



**Baltic Farmers' Forum on Environment (BFFE) Conference
on Agricultural Water Protection and Sustainable Food Production**

Resource efficiency: the key for sustainability in agriculture

26th February 2015, Eespo (Finland)

**Werner Hilde, Vice-President of the German farmers' association
(Deutscher Bauernverband, DBV)**

Dear Sir, Madam,

Dear colleagues,

Let me first thank the organisers for bringing together the farmers around the Baltic Sea to discuss cross-cutting issues between agriculture and environment.

These are two sides of the same coin, two different perspectives on the same issue: preserving our natural resources.

The Earth Summit in 1992 and the Rio+20 conference in 2012 have rightly identified the challenge we will have to manage in the medium term.

The main task of the agriculture sector is and will remain in ensuring food security.

To do so, the productivity on the existing agricultural land will have to be increased, while the environmental impacts of the production on natural resources will have to be further minimised.

In its declaration "the future we want", the Rio+20 conference has assigned a clear goal to the farming sector: increase the efficiency of the production.

Here we are not starting from zero!

Let me first underline the progress already achieved by the German agriculture sector, before depicting the future issues lying ahead for the farming community.

1) German farmers are already resource-efficient

German farmers stand for the principle of sustainability.

Sustainability means first of all generational thinking.

Thus it is truly rooted in agriculture.

The pre-condition is that the three pillars of the sustainability – environmental, economic and social – must be balanced and in harmony.

A farm business can only survive if:

- it is economically successful,
- it takes care of the natural resources,
- it operates in a socially responsible way.

By following this strategy in the last decades, the German farmers have significantly improved the ecological efficiency of their practices.

Let me back this statement with a few concrete examples:

- First, if we look at the development of the cereals yields in comparison with the nutrient surplus, we can observe that between 1980 and 2010 the yields have increased by 50%, while the nutrient surplus per hectare has decreased by about 50%.
- Since the beginning of the 1990's the ammonia and methane emissions have decreased by 11% and 12% respectively, while the production of meat has increased by 25% and the production of milk by 6%.

- The greenhouse gas emissions from farming (that's to say methane and nitrous oxide) have decreased by 20% since 1990, even if in the same time the agricultural production has been significantly increased.

Dear colleagues, these are just three examples that show that:

- German farmers are not starting from scratch;
- Green growth is possible and already implemented.

In 2013 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has published a report about agri-environmental indicators in 34 OECD countries.

The report comes to the same conclusion: agricultural productivity has been decoupled from environmental impacts.

In a country comparison, German farmers are dealing carefully with natural resources.

- For example, in the last ten years, the energy use on German farms (for tractors, lighting etc.) has been reduced by 5 to 9%, while it has increased yearly by 1% in the farms of our American counterparts.

These improvements have been realised thanks to:

- A higher environmental consciousness among farmers.
- Advice to farmers and extension services.
- The development of the environmental legislation at EU and national level.

By reading newspapers or listening to public debates, we actually get a different picture.

Nevertheless, in the last twenty years, significant progress has already been achieved, not only in Germany, but also in the EU:

- Nutrient losses have decreased significantly,
- Soil erosion is going downwards,
- Less water is being used to produce food,
- Greenhouse gas emissions have been reduced by 23%.

It is crucial to underline these successes if farmers have to further improve their practices in the future.

The farming sector in Europe and especially in Germany should therefore communicate self-confidently about these achievements.

2) More confidence in the work of farmers is needed

Sustainability is a buzz word, being frequently used by food companies and retailers to market and differentiate their products.

The farming community is worried about this trend: an increasing number of agricultural produces is being developed according to private schemes on sustainability.

Such a trend should not lead to the creation of an additional layer of legislative standards.

Yet, certification schemes on a voluntary basis can be useful at farm level for instance in order to optimise the different steps of the production process.

It would actually bring added-value if the number and the frequency of controls on those farms would be reduced.

Looking at the current trend both at national and European level, this innovative approach rather seems to be a wishful thinking.

However, if consumers are not willing to pay more for produces under specific certification schemes, this trend will remain a niche market.

The multiplication of schemes could also endanger the level-playing field of European farmers and thus the competitiveness of parts of the sector.

Instead, a comprehensive and coordinated approach is needed.

Higher animal, nature and environmental protection standards in Germany or the EU alone do not respond to the challenge of sustainability in the farming sector.

In order to secure the competitiveness of agricultural production in Germany and Europe, two aspects have to be ensured:

- We must tend to European convergence of animal, nature and environmental protection requirements in production.
- Social and environmental standards have to be taken into consideration in world trade.

Last but not least, the different partners of the food chain, from the field to the shelf, are requested to contribute to further improving sustainability and resource efficiency.

The strategy that the retailers pursue of always selling more cheaply does not correspond to the principle of sustainability if at the same time some market segments are advertised as having fulfilled special sustainability criteria.

The additional costs of the retailers' own production standards cannot be borne solely by farmers.

Rather, a sustainability strategy is when quality and price are also workable for the farmer.

One principle is clear: farmers are only able to satisfy additional sustainability requirements if these are reflected in the price of the product.

3) Sustainability is a dynamic process

This being said, it does not mean that we are at the end of the journey: sustainability is a dynamic process.

The own responsibility of the individual farmers has to be reinforced in the future, instead of trying to standardise the concept of sustainability.

The extensive specific provisions, as well as environmental, food and agricultural law, form the basis of sustainable development at European, national and regional level.

High product quality, considerable lowering of the environmental impact, and secure and affordable food provision are guaranteed by an economically viable agricultural sector.

Furthermore, an essential component is the effort made by farmers to produce in both a resource-efficient and productive way, assuming their responsibility for generations to come.

Through the efficiency gains in production that have been made thus far, significant improvements to water, soil, climate and nature protection have been achieved.

In the future, we must produce more and even better with less inputs and less impacts.

The FAO also subscribes to the view that sustainable intensification of agricultural production is the central lever.

We have to produce more cereals per litre of water, per kilogram of nutrient and per hectare of land.

Setting land aside or developing extensification strategies would instead increase the European dependence on imports from third countries.

It would shift production to regions where production standards are often lower than in Europe.

Furthermore, German farmers will also continually improve their production, and in doing so will greatly reduce the environmental effects of their farming practices.

However, these developments are confronted with high and diverse expectations of the European consumers.

Consumers want more animal welfare, more environmental protection, more fairness...

Still, while purchasing in the supermarket, consumers are making their choices depending on the prices and the quality of the products.

This is why it is up to the entire food chain:

- to pinpoint the high standards for quality and sustainability already met today;
- to highlight that sustainability is not the end of the line, but rather a continuous journey!

Last but not least, it is crucial to increase the awareness of consumers towards our daily job as farmers:

- already today we produce diverse and healthy food,
- we care for the soil and the water,
- we contribute to the protection of biodiversity
- and to the mitigation of climate change.

Sustainable intensification, as recently recognised by the EU heads of state in their conclusions on the future climate policy, is the way forward.

Together with a strengthening of applied research, it will contribute:

- to ensure food security,
- to preserve natural resources,
- and to strive towards the sustainable development we are all aiming at.