest Management](#) in which chemical pesticides are used only as a last resort;
- Helping farmers access required advice and guidance for more sustainable farming.

Despite the scientifically undisputed urgency of taking action to halt the ongoing loss of biodiversity, resistance to legally binding quantitative targets for pesticide reduction is very strong in some Member States. This is despite the fact that nearly 20 years of EU legal programmes and recommendations without binding targets have brought little progress so far.

20 years of failure to reduce pesticides

In reducing the use and risk of pesticides, the European Union has a long record of empty promises, inconsequential declarations of intent and missed targets

1990's

As early as 1993, the EU recognised the need to reduce the use of chemicals in agriculture in its [Fifth Environmental Action Programme](#) and defined as a target, among other things, the "significant reduction of pesticide use per unit of cultivated area" by the year 2000. At the [Council of Agriculture Ministers in Cardiff](#) in 1998, the member states reaffirmed their determination to reduce the environmental risks of pesticide use, such as the impairment of biodiversity and the pollution of waters.

However, these reduction targets were not to be reflected in pesticide sales statistics. In retrospect, however, a decrease in kilograms of pesticides sold would have been expected simply because synthetic chemical pesticides show a [clear trend](#) toward higher toxicity with each new generation of active substance types developed. This means that even if the intensity of pesticide use over the years had remained the same, sales volumes, expressed in kilograms of active substance, should have declined. But they did not. Sales volumes have even increased since the 1990s ([Neumeister @foodwatch 2022](#) p.19).

2000's

To step up action, in 2007, the EU Commission presented a legislative proposal to

- i. reduce the risk and dependence on pesticides,
- ii. protect ecologically sensitive areas,
- iii. strengthen the principles of Integrated Pest Management, and
- iv. require Member States to have National Action Plans in order to offer farmers advice and guidance for more sustainable farming.

The objectives of the 2009 SUD are strikingly reminiscent of those of the currently negotiated SUR but leave member states much more room for manoeuvre and interpretation. Member states and the European Parliament agreed to these objectives when they adopted the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive ([SUD](#)) No. 128/2009

2010's

In 2013, the [Seventh Environment Action Programme](#) set the objective that by 2020 the use of pesticides will not have any harmful effects on human health or unacceptable influence on the environment, and that such products should be used sustainably. [No substantive action followed.]

In 2017, with no progress made, the successful European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "[Stop Glyphosate](#)" demanded quantitative targets for pesticide reduction from the Commission. In its [response](#), the Commission stated that "EU policy is already directed towards reducing dependency on pesticides and achieving a pesticide-free future as requested by the European Citizens' Initiative". However, the Commission declared it would "re-evaluate the situation on the basis of the resulting data and assess the need for EU-wide mandatory targets for pesticides."

Subsequently, [several audits](#) by the Commission and European Court of Auditors, as well as a [report from the European Environment Agency](#) and a [report from the European Parliament](#), concluded that the goal of reducing the negative impacts of pesticide on human health and the environment was not met and that the SUD was poorly implemented by most Member States and completely neglected by some.

2019-present

Thus, in 2019, a [Save Bees and Farmers](#) ECI asked the Commission for a legally binding 80% reduction in pesticides by 2030 and a complete phase-out by 2035.

In 2020, the Commission presented its F2F and Biodiversity Strategies, both of which propose a 50% pesticide reduction as a key measure. Two years later, the Commission proposed the SUR to make these targets legally binding.

A timeline of Member State Reactions to the F2F / SUR

Proposed due to poor implementation of already existing legal requirements, the SUR was criticised by a dozen mostly Eastern European Member States even before it was presented by the Commission. At the Council meeting of 16 November, however, this group was able to rally a critical mass of member states behind its demand for a complementary impact assessment, which, according to diplomats cited by [POLITICO](#), could be sufficient to “set back the proposal by months, or even kill it”.

These efforts echo a lobby campaign by the [multi-billion Euro pesticide sector](#), embodied by companies such as Bayer, BASF or Syngenta. They have tried to obstruct an ambitious pesticide reduction target ever since the outset of the European Green Deal and its F2F-strategy. A report on this campaign can be [found here](#).

October 2020: France in favour, Austria against

In a [report](#) admitting poor progress of the SUD, the Commission revealed its plans to enshrine in law the 50% reduction target. In October 2020, ministers reacted in Council. [France](#) proposed to argue in favour of the inclusion of the “ambitious 50% reduction target for pesticide use in a revised SUD” and also to implement “ambitious measures related to the protection of pollinators.” But [Austria](#) explicitly objected to the French proposal to positively highlight a legal anchoring of the 50% pesticide reduction target and the protection of pollinators in a revised SUD, as evidenced by Council documents accessed by PAN Europe and GLOBAL 2000 (source: [PAN-Report](#) and [GLOBAL 2000-Factsheet](#); in German only).

March 2022: War in Ukraine, Member States fear for food security debunked by scientists

On 16 March 2022, 7 days before the Commission was due to table its plans to revise the SUR, twelve Member States, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, raised concerns about the Commission's plans for pesticide reduction in a so-called [non paper](#) and put forward alleged negative impacts on European food production. The Commission postponed the presentation of the SUR and floated 22 June as a probable alternative date.

On 18 March 2022, [over 660 Scientists](#) denounced in an open letter “*political efforts to abandon the sustainability targets of the Farm2Fork strategy, including greenhouse gas emission reduction, reduction of nitrogen fertiliser and pesticide use, and protection of fallow land for biodiversity.*” In their statement the scientists highlighted that “[such] efforts do not shield us from the current crisis, they rather worsen it and make the crisis permanent. Global warming and ecosystem decline are already affecting crop yields and livelihoods worldwide, a situation that will substantially deteriorate in the absence of ambitious mitigation strategies” and that in Europe “we need a food system transformation – in the face of the Ukraine war, now more than ever.”

June 2022: 10 Member States express concerns again, Commission proposes SUR

On 8 June, two weeks before the Commission was due to announce its SUR plans, ten member states, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, complained in a second [non paper](#) that there was a “need for discussion”. They fundamentally questioned binding pesticide reduction targets, arguing that “setting the obligation to act instead of the obligation to reach the target will secure better implementation of the legislation.” Undeterred, the Commission presented the SUR proposal on 22 June. Since then, the proposal has been regularly reviewed in Council working groups as well as in the environment and agriculture committees of the European Parliament.

September 2022: 3rd Member States non-paper, requesting another impact assessment

On 22 September, almost the same ten member states (Lithuania had left but Malta joined) submitted a third [non paper](#) stating that their “main concern is that the impact assessment on which the proposed regulation is based does not take into account the impact of the war in Ukraine on global food security and the resulting threats to the European Union.” They asked for an additional impact assessment, that should take into account

- i. the impact of the draft regulation on EU food production;
- ii. the increased dependence on food imports;
- iii. the reduction of EU resilience to crisis events disrupting supply chains, such as the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the severe drought;

Neutrality of the Czech Presidency in doubt

The Czech Republic has not officially taken sides since adopting the neutral role required of a Council Presidency. NGOs, however, question this. The Czech interpretation of majorities seems to be questionable, according to the Council protocol, made available to us. This says, with our emphasis added:

*“The CZE Presidency concluded that the majority of MS were in favour of a renewed impact assessment”. What was surprising about this was that, according to the CZE Presidency, the framework for this should be a position paper submitted by eleven MS from the Agriculture and Fisheries Council of 26.09.2022 (doc. no. 12601/1/22 REV1) and that the majority of MS had spoken out in favour of continuing negotiations **only for those areas that were not affected by the renewed impact assessment.**”*

This statement by the Czech Presidency is in clear contradiction to what is stated in the protocol.

In January, Sweden will take over the Council Presidency. However, the [Draft Council Decision](#) on a supplementary impact assessment will likely still be voted on under the Czech Presidency. The December Council [meeting](#) is a possible date.

The impact of not acting

NGOs welcome the commitment from a majority of member states to continue the negotiations unconditionally. At the same time, we would very much regret it if a majority of member states were to agree to the demand for a supplementary impact assessment at the AGRIFISH on 12/13 December - or at any other time: **We appeal to all EU member states on behalf of the 1.1 million European citizens who have supported our demands for pesticide reduction in Europe not to do so.**

If only a dozen Member States block the negotiations by referring to a pending impact assessment, the implementation of such an assessment could lead to significant delays in the Council negotiations. These delays in the legislative process would not be matched by any useful gain in knowledge. This is because the questions in the present draft of the Council Decision are one-sided and therefore have a suggestive rather than an informative character. They categorically circumvent the expected positive impact on the health of farmers, inhabitants of rural areas and consumers as well as the expected positive impact on biodiversity, as the long-term prerequisite of all agricultural productivity. **More than that, they disregard the disastrous effects of inaction.**

We have known that [business as usual is not an option](#) at least since the presentation of the results of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development in 2008. Since then, this conclusion has been confirmed several times by the UN scientific bodies [FAO](#), [IPBES](#) and [IPCC](#) - as mentioned above.

Politicians who give more weight to these independent scientific bodies than to self-interested [industry lobbyists](#) do not ask for a further impact assessment. They already know what the real threat to the future of our food system. It is the impact of inaction.



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