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**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 ORGANIC PRODUCTION

{SWD(2021) 65 final}



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The European Green Deal is at the centre of the Commission's policy agenda. Its prime objective is a sustainable, climate-neutral Europe by 2050, acting as a vehicle for investment and growth¹.

The Green Deal emphasizes that it is 'key' to manage the transition towards a more sustainable food system, in particular strengthening the farmer's efforts to tackle climate change, protect the environment and preserve biodiversity'. The farming community has an essential role to play in the achievement of these objectives. Farmers are at the forefront of the consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss while unsustainable agricultural practices remain a major driver of biodiversity loss. Organic farmers are the pioneers of the sustainable agriculture of the future. They open ways in greening agriculture and innovative production techniques that are friendly to the environment, promote circularity and animal welfare.

The organic logo reflects the farmers' commitments to these high production standards and consumers are assured that the product has been made according to very specific and stringent sustainability rules. Even more importantly, organic farming brings much more nature into our fields and it makes farmers more resilient to economic changes as well as to those brought upon them by increasingly erratic nature and climate.

That is why the 2030 Biodiversity Strategy² and the Farm to Fork Strategy³ - together with the upcoming zero pollution action plan on air, water and soil – set out concrete actions covering the full chain from food production to consumption, actions that also encompass international cooperation on sustainable food systems. These strategies aim to reconcile food production with environmental protection while spurring investment and sustainable production, an objective that the Commission will seek to promote within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, the Farm to Fork Strategy announced the EU carbon farming initiative for this year, which aims, within the context of the climate pact, to reward farmers for the verified provision of ecosystem restoration, emission reduction and carbon sequestration services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meanwhile produced an unprecedented challenge for the EU. It is having a far-reaching impact on the economy, people's health and food systems. The EU's response comprises a recovery plan supported by the 'Next Generation EU' instrument and the new multiannual financial framework. 'Next Generation EU' funds could be used to support investments in the organic sector, provided that they meet the

KEY FIGURES: The area under organic farming has increased by almost 66% in the last 10 years - from 8.3 million hectares in 2009 to 13.8 million hectares in 2019. It currently accounts for 8.5% of the EU's total 'utilised agricultural area'. This increase in area has been matched by a substantial increase in retail sales. These have doubled in value in the last 10 years, from approximately EUR 18 billion in 2010 to more than EUR 41 billion in 2019.

¹ The legislative proposal COM/2018/392 final - 2018/0216 (COD), the future common agricultural policy (CAP) also highlights the beneficial role of organic farming and offers support to it through different mechanisms.

² COM(2020) 380 final.

³ COM(2020) 381 final.



relevant conditions and objectives. Europe's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis provides an early opportunity to make the Green Deal a reality, by providing a broad platform for sustainable production and consumption patterns, including in the field of agriculture and aquaculture.

Organic farming plays a central role in the achievement of Europe's recovery, which should be green and digital, through bolstering rural incomes. It generally involves shorter supply chains and provides opportunities for small farmers, enhanced by the new provisions introduced in Regulation 2018/848 on organic production.⁴ This regulation aims to modernise the sector and harmonise the rules, providing a stable regulatory framework.

There is broad consensus on the key role of organic production and consumption. In its Farm to Fork Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy, the Commission has defined the objective of 'at least 25% of the EU's agricultural land under organic farming and a significant increase in organic aquaculture by 2030'. In its resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Green Deal, the European Parliament has highlighted that agriculture has the potential to help the EU reduce its emissions through sustainable practices, such as organic farming.⁵ In its conclusions of 19 October 2020 on the Farm to Fork strategy,⁶ the Council emphasized the role of organics in a sustainable food system. At the same time, people across the EU endorse sustainable farming and food production, and public awareness of the EU organic logo has increased markedly, as confirmed by Eurobarometer special report 504⁷.

This is why the Commission is putting forward this action plan for organic farming. It builds up on the action plan for the period 2014-2020, which already addressed some of the problems identified by the review of the EU organic policy that resulted in the adoption of Regulation (EU) 2018/848 on organic farming. All of the 18 actions in the 2014-2020 have been fully implemented. Major non-regulatory achievements include the roll-out of the electronic Certificate of Inspection (E-CoI) in Traces, which has improved the traceability and thus also integrity of organic products, and increased the information on organic imports into the EU; specific funding for research and innovation on organics in the EU Research and Innovation Framework Programmes; and the inclusion of organics into 'green public procurement'.

The new action plan (2021 – 2027) also takes into account the outcome of the public consultation held between September and November 2020, which confirmed strong support for the action plan and its proposed actions from both stakeholders and the broader public.

Current projections predict a remarkable growth of the organic sector during this decade. Even if we continue doing just what we are doing, the share of organic agriculture

⁴ Regulation (EU) 2018/848 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 on organic production and labelling of organic products and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007.

⁵ European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Green Deal: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0005_EN.html.

⁶ Council's conclusions on the Farm to Fork strategy: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46419/st12099-en20.pdf>.

⁷ In this Eurobarometer special report, 56% of those surveyed said they were aware of the organics logo.



should, according to some sources, reach between 15% and 18% of agricultural land by 2030⁸. The 25% target significantly increases our ambition. This action plan aims to encourage a marked increase of the share of organic farming in the EU, through encouraging farmers to convert to organic farming, and to expand the accessibility of organic food to close the gap between a business-as-usual growth curve and the “extra effort” necessary to reach a 25% target by 2030.

KEY BENEFITS: Land farmed organically has about 30% more biodiversity than land farmed conventionally. Organic farming is, for instance, beneficial to pollinators. Organic farmers are not allowed to use synthetic fertilisers and may only use a limited range of chemical pesticides. In addition, the use of GMOs and ionising radiation is prohibited and the use of antibiotics is severely restricted.

European citizens enjoy safe, top quality food. However, for decades, the share of household expenditure on food has been decreasing and lowering food prices have seen farmer incomes stagnate. Organic farming is more costly as organic farmers work in a more extensive way and use natural processes and substances, without using synthetic products, and yields are lower. But organic farmers often enjoy better incomes as organic products are

usually sold at higher prices than conventional ones, while consumers value the contribution to the environment made by organic farming.

By integrating organic products into school meals and workplace canteens through public procurement, into the hospitality sector through incentives and visibility, into supermarkets through promotion campaigns, and into everyday home cooking, more organic food will become accessible to more European citizens. There is also a need to tackle the accessibility and affordability of organic food to help increase access to organic food for low-income families. The action plan also aims to support farmers in converting to organic production, by boosting education and training opportunities, by supporting the market for organic products and in parallel identifying relevant incentives.

Organic farming should be a model to follow. It is not the only sustainable farming system but until carbon farming is fully rolled out, it is for now the only system which has been recognised by a robust certification method. As such, it should lead by example on the path to more sustainable farming practices, a better use of renewable resources, higher animal welfare standards, and higher incomes for farmers. Organic farming can also boost social sustainability in various ways and support the development of rural areas, in line with the upcoming Long-term vision for rural areas, as well as that of coastal areas. It can provide possibilities for young farmers and help foster equal access and equal income between women and men in the sector.⁹ Studies¹⁰ show that organic farming offers women farm entrepreneurs an easier entry-point than the conventional sector. Organic farming has to inspire conventional farming and lead the way.

⁸ Eurostat and HIS Markit

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/page/LFST_R_ERGAU__custom_443889 and https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/page/ILC_DI17__custom_416294

¹⁰ The role of funding under the common agricultural policy (CAP) for women in agriculture: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/536466/IPOL_STU\(2015\)536466_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/536466/IPOL_STU(2015)536466_EN.pdf).



In December 2020, the Commission published recommendations¹¹ to Member States on their future CAP strategic plans. These recommendations address economic, environmental and social challenges of European agriculture and rural areas, focusing on the European Green Deal targets, including the target of 25% of agricultural land under organic farming by 2030. Member States are therefore invited to set national values in their CAP strategic plans for these Green Deal targets. Based on European averages and trends, Member States should focus on increasing the organic area by defining target percentages or encouraging positive trends. When drafting their CAP national strategic plans, Member States will be asked to respond to the aforementioned recommendations.

As the extent of organic production and consumption differs significantly between Member States – the share of agricultural land under organic farming ranges from a low of 0.5% to a high of more than 25% - it is crucial for each Member State to develop as soon as possible **its own national strategy** on organic farming, **drawing on a comprehensive analysis of the sector and with related actions, incentives, clear deadlines and national objectives**. All Member States should explain how they intend to contribute to the EU-wide target by setting a national value for the share of the area under organic farming by 2030, bearing in mind their different starting points. To ensure the success of their national organic action plans, Member States should build appropriate capacity to implement them. The Commission will monitor the progress of Member States towards their national targets, providing the Commission and Member States with the opportunity to discuss the implementation of the proposed actions, and providing guidance on necessary and relevant adjustments.

Concerning **aquaculture**, the new Strategic Guidelines for the sustainable development of EU aquaculture to be adopted by the Commission in spring 2021 will promote organic aquaculture. In addition, the Commission encourages EU Member States to include the increase of organic aquaculture among the objectives of their reviewed Multi-annual National Strategic Plans for aquaculture. Furthermore, the Commission staff working document on a sea basin perspective to guide the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) programming stipulates¹² that the EMFF (future European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, EMFAF) should be used to promote sustainable aquaculture practices such as organic production.

The action plan is organised along three axes that accommodate the structure of the food supply chain (production, processing, and retailers and consumers). To support positive developments in the organic sector and to maintain a balanced and profitable market for organic operators, it is crucial to boost the overall demand for organic products. A growing consumption of organic products is vital to encourage farmers to convert to organics (Axis 1). Further incentives for production are also needed to meet the target of 25% of the utilised agricultural area under organic practices and a significant increase of organic aquaculture by 2030 (Axis 2). Finally, there is a need to further improve the organic sector's contribution to sustainability and environmental challenges (Axis 3).

¹¹ COM(2020) 846 final.

¹² Commission staff working document on Regional Sea Basin Analyses – Regional challenges in achieving the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy – A Sea Basin perspective to guide EMFF Programming (SWD(2020) 206 final).



Apart from continuing some of the existing successful actions, this action plan also puts forward an array of new actions, and mobilises different sources of funding.

The Commission intends to increase the share of **research and innovation** (R&I) and dedicate at least 30% of the budget for research and innovation actions in the field of agriculture, forestry and rural areas¹³ to topics specific to or relevant for the organic sector. Research shall cover inter alia, changing farmers and consumers behaviours, increased crop yields, genetic biodiversity and alternatives to contentious products. Within that context, the Commission will strengthen the coordination of national organic food R&I programmes and provide new opportunities, via the proposed Horizon Europe mission in the area of soil health and food, and via partnerships, in particular those on agro ecology and food systems. The dissemination of R&I results will be fostered through the European Innovation Partnership AGRI and the Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) to promote a general increase of organics in all Member States.

All EU institutions, Member States and stakeholders need to be engaged fully in developing the measures necessary to achieve the action plan's overriding aim: to provide solid grounds for the future of the sector.

AXIS 1. ORGANIC FOOD AND PRODUCTS FOR ALL: STIMULATE DEMAND AND ENSURE CONSUMER TRUST

KEY FIGURES

While each European on average spends around EUR 84 per year on organic products¹⁴, the yearly per capita consumption of organic products differs quite substantially between Member States, ranging from EUR 344 to EUR 1. In addition to differences in purchasing power, this is due to a still incipient market in certain regions, a lack of proper supply chains in many areas, and insufficient consumer knowledge of the logo and of the benefits of organic production. While organic aquaculture production is a relatively new sector, it has significant potential for growth.

The desired growth in the area under organic farming will not materialise without an increase in the demand for organic products. While being comprehensive, this action plan emphasizes first of all the 'pull' effect and aims to boost the consumption of organic food products across the EU. The EU's citizens increasingly value foods produced with broader benefits for society, such as organics, products with geographical indications, local food production systems with lower carbon footprints, and innovative low-emission food solutions¹⁵.

The measures proposed in this axis focus on stimulating the demand for organic products by increasing the awareness of its benefits and consumer trust in the organic logo. Member States themselves can also stimulate the consumption of organic products. Some

¹³ More specifically, 30% of the next calls related to Intervention Area 3 "Agriculture, forestry and rural areas" of Cluster 6 of Horizon Europe

¹⁴ FiBL- the World of organic agriculture 2020.

¹⁵ Commission reflection paper 'Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030'.



tools are at Member State level. For example, Member States can lower the VAT rates for organic fruit and vegetables. Promoting organic food consumption will incentivise farmers to switch to organic production, which will in turn increase and diversify supply to meet this higher consumer demand.

1.1. Promoting organic farming and the EU logo

While the EU organic logo is the most recognised one among the European quality logos, there is still scope for further increasing its level of recognition. The latest Eurobarometer on this subject¹⁶, which was published in October 2020, shows that 56% of consumers in the EU recognise the EU organic logo. This is a substantial increase compared to earlier years. Significant differences between Member States persist, however, as Member State values range from 30% to 74%.

In the context of the EU's agricultural promotion policy, the Commission is already promoting actively organic products, and it will continue to do so in the future as well. For 2021, the overall share of the agricultural promotion budget allocated to organic products is 27%, amounting to EUR 49 million.

***Action 1:** As regards information and communication, the Commission will:*

- *starting in 2021, give a greater focus to organics among the themes covered by the annual call for proposals on information measures on the CAP;*
- *starting in 2022, collect continuously data about the environmental, economic and social benefits of organic farming and inform citizens, including farmers, about these benefits by enhancing the use of social media;*
- *starting in 2022, measure consumers' awareness of the EU organic logo to monitor progress since the 2020 Eurobarometer. Continue conducting Eurobarometer surveys as a valuable tool to measure the effectiveness of the Commission's actions to promote the organic logo; and*
- *identify main events to inform about organics¹⁷, in particular in Member States where demand is below the average EU level, in cooperation with the European Parliament and other bodies such as the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, and Commission Representations in Member States.*

***Action 2:** As regards promotion, the Commission will continue to secure an ambitious budget in the EU promotion policy for boosting the consumption of organic products that are aligned with the ambition, policy and actions of the Farm to Fork strategy and Europe's beating cancer plan. The Commission will, starting in 2021:*

¹⁶ Special EUROBAROMETER 504.

¹⁷ In addition to those where Commission services are already present.



- *allocate an enhanced budget in the framework of the annual work programmes of the agricultural promotion policy, with a view to raising consumer awareness of, and stimulating the demand for, organic products;*
- *step up the promotion of EU organic products in targeted third country growth markets through, for instance, the participation in fairs in cooperation with Member States;*
- *raise awareness of export opportunities for EU organic producers, to take advantage of our network of Free Trade Agreements and equivalency agreements; and*
- *stimulate the sector's visibility through awards recognising excellence in the organic food chain in the EU.*

1.2. Promoting organic canteens and increasing the use of green public procurement

Cities, towns and regions all play an increasingly important role in promoting organic production. The development of canteens favouring organic food, as well as offering organic food vouchers to vulnerable people, for instance, could provide significant opportunities for increased organic consumption and production. Existing networks should be encouraged to widen the number of cities and towns involved in national or local strategies promoting organic food in canteens.

KEY FIGURES

Copenhagen is the first city that has reached 100% organic public canteens, supplied by around 25 000 hectares of organic farmland mainly around the city. Vienna has a network of organic urban gardens of around 860 ha that also supplies public canteens, in particular nurseries. Rome serves around 1 million organic meals per day in public canteens.

A shift to organics could trigger potential benefits for peri-urban agricultural and aquaculture activities, the development of local supply chains and exchanges of best practices, for example between public canteens and restaurants. At the same time, providing organic products in canteens will make these products accessible to a wider range of consumers.

Green public procurement (GPP) offers potential to boost organic farming. In the implementation of such procurement procedures, special attention should be paid to small farms, micro-enterprises and SMEs. In October 2019, the Commission issued new EU GPP criteria for food, catering services and vending machines.¹⁸ There is nevertheless still a lack of knowledge among public administrations - particularly local ones – on the possibilities offered by GPP when organising public procurements. In the Farm to Fork strategy, the Commission commits to determining the best way of setting minimum mandatory criteria for sustainable food procurement to promote healthy and sustainable diets, including organic products, in schools and public institutions, which should be the basis for any future action of the Commission in this area.

¹⁸ COM (2019) 366 - EU green public procurement criteria for food, catering and vending machines.



Action 3: *To stimulate a greater uptake of organics in public canteens, the Commission will, together with stakeholders and Member States:*

- *boost the awareness of the criteria for GPP issued in 2019, of the work on Public Procurement of Food for Health, and of the Joint Action BestREMAP¹⁹;*
- *integrate organic products into the minimum mandatory criteria for sustainable food public procurement to be developed as part of the legislative framework for sustainable food systems by 2023;*
- *analyse the current situation as regards the application of EU GPP. The Commission will use the national action plans on organic farming to monitor the application of GPP and call on Member States for an increase in the use of GPP by public authorities. It will also invite Member States to fix ambitious national targets for organics in GPP;*
- *prepare, in close cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the Covenant of Mayors, specific events for public administrations in charge of public catering, to raise awareness of EU GPP by linking these initiatives to the European Climate Pact, starting in 2022.*

1.3. Reinforcing organic school schemes

The EU school scheme supports the distribution of fruit, vegetables, milk and milk products to children, combined with educational activities, with the aim of reconnecting children with agriculture and teaching healthy eating habits, thereby encouraging a healthy diet and sustaining the short- and long-term consumption of the products under the scheme.

In line with the Farm to Fork strategy, Member States should prioritise the distribution of organic products under the EU school scheme, through selection or award criteria in procurement procedures and/or through more favourable conditions. The Commission will reflect these principles in the revision of the school schemes. At present, several countries do not prioritise organic products, mainly because they are often more expensive than non-organic, which could be mitigated by Member States taking tax measures such as removing reduced rates on pesticides as agricultural inputs.

Action 4: *As part of the review of the EU school scheme framework planned for 2023 under the Farm to Fork strategy, and in accordance with the Europe's beating cancer plan, the Commission will:*

- *engage with Member States to identify ways to increase further the distribution of organic products in the school schemes. The Commission will call on Member States to continue increasing this share, and those further behind will need to make extra efforts; and*

¹⁹ Best-ReMaP Project on diet and nutrition with a special focus on children: <https://bestremap.eu/>.



- *carry out a study on real price of food, including the role of taxation, with a view to developing recommendations.*

1.4. Preventing food fraud and strengthening consumer trust

The success of organic products in terms of market development and consumer preference depends on consumer trust in the EU organic logo and its control system. Fraudulent behaviour and intentional violations of organic rules can harm consumer confidence in organic products.

Cooperation between officials with agri-food chain knowledge, police and customs officers with investigative powers, judges and prosecutor administrations is very important at national and EU level to prevent and fight against fraud in organics. This also applies to enhancing and optimising the use of new technologies.

Action 5: *The Commission will, starting in 2021, strengthen the fight against fraudulent practices and in particular:*

- *ensure a robust supervision of control systems in Member States and third countries; increase cooperation with Member State administrations and third countries recognised as equivalent, relying – inter alia - on their means and results of previous audits;*
- *assist Member States in developing and implementing an organic fraud prevention policy, through targeted workshops to share lessons learnt and best practices;*
- *cooperate with the EU Food Fraud Network and Europol in analysing the sector to prevent fraud and coordinate investigations; increase cooperation with competent authorities and law enforcement bodies in third countries to exchange information on the organic trade and fraud;*
- *support Member States with guidance on reinforced imports control at the border;*
- *promote stronger measures to tackle fraudulent practices through the sanctions catalogues;*
- *put in place measures to inform consumers and/or to recall from the market products where fraud is identified; and*
- *develop early warning systems, using artificial intelligence for data mining in EU (e.g. the Information Management System for Official Controls - IMSOC²⁰) and Member State databases.*

1.5. Improving traceability

The reputation of the organic sector relies on the ability to trace products from the fork back to the farm. To strengthen traceability and transparency, it is important to have a

²⁰ The Information Management System for Official Controls regulation (IMSOC): https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_impl/2019/1715/OJ.



clear overview of the operators that are involved in the production, distribution and marketing of organic products in the EU. Control bodies are already required to publish on their website organic operators' certificates, but this information is not yet centralised on a single pan-EU website.

Action 6: *The Commission will, as of 2021:*

- *develop a database of certificates of all EU operators, and later also relevant third country operators, building on the analysis already started under the 2014 action plan, and as a follow-up to European Court of Auditors recommendations²¹;*
- *promote the enrolment of competent authorities and control bodies sign certificates of inspection in TRACES digitally. This paperless process will reduce the administrative burden and the risk of forgery of documents; and*
- *coordinate regular traceability exercises on organic products in cooperation with Member States, their control bodies and third countries, especially in cases of food fraud suspicion.*

Digital technologies can help tag, trace, localise and share product-related data and the Commission is working on solutions such as digital passports. The organic sector could benefit from the use of new technologies, in particular as it is characterised by increasingly complex value chains and a need for transparency. Artificial intelligence, blockchain and similar technologies can help strengthen organic certification, in particular by ensuring transparency along the supply chain and the traceability of products contributing to consumer trust.

Action 7: *The Commission will, as of 2021:*

- *in synergy with the work on digital product passports, assess to what extent the traceability of organic products could benefit from blockchain or other digital technologies and envisage, in a second step, a pilot project with stakeholders. These steps will be supplemented by actions under Horizon Europe on the use of blockchain technologies in the agri-food sector as well as other targeted research & innovation actions aimed at developing innovative solutions to trace organic food.*

1.6. The contribution of the private sector

Retailers, catering services, restaurants and delivery services can play an important role in promoting organic food products. They can, for instance, ensure a sufficient and affordable offer of organic products in food shops, supermarkets and online shops, and of organic menus in restaurants and catering services. These actions can be combined with an explanation of the economic, environmental and social benefits of organic production.

²¹ The Control System for Organic Products Has Improved, but Some Challenges Remain": https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR19_04/SR_organic-food_EN.pdf



Moreover, the private sector can play an important role in promoting organic food, including by informing their employees about the benefits of organic farming (e.g. using communication material made available by the EU), offering organic products in their canteens, and rewarding their employees with ‘bio-cheques’ they can use to purchase organic farming products.

Action 8: *With the objective of reinforcing the role of retailers, wholesalers, catering services, restaurants and other businesses, the Commission will, starting in 2021:*

- *aim at obtaining clear commitments from relevant stakeholders to support and increase the distribution and sale of organic products, in the context of the Farm to Fork strategy’s code of conduct for responsible business and marketing practices, and disseminate best practices in relevant platforms like the Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform; and*
- *establish partnerships with businesses willing to promote the use of organic products as part of their corporate sustainability policy. These measures will be further discussed in the platform for Business and Biodiversity²².*

AXIS 2. ON THE WAY TO 2030: STIMULATING CONVERSION AND REINFORCING THE ENTIRE VALUE CHAIN

As mentioned above, the EU average of 8.5% hides substantial differences between Member States as regards the share of agricultural land dedicated to organic farming: from a low of 0.5% to a high of more than 25%. The same applies to organic aquaculture production, which is increasing significantly in some Member States, while others are still in the early stages of this production method²³.

These differences between Member States are partially due to the fact that adequate structures are lacking in some of them. Putting in place adequate structures would enable the proper channelling of organic production in supply chains, which would in turn allow farmers to benefit fully from the added value of organic production. The action plan should drive the uptake of organic production, notably in those Member States where the share is below EU average. Most Member States have already defined national targets concerning the agricultural area under organic production, in most cases as a share of the utilised agricultural area.

In parallel, the CAP remains a key tool for supporting the conversion. Currently, around 1.8% of CAP is used to support organic farming. The future CAP will include eco-schemes which will be backed by a budget of EUR 38 – 58 billion, for the period 2023 – 2027, depending on the outcome of the negotiations²⁴. The ecoschemes can be deployed

²² https://ec.europa.eu/environment/biodiversity/business/index_en.htm

²³ EUMOFA Organic Aquaculture report, May 2017.

²⁴ The final budget for eco-scheme (2023-2027) is still under discussion between the EP and the Council in the context of the CAP reform. The EP position foresees a budget allocation of 58.1 billion EUR and the Council position a budget of 38.7 billion EUR



to boost organic farming. The EMFAF will continue to provide support to conversion to organic aquaculture.

2.1. Encouraging conversion, investment and exchange of best practices

The CAP's rural development programmes have made financial support available to farmers to convert their holdings to organic production and to maintain them. This support has proven fundamental in incentivising farmers to convert to organic farming. It is a major factor in the increase in land area under organic production. For the future CAP, Member States will have the flexibility to support organic operators in a tailored manner under both the rural development funds and with targeted direct income support eco-schemes. The budget for support measures to organic conversion and maintenance as well as that for investment support in CAP strategic plans should align with the national ambition to increase organic production.

Organic farming provides a valuable contribution to the CAP's and Common Fisheries Policy's (CFP) specific objectives, in particular 'ensuring a fair income for farmers', 'rebalancing farmers' position in the value chain', 'ensuring sustainable development and efficient management of the natural resources', 'protecting biodiversity ecosystem services and habitat and landscapes' and 'improving the response of EU agriculture and EU aquaculture to societal demands on food and health, as well as animal welfare'.

Organic farming is specifically addressed in the recommendations made to the Member States on the nine specific objectives of the CAP. In these recommendations, the European Commission asks Member States to set explicit national values for the organic area target, taking into account their specific situation and the above-mentioned recommendations.

The Commission will foster technical assistance to farmers across the EU in the post-2020 CAP to encourage the uptake of organic farming. Support for organic aquaculture will be granted via the 2021-2027 European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF).

Developing the organic sector also requires upskilling and re-skilling the agri-food workforce. The European Pact for Skills provides opportunities for large-scale skills partnerships in industrial eco-systems such as the agri-food one and should be fully mobilised to reach the objectives set in this Communication.

Action 9: *In the framework of the new CAP and CFP, the Commission will:*

- *starting in 2023, assess the specific circumstances and needs of Member States regarding the growth of the organic sector, and ensure Member States make the best use of the possibilities offered by the new CAP to support their national organic sector. This support will include technical assistance, the exchange of best practices and innovations in organics, and the full use of relevant CAP instruments such as eco-schemes and rural development environmental management commitments, which include organic farming. Farm advisory services on specific topics will be strengthened, notably as part of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), to promote relevant knowledge exchange;*



- *starting in 2022, promote the exchange of best practices (education and training curricula, courses, materials, etc.) at EU and national level allowing education providers (e.g. technical schools, universities) to develop courses on organic farming as part of the general curriculum and present innovative solutions targeting the organic sector (production, processing, retailing and consumption). EU demonstration farm networks will be set up on specific topics to promote a participatory approach (dissemination). Best practices and synergies with the EIP-AGRI projects will be promoted via the future CAP network; and*
- *encourage Member States to include the increase of organic aquaculture in their reviewed Multi-annual National Strategic plans for aquaculture, and to make the best use of possibilities offered by the EMFAF 2021-2027 for achieving this purpose. The Commission will also facilitate the exchange of best practices and innovation on organic aquaculture in the context of the Open Method of Coordination.*

2.2. Developing sector analysis to increase market transparency

The availability of data – particularly on production, prices along the organic food supply chain, trade, consumer preferences, and specific marketing channels - is essential for shaping, monitoring and evaluating EU policy on organic production. Further efforts to gather, analyse and disseminate data on a regular basis will increase transparency and confidence in the organic sector.

Action 10: *To provide a comprehensive overview on the sector, the Commission will, starting in 2021:*

- *publish regular reports on organic production in the EU based on Eurostat data, containing, in particular, information on surfaces, holdings involved in organic production, and the main production sector; and*
- *publish a yearly report on imports of organic products from third countries.*

Stakeholders, public administrations and academia are also increasingly interested in having access to accurate and timely data on organic products. This type of transparency will help build trust between operators in the food chain, ensure that production matches consumption trends, and ultimately allow operators to take better production and investment decisions.

Action 11: *The Commission will, starting in 2022:*

- *intensify the collection of market data in collaboration with Member States and extend the EU Market Observatories' analysis to organic products.*



2.3. Supporting the organisation of the food chain

Organic farming is characterised by its scattered nature, with producers having access to a limited number of processors and retailers. Imbalances in the food chain limiting the bargaining power of organic farmers may increase as the overall market share of organic products in the food sector is increasing.

By creating or joining a ‘producer organisation’²⁵, organic farmers can benefit from EU funds under the CAP, and from the support and funds available under the Common market organisation for fisheries and aquaculture products and the EMFAF, to improve the organisation between the various actors in the organics supply chain. Operational programmes covering the production of organic fruit and vegetables receive a higher rate of co-financing. However, there is currently little knowledge on the degree of concentration in organic production and on whether its organisation needs particular attention.

Small farmers in the EU face relatively high costs and red tape linked to organic certification. Regulation 2018/848 on organic production will introduce a system of ‘group certification’ allowing farms meeting certain criteria to form a group with other small farms to reduce the inspection and certification costs and the associated administrative burden. This provision will also strengthen local networks and improve market outlets.

Action 12: *The Commission will, starting in 2021:*

- *carry out an analysis of the degree of organisation in organic sector supply chains and identify ways to improve it in consultation with producer organisation representatives and other concerned stakeholders; and*
- *investigate the legal possibility of forming or joining specific organic producer organisations and, where possible, encourage Member States to allocate funds for this purpose. Producer organisations have greater market power and can generally help strengthen the position of organic farmers in the agri-food supply chain, particularly when faced with unfair trading practices²⁶. If there is sufficient evidence that unfair trading practices penalising organic producers occur, the Commission shall address them by using all the tools at its disposal.*

Action 13: *The Commission will, starting 2022:*

²⁵ ‘Producer organisations’ can refer to any type of entity that has been formed on the initiative of producers in a specific sector (horizontal cooperation) to meet one or more of the specific aims listed in Regulation (EU) 1308/2013 establishing a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products - whether or not it is formally recognised under Article 152 and/or Article 161. They are controlled by producers and can take different legal forms, e.g. agricultural cooperatives, farmers’ associations, or private companies with producers as shareholders.

²⁶ A recent PO study concluded that ‘POs are also better placed than individual farmers to resist practices by business partners that are perceived as unfair towards farmers or that are not in line with contractual terms’: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2c31a562-eef5-11e9-a32c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.



- *raise awareness and provide better information about ‘group certification’, allowing small holding farmers to share the cost and administrative burden of certification, in line with Regulation 2018/848 on organic production.*

2.4. Reinforcing local and small-volume processing and fostering short trade circuit

Organic farming has developed mainly at the primary production level, while organic processing is less developed and regulated. Therefore, investing in careful processing techniques and sustainable and reusable packaging, and achieving a better understanding of quality and safety issues in organic supply chains, in combination with regulations, is important for creating new value for consumers.

Minimising food mileage and climate change impacts is another challenge for organic supply chains, which calls for streamlining the logistics of organic produce and agricultural input networks²⁷. This will enable small organic producers located in remote areas to find an outlet for their production and benefit from the added value of their organic status.

However, operators are often reluctant to convert to organics due to the lack of organised and efficient organic commercial supply chains. In addition to the cross-cutting problems faced by agri-food supply chains, organic distribution can entail high operating costs and an imbalance between supply and demand.

Exchanging experience and knowledge can encourage the creation of local food markets and short supply chains, and uphold the integrity of the organic quality of the product. Dedicated programmes and participation in rural networks are also important.

Organic production can help stimulate new business models. ‘*Bio districts*’ have proven successful in integrating organic farming and other local activities to enhance tourist appeal²⁸ also in areas that are off the mainstream tourist track. A ‘*Bio district*’ is a geographical area where farmers, the public, tourist operators, associations and public authorities enter into an agreement for the sustainable management of local resources, based on organic principles and practices. The aim is to maximise the economic and sociocultural potential of the territory. Each ‘*Bio district*’ includes lifestyle, nutrition, human relations and nature considerations. This results in local agricultural production that is appreciated by consumers and hence has a higher market value.

Action 14: The Commission will, starting in 2023:

- *engage with Member States and stakeholders to foster local and small-scale processing, in line with the objective of Regulation 2018/848 on organic production to move towards ‘shorter organic supply chains, providing environmental and social benefits’ as part of its efforts to support trade for organic products within the EU*

²⁷ Stolze et al: ‘Organic in Europe, expanding beyond a niche’ in *Organics in Europe, prospects and development* 2016.

²⁸ FAO, ‘The experience of Bio-districts in Italy’: <http://www.fao.org/agroecology/database/detail/en/c/1027958/>.



single market. This action will be reinforced by targeted research & innovation under Horizon Europe, including support for the use of digital technologies; and

- *encourage Member States to support the development and the implementation of ‘Bio districts’.*

Action 15: *As organic farming can enhance social inclusion in rural areas while promoting decent working and living conditions, the Commission will, starting 2022:*

- *assist Member States in designing measures for organic farming in rural areas that promote gender equality and youth farmers/employment, which could include the sharing of best practices.*

2.5. Improving animal nutrition in accordance with organic rules

Organic animal husbandry must meet the EU’s high animal welfare standards and meet animal species-specific behavioural needs, in line with the EU’s disease prevention approach to animal health. Essential feed additives, such as vitamins, are increasingly produced by fermentation with genetically modified microorganisms (GMM)²⁹. As this production technique is not in line with organic principles, and as the feed additive industry might not apply for the authorisation of additives produced from conventional micro-organisms, supply problems for essential additives in organic livestock farming are increasing.

In addition to increasing the availability of locally sourced feed proteins, alternative sources of protein for feed should be found to ensure sustainable and diversified animal nutrition. These could include insects, marine feed stocks (e.g. algae) and by-products from the bio-economy (e.g. waste from fisheries and aquaculture). Moreover, the standards of organic animal feed should be kept up to date.

Action 16: *The Commission intends to:*

- *support research and innovation under Horizon Europe on alternative sources of organic vitamins and other substances that might turn out to be necessary, and on alternative sources of protein keeping in mind their technical and economic feasibility;*
- *explore means to support the application for feed additives produced without GMM, feed based on insects as well as marine feed stocks; and*
- *adopt an algae initiative in 2022 to support EU algae production and support the EU algae industry to ensure the supply of algae as alternative feed material for organic animal farming.*

²⁹ For feed additives produced by GMM in contained use, the operator must demonstrate that the additive does not contain any trace of the producing microorganisms, in particular any trace of recombinant DNA.



2.6. Reinforcing organic aquaculture

Organic aquaculture can help meet consumer demand for diversified high quality food produced in a way that respects the environment and ensures animal welfare. It can also help fill the gap between EU aquaculture products demand and production for sustainable aquaculture products, and release pressure on wild stocks.

Action 17: Starting in 2022, the Commission intends to:

- *support research and innovation on alternative sources of nutrients, breeding and animal welfare in aquaculture; the promotion of investments on adapted polyculture and multi-trophic aquaculture systems; and the promotion of hatcheries and nurseries activities for organic juveniles; and*
- *identify and address as appropriate any specific obstacles to the growth of EU organic aquaculture.*

The new guidelines on the sustainable development of EU aquaculture, expected to be adopted by the Commission in spring 2021, will encourage Member States and stakeholders to support the increase in organic production.

AXIS 3: ORGANICS LEADING BY EXAMPLE: IMPROVING THE CONTRIBUTION OF ORGANIC FARMING TO SUSTAINABILITY

A sustainable and resilient agricultural and aquaculture sector depends on enhanced biodiversity, which is fundamental for a healthy ecosystem and critical for maintaining nutrients cycles in the soil, clean water and pollinators. Increased biodiversity allows farmers to adapt better to climate change. The organic sector is by its very nature oriented towards higher environmental standards, enshrined in its objectives and principles.

With a rise in global temperature and increasing weather unpredictability, it is important to step up the role that farming, including organic, plays in the fight against climate change. Extensive farming practices and the use of renewable energy instead of fossil fuels provide the organic farming sector with the opportunity to lead the way to a better use of resources and to reduce waste and carbon emissions.

This action plan focuses exclusively on promoting organic farming and its contribution to sustainability. However, organic production also has the potential to improve its environmental impact. The environmental footprint of food production more broadly is tackled by the Farm to Fork strategy.

Research will be key for the achievement of these objectives. Within this context, the **European Commission intends to dedicate at least 30% of the next calls related to Intervention Area 3 “Agriculture, forestry and rural areas”** of Cluster 6 of Horizon Europe to topics specific to or relevant for the organic sector.



3.1. Reducing climate and environmental footprint

Agriculture and aquaculture play a key role in meeting the EU's ambition for a carbon neutral Europe by 2050 by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Organic farming uses a number of management practices that contribute to climate change mitigation, with additional benefits for the environment and biodiversity.

In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in both the public and the private interest in environmental information beyond the information currently offered by the organic label. Consumers are getting more interested in knowing the environmental impacts of the products so that they take sustainability-based decisions. Such decisions would support the EU's Zero Pollution ambition. As announced in the Circular Economy Action Plan and the Consumer Agenda, the Commission will propose measures to fight greenwashing.

Action 18: *The Commission will, starting in 2022:*

- *take steps³⁰, to set up, in cooperation with stakeholders, a pilot network of climate positive organic holdings, to share best practices.³¹ A proposed mission in the area of Soil Health and Food could contribute to the pilot network in particular through the deployment of living labs and lighthouses and other activities supporting carbon farming.*

3.2. Enhancing genetic biodiversity and increasing yields

The role of organic farming in maintaining a healthy ecosystem, respecting biodiversity and the existence of natural predators, and preserving an ecological equilibrium, is well recognised. Regulation 2018/848 on organic production introduces specific objectives and related principles to protect biodiversity, which will strengthen the role of organic farmers as promoters of biodiversity preservation. As part of the Farm to Fork strategy, the Commission will also revise the Seeds Marketing Directives to facilitate the registration of seed varieties, including those used for organic farming, and develop actions to conserve genetic resources and develop seeds with a higher genetic variability and broader biodiversity potential.

Organic crops achieve lower yield compared with the conventional crops. Closing the yield gap is essential to ensure the economic viability, especial for those crops for which the yield gap is still relatively high.

Action 19: *In order to enhance biodiversity and increase yields, the Commission intends to:*

³⁰ Following the completion of the modules on greenhouse gas emission and nutrient management of the Farm Sustainability Tool.

³¹ The estimation of the carbon footprint should be in line with methods developed by the European Commission, and in particular the Product and Organisation Environmental Footprint (PEF/OEF) as defined in Commission Recommendation of 9 April 2013 (2013/179/EU).



- *starting in 2022, earmark funding under Horizon Europe to support the preservation and use of genetic resources, pre-breeding and breeding activities, and the availability of organic seeds, and to contribute to the development of organic heterogeneous plant reproductive material³² and plant varieties suitable for organic production;*
- *set up EU demonstration farms networks to promote a participatory approach (dissemination). Best practices and synergies with the EIP-AGRI projects will be promoted via the future CAP network;*
- *strengthen farm advisory services, notably as part of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), to promote knowledge exchange of material suitable for the organic farming; and*
- *support research and innovation on improving organic yields.*

3.3. Alternatives to contentious inputs and other plant protection products

Organic farming is recognised for the limitation of off-farms inputs. The organic legislation authorises the use of a specific set of plant protection products with a lower impact on the environment and on the soil. However, certain substances harm the soil fauna and, once leaked into ground waters, can endanger aquatic species. It is, therefore, important to continue to look into pathways to phase out or replace contentious inputs in organic farming, such as copper, and to develop alternatives to these products to allow organic farmers to protect crops.

Action 20: The Commission:

- *starting in 2023, intends to earmark funding under Horizon Europe for research and innovation projects on alternative approaches to contentious inputs, paying particular attention to copper and other substances as assessed by the European Food Safety Authority; and*
- *starting in 2022, will, building on the forthcoming regulation on biopesticides, and via the strengthened farm advisory services, notably AKIS, foster where appropriate the use of alternative plant protection products, such as those containing biological active substances.*

3.4. Enhancing animal welfare

Organic farming already plays an important role in improving the welfare of animals, which is an integral part of the sustainability of food systems. Better animal welfare improves animal health and food quality, reduces the need for medication, and can help preserve biodiversity. In line with the Farm to Fork strategy, actions need to be taken to

³² Organic heterogeneous material: plant reproductive material that does not belong to a variety, but rather belongs to a plant grouping within a single botanical taxon.



further improve animal welfare, mobilising all instruments available to better respond to citizens' expectations and demands. While the Commission will revise the animal welfare legislation to ultimately ensure a higher level of animal welfare, organic farming should remain the model in terms of animal welfare protection and entail a guarantee for the consumer that animals were well treated along the chain and could fulfil their natural needs and behaviours whether at farm level or during transport, as animals should be spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering including at the time of killing.

Action 21: *In the context of the Animal Welfare Platform, the Commission will:*

- *continue working with Member States and civil society to find concrete and operational ways to further improve animal welfare in organic production.*

3.5. Making more efficient use of resources

Circular economy policies place resource-efficiency at the centre of decision-making, ensuring added value and that resources can be used and re-used longer, thus eliminating waste, minimising the demand for resources (like water, fossil fuels and energy), improving efficiency and reducing costs.

Over the past 50 years, the economic role of plastics has steadily increased, and plastics have become important for an increasing number of products and product chains. However, the production of plastics and the incineration of plastics waste give rise to significant greenhouse gas emissions³³.

Much plastic is still being used in organic farming: in mulch films, greenhouses and tunnels, silage films, nets for storing animal feeds, shellfish ropes and packaging. Aside improving the reuse, collection and recycling of conventional plastics, farmers need more clarity on when biobased and biodegradable plastics can contribute in a circular economy.

Action 22: *The Commission intends to:*

- *adopt a Framework on bio-based, compostable and biodegradable plastic³⁴, which will include principles and criteria under which the use of sustainable bio-based materials that are easily bio-degradable in natural conditions is beneficial to the environment. The Framework will cover all plastics, including for uses in all types of agriculture, and will therefore also be highly relevant for organic farming leading the way in terms of sustainability.*

Some agricultural practices are the main obstacles to the EU's fresh waters and marine waters achieving good status under both the water framework and the marine framework

³³ COM(2018) 16 final - Communication 'A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy'.

³⁴ As announced in the European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy – COM(2018) 28 final - and the Circular Economy Action Plan – COM(2020) 98 final.



Directives. This is mainly due to the diffuse pollution of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus) and pesticides. Around 38% of the EU's surface water bodies are under pressure from diffuse pollution (of which, at 25%, agricultural production is a major source), from water abstraction for irrigation, and from hydro-morphological changes (e.g. due to drainage)³⁵. Climate change will increase irrigation needs in the EU and reduce water availability.

Action 23: *The Commission will:*

- *promote the more efficient and sustainable use of water, the increased use of renewable energy and clean transport, and the reduction of nutrient release, in all types of farming, with organic farming leading the way, and with the involvement of the Member States through their CAP Strategic Plans, as well as with the new Strategic Guidelines for aquaculture and EMFAF.*

CONCLUSION

To achieve the ambitious target of 25% of agricultural area under organic farming and a significant increase in organic aquaculture by 2030 as outlined in the Farm to Fork and the biodiversity strategies, it is necessary to provide the organic sector with tools that will create the conditions that can trigger the change in EU agriculture and aquaculture towards the high quality standards that EU consumers value. Moreover, the organic farming target will contribute significantly to the achievement of other targets foreseen in the biodiversity strategy and the Farm to Fork strategy, such as the pesticide reduction target and the target on the reduction of the nutrients surplus, whilst contributing to steering the EU towards its Zero Pollution Ambition for a non-toxic environment.

The EU has a leading role to play in the promotion of changes in farming practices. Increased organic production is central to the transition to more sustainable agriculture and aquaculture sectors that provide fair incomes for farmers and contribute to vibrant European rural and coastal areas.

To monitor progress, the Commission will organise yearly public follow-up meetings with representatives of the European Parliament, Member States, the Union's advisory bodies and stakeholders as appropriate. The Commission will also publish bi-annual progress reports – including a scoreboard - and present them at dedicated events, as well as a midterm review in 2024 of the action plan, to be presented at a high-level conference. To raise awareness on organic production, the Commission will also organise a yearly EU-wide 'Organic Day'.

³⁵ SWD(2019) 439 final - Commission staff working document fitness check of the water framework directive.