What about sustainability for European growers?

Areflh says that for European farmers, sustainable development means safeguarding incomes, better commercial practices and international harmonization of phytosanitary rules.

For the Assembly of European Fruit and Vegetable Growing and Horticultural Regions (AREFLH), the main aim of the Common Market Organization is to ensure stable markets so that farmers get fair returns and consumers pay acceptable prices. According to AREFLH's Secretary General, Jacques Dasque, the only way to safeguard farmers' incomes and allow them a certain degree of economic sustainability would be an effective crisis management mechanism, if one could be introduced. «The Commission remains deaf to our crisis management proposals, whereas in the dairy sector a high-level committee has been set up, a strategy has been defined and measures have been approved», he declared. He points out that fruit and vegetables make up 16% of Europe's agricultural output but only receive 3.5% of the CAP budget.

On the environmental front, AREFLH does not yet have an official position on carbon footprinting but it highlights its member regions' increasing initiatives to use resources more rationally. Murcia is a case in point: a recent audit shows that the carbon budget of over 80% of this province's fruit and vegetable production is in the black. «We talk about fair trade for African or South American countries, but we should also be applying it at home! In this respect, I am pointing the finger at certain business practices employed by the volume retailers», explained Jacques Dasque. In particular, AREFLH is taking part in the debate on better distribution of the value generated in the agri-food chain that has been launched within the European Commission.

Jacques Dasque

As regards organic growing, Jacques considers that there is a place for everything but it only makes up 3% to 5% of EU production. Meanwhile, AREFLH has been fighting for nearly 5 years for EU harmonization of integrated farm management, which accounts for over 50% of the produce on the market. «Harmonization of specifications could also allow communication with consumers on a shared basis», he noted. He underlined the urgent need to agree on a common definition, given the diversity of the concepts and rules applied in different countries or even in different regions. «Also, the new EU pesticide rules frequently cite Integrated Crop Protection as an obligation», he pointed out. In his opinion, sustainable development entails applying the same rules to all farmers, including those from outside the EU, and «researchers and plant health product companies should give farmers alternative solutions for all crops». AREFLH's members also want a fruit and vegetable CMO to be kept in the coming reform of the CAP, due in 2014: «The CMO, which is based on producer organisations, should be retained», he says.

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