

POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

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EU's Green Agenda: Lessons for the U.S.

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What You Should Know

The Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy, **published** by the European Commission in May 2020, is a centralized attempt to adapt European agriculture to the pressing challenges of the day. Extensively criticized by the U.S., the F2F turns a blind eye to the best interests of European farmers and consumers, and risks doing more harm than good not only at home but also abroad. The F2F serves as a lesson in how not to approach agriculture in the 21st century.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that the resilience of food systems is pivotal. Future pandemics combined with environmental challenges call for a science-based approach to food production both in the EU and worldwide. *Although noble in intent, the Farm to Fork strategy's bold push for organic farming doesn't provide viable solutions to pressing climate problems and will only lead to higher consumer prices, more illicit trade, and more food insecurity.*

The Farm to Fork strategy assumes that organic farming is more sustainable than conventional farming and should be given every preference. To achieve that, the European Commission proposed to cut the use of pesticides in the EU by 50 percent while increasing organic farming in agricultural

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production from 7.5 percent to 25 percent. However, such a commitment is neither climate-friendly nor feasible.

Rather than imitate the F2F strategy, the U.S. should strive to preserve its competitive edge in food production and only see the F2F as a reminder of why politics has no place in agriculture.

Why You Should Care

The F2F strategy is well intended, but the consequences of this policy will be harmful and the benefits are oversold.

- **Higher Food Prices, Greater Food Insecurity:** Pesticides are a critical tool for fighting pests and diseases that can decimate crops. Limiting the use of pesticides will limit farmers' ability to maximize food production, which will drive down food supply and drive up food prices, putting millions more people at risk of hunger.
- **Organic Farming: A False Promise for the Environment.** While organic farming may seem more earth friendly because it is branded as more "natural," the reality is that organic farming yields lower crop output per hectare, meaning it actually requires more land and more natural resources than conventional farming.
- **Politicization of Agriculture and Trade Policy.** The F2F strategy represents an effort to insert a political agenda into agriculture policy, and worse, to export bad ideas via trade agreements that pressure partners into similar pesticide bans. Agriculture, trade, and other areas of policy should be evidence-based, not ideology-driven.

More Information

Pesticides Play a Key Role in Crop Protection

European farmers are highly dependent on pesticides, and there are legitimate scientific and economic reasons for that. Pesticides are an **effective** crop protection tool and **fall** into the following categories: herbicides, which protect from the 30,000 weed species that deprive crops of space, water, sunlight, and soil nutrients, insecticides, which defend against 10,000 plant-eating species, and fungicides, which are used to prevent 50,000 plant diseases, such as mycotoxin contamination.

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Without pesticides, farmers would lose 30 to 40 percent of their crops globally due to pests and diseases, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Unless there are more innovative solutions on the table, such as genetic modification, pesticides remain our best weapon against the prospect of global starvation, and their benefits should be recognized and enhanced.*

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In India, for example, the Green Revolution of the 1960s, which—among many things—spurred the use of pesticides, was instrumental in alleviating poverty and malnutrition, and **succeeded** in mitigating hunger in the short term as well. Prior to the introduction of agrochemicals, food availability in India was only 417 grams per day per person, as a consequence of a severe shortage of food and commercial crops. Since pesticides enable greater food production, it also means that food becomes more affordable. *Organic farming has yet to prove such food security potential.*

Another upside of pesticides is reduced labor input **compared** to organic farming. Pesticides are crucial to sustaining high yields and “make a significant **contribution** to world food production”. At the same time, it is important to ensure safe usage of pesticides—especially in developing countries—and farmers need to be educated about how to properly use this crop protection tool. Inappropriate use of pesticides shouldn’t blind governments’ judgment of pesticides wholesale.

EU countries top global pesticide usage. As of 2017, Germany **had used** over 4 kilograms of pesticides per hectare of cropland. The Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, and Portugal exceeded that number, with only China, Guatemala, Brazil, Ecuador, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea **using** significantly higher amounts of pesticides, with an average over 10. However, there is also a gradual downward trend towards reducing pesticide use in most of the said EU countries.

European farmers are well aware of the benefits of pesticides, and every member state and EU-wide agriculture policy, including the Farm to Fork strategy, should have their interests, and the interests of consumers, at heart. In 2018, France introduced a ban on neonicotinoid pesticides in an attempt to protect bees. Two years later, French farmers faced a lack of tools to combat the jaundice virus, transmitted by aphids, and asked the French government to ease the ban, so they could protect their crops; and the French government created a derogation. *By obliging farmers to give up on pesticides,*

the Farm to Fork strategy leaves farmers without an established toolkit to tackle crop crises, thereby endangering food security in Europe.

In 2018, the European Union Intellectual Property Office stated that €1.3 billion are lost every year in Europe due to fake pesticides. If pesticides cannot be obtained legally, farmers turn to illicit means. Counterfeit pesticides—now estimated by EUROPOL to represent 14 percent of the European crop protection—go unchecked and put the lives of European consumers at risk. Untested products can also lead to considerable harvest loss, and the Farm to Fork strategy elevates those dangers.

Organic Agriculture Is Not Climate-Friendly

The appeal of organic farming is fairly straightforward: it is seen as “natural” and so its food security is perceived to be higher. However, exactly because it is “natural”, organic farming requires us to use more natural resources. It is crucial to develop innovative ways to utilize natural resources, not to use more of them.

In 2017, researchers at the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture in Switzerland found that if the world fully switched to organic agriculture, we would need between 16 and 81 percent more land to feed the planet. A different study **estimated** additional land requirements to be between 65 and 200 percent. In that case, the quality of land used for agriculture in the EU will be questionable, which is not the risk we can afford to take. *That alone, combined with deforestation needed to obtain more land, casts doubt on the sustainability of organic farming.*

Additionally, a 2018 international Swedish study **published** in the journal Nature found that organic peas, farmed in Sweden, have around a 50 percent larger climate impact than conventionally farmed peas. For other foods, the difference was even greater, approaching 70 percent. The reason for that is lower yields per hectare, which, again, results in the need for more land.

Organic farming has also been found to increase the greenhouse effect. A study conducted at Cranfield University in the UK **concluded** that organic farming would increase greenhouse gas emissions by 21 percent. The authors assessed a complete conversion to organic farming in England and Wales using life-cycle assessment and predicted a substantial decrease in food production for reasons laid out above. *The Farm to Fork strategy is, therefore, inconsistent with the EU’s climate priorities.*

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture **estimated** that if the EU proceeds with the Farm to Fork commitments, worldwide agricultural production will decrease by 1 percent, followed by a decline in agricultural production in the EU of 12 percent. Consequently, consumer prices will rise. In the EU, the price of most goods will climb up by double digits. The price of coarse grains, for example, will spike by 96 percent and sugar crops by a staggering 107 percent.

With such high prices in sight, the demand for organic products is highly contentious. According to a 2005 Greece survey, only 5-20 percent of consumers will opt for organic products when prices **climb up** by more than 30 percent. *A sharp reduction in the use of fertilizers and pesticides will hit those on the lowest incomes hardest as they are trying to get back on their feet after the COVID-19 crisis.*

EU's Organic Ambitions Threaten Food Security Globally

The Farm to Fork strategy aspires not only to help the EU transition to green agriculture but also to “enhance cooperation with and to obtain ambitious commitments from third countries in key areas such as animal welfare, the use of pesticides and the fight against antimicrobial resistance.” Essentially, this means that the EU plans to use trade policy to impose its organic aspirations on the world by including a sustainability chapter in all EU bilateral trade agreements.

Such a move will put international trade at risk by making it less about trade and more about ideology. The European Union can hardly be seen as a proactive advocate for free trade, demonstrated by its ambivalent attitude to the EU-Mercosur agreement. Amazon deforestation has been continuously used as a weapon to pressure the Mercosur bloc to live by the EU rules. With Farm to Fork, this way of doing international trade will become even more common. *In the end, little is achieved, and millions of consumers are deprived of the opportunity to enjoy cheaper products.*

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In line with the organic goals, new products entering the EU market will have to comply with stricter new standards and labelling obligations. The transition will be short on time, too. However, further consistency must be pursued, according to some Members of the European Parliament. It is argued that the importing of products treated with pesticides that are banned from the EU by third countries should be stopped. With further expected reduction in pesticide use, that will put a huge pressure on developing countries to switch to expensive organic farming, or look for better markets elsewhere.

African farmers have already voiced their fears over being left alone in making sense of and applying environmental standards required by the Farm to Fork strategy. It will be difficult for African farmers—especially smaller ones—to reduce their use of pesticides. As the continent is between the tropics, crop protection is especially important, as the pressure from plant pests will not go away. “When the EU says you need to go organic, you’re telling us we must stop using certain molecules. And yet, we’re not given an alternative to deal with locusts,” CEO of Kenya’s Fresh Produce Consortium, Okisegere Ojepat, told EURACTIV in March 2021. Ukraine, the U.S., and China, all of whom are major EU trading partners and use pesticides, will face similar challenges.

Lessons for the United States

The United States has been extremely vocal in its opposition to the Farm to Fork strategy, calling it “protectionist”. A *study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture concluded that the adoption of Farm to Fork “would have impacts that stretch beyond the EU, driving up worldwide food prices by 9 (EU only adoption) to 89 percent (global adoption), with the potential of increasing the number of food-insecure people by 185 million globally”.*

It is crucial that the U.S. doesn’t emulate the European Union’s green regulations. Many agricultural areas throughout the United States experience extreme weather events, and that necessitates the use of crop protection tools. In 2020, for example, Iowa, encountered a devastating wind storm (derecho) that damaged over 850,000 acres of crops within the state. Only by embracing modern agriculture can such disasters be prevented in the future. The U.S. should, therefore, not feel incentivized to replicate the EU’s F2F approach and instead should follow scientific evidence.

Conclusion

Introduced to boost the European Union food system’s resilience towards pandemics and environmental challenges, the Farm to Fork strategy takes a toll on consumer welfare and the bloc’s competitiveness by depriving farmers of essential crop protection tools. Seen as a panacea to the pressing environmental concerns, the green agenda might end up making them even worse, while driving millions into food insecurity. The U.S. should strive to preserve its competitive edge in food production and only see the F2F strategy as a reminder of why politics has no place in agriculture. Instead, the U.S. should remain a champion of evidence-based policies.

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What You Can Do

Get Informed

- [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#)
- [National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America](#)
- [Nature Biotechnology](#)

Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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