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Date: 1/15/2013

GAIN Report Number: FR9129

France

Post: Paris

France Chooses Agro-Ecology for a More Sustainable Agriculture

Report Categories:

Agriculture in the Economy

Biofuels

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

Oilseeds and Products

Policy and Program Announcements

Special Certification - Organic/Kosher/Halal

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Report Highlights:

Under France's recently formed government, the Ministry of Agriculture has launched an initiative to make agriculture more sustainable, which aims to make France a champion of agro-ecology. Under this initiative, the Ministry puts forward practices that are environment-friendly and increase farms' autonomy. The government's focus is on the environmental and social legs of sustainability in agriculture.

General Information:

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1. Background on Past Initiatives on Sustainable Agriculture

France’s 2010-2013 National Strategy for Sustainable Development aims to develop a more sustainable food production system and to support green economy and business innovation. In 2007-2012, under the former Government, conservative, national public policies toward a more sustainable agriculture resulted in laws named Grenelle, which used the concept of “ecologically intensive agriculture.” The major outcomes included the expansion of organic production and consumption, environmental labeling on certain food products being tested, efforts to reduce pesticide use, farm energy independence, and new research and innovation programs in plant biotechnology and renewable energies. For more details, please see [GAIN report FR9121](#).

2. Making France a Champion of Agro-Ecology

As part of the new socialist Government, formed in May 2012, the Ministry of Agriculture (MinAg) initiated a new program to explore and promote a wide range of sustainable farming practices. The program, named “Produisons Autrement” (“Let’s Produce Differently”) was launched in a national conference held on December 18, 2012. Described as an “agro-ecological project for France,” it aims to reconcile economic and environmental performance by expanding successful farming practices currently tested at small scale in individual initiatives. Information about the program is available in French on the MinAg website at: <http://agriculture.gouv.fr/Produisons-autrement>, designed as a

participatory forum to which anyone can contribute and share their experience.

At the conference, one could observe a semantic shift from “sustainable agriculture” and “sustainable development,” rarely used in a full-day conference, to “agro-ecology,” repeatedly used by most speakers as the ultimate type of agriculture of the future. The MinAg has set for France to become “the champion of agro-ecology.” The concept of agro-ecology, however, was not defined during the conference. Participants (farmers, professors in agriculture, advisors to farmers, researchers, and policy makers) kept their individual definitions, thus leading to some confusion about the objectives of the project.

The National Institute of Research in Agriculture (INRA) is significantly involved in agro-ecology. In its orientation document, “2010-2020: Targeted Research,” INRA specifically defines agro-ecology as “a new science at the crossroad between agronomy and ecology. It will clarify the effects of biodiversity on the services rendered by ecosystems and their interactions with agriculture, forestry and stock farming, and help to determine how these can be optimized to ensure a good quality of life for all citizens.”

http://www.inra.fr/1_institut/document_d_orientation_2010_2020 (in French and English).

3. Strategy in Place

The Minister announced three steps to reach this objective:

- ***Taking Stock of Current Knowledge and Experience in Agro-Ecology***

Last September, the MinAg assigned Marion Guillou, former President of INRA, and Bertrand Hervieu, Vice-President of the General Council on Food and Agriculture – a strategic advisory committee within the MinAg – to identify drivers (especially, regulatory) to good farming practices, to develop new agricultural models, and prefigure what could be the collective territorial dynamics.

The December 18 national conference emphasized a wide range of practices currently used by some farmers, including environment-friendly farming (e.g., low chemical input, mechanical weeding, soil conservation, no-till, integrated or biological pest management, organic agriculture, agro-forestry, diversify crops, and rotation), more autonomous farming (with reduced needs in animal feed, fertilizers, chemicals, seeds, water, and energy), and farming with a better image for the non-farming society (organic, direct sales, valuing public goods supplied by farming, such as landscape management).

- ***Dissemination of Knowledge to Stakeholders***

At the national conference, future changes in agricultural education of farmers and their advisors were indicated, in order for education programs to gradually include agro-ecology as a holistic approach, starting in 2013/14. The major criticism addressed at current agricultural education programs was that

they encourage farmers to overuse chemical inputs in their practices.

- ***Encouraging Farmers to Convert to and Maintain New Practices***

The MinAg plans to encourage farmers to use agro-ecology with the help of public support of the Common Agricultural Policy (mainly under Agro-Environmental Measures) and national policy initiatives: a fiscal reform favoring agro-ecology practices and a new national law on agriculture are planned for late 2013.

Specific action plans include the continuation of the pesticide reduction program launched in 2008 under the previous Administration, named “Ecophyto” (see [GAIN report FR9121](#)); a new program aiming to reduce antibiotic use in livestock production, named “Ecoantibio;” a specific program favoring sustainable honey production; a program favoring domestic vegetable protein production to reduce France imports of feed proteins; a program favoring biogas production from animal waste nitrogen; and actions in favor of organic production and consumption.

4. Questions Raised

- ***Definition and Objectives***

Despite the width of these strategies, the conference left the impression that a small number of farmers used them on their farms. No clear estimation of the proportion of farmers, location, or type of production was given, and only one speaker estimated farmers testing such practices accounted for 10 percent of the total number of French farmers. Meanwhile, the MinAg listed a variety of existing groups and networks of farmers involved in these practices, qualified of “alternative” and “innovative,” wider than organic farming, and also including conventional farming with sustainable practices. As the process is participatory, definition and objectives are likely to be gradually clarified in the coming months, taking into account the stakeholders’ input.

- ***Financial Resources***

Policies envisioned to encourage new farming practices and make them viable, either reducing production costs or increasing sales value, are explored by the MinAg. Scarce budget resources under the CAP are expected to be the limiting factor to funding France’s ambitions towards agro-ecology.

- ***Economic Sustainability***

As already observed in the orientation and actions of the former Government (see [GAIN report](#)

[FR9121](#)), the economic aspects are not a focus of the initiative. At the agro-ecology national conference, the MinAg stated that solving the ecological issue could not be achieved simply by reducing agricultural production, while many participants at the conference were promoting this. Also, the economic strengths of France's agrofood industry were not mentioned during the conference, an industry that had annual sales of 63 billion euros (more than 3 percent of the national Gross Domestic Product), a trade surplus of 22 billion euros, and employed 1.4 million people in 2011. Individual farmers at the conference noted that their current economic situation was poor, but in general, embraced the idea of the agro-ecology initiative.

- ***Biofuels***

France is a leader in biofuels in the European Union (EU), totaling 20 percent of the EU's production and consumption, having one of the highest blending rates in the EU (7.2 percent in 2011). France also has a number of pilot projects on advanced biofuels (see [GAIN report FR9118](#)). References to a methane program expected to be launched were highlighted during the December 18 conference.

- ***Animal Feed***

A program was announced at the conference by the Ministry of Agriculture to boost domestic production of oilseeds and protein crops for animal feeds and reduce dependence on imports. While soybean meal consumption has remained relatively stable at 4 million metric tons (MT) annually over the past 25 years (imported mainly from Brazil, Argentina, and the United States), use of rapeseed meal has increased from minor levels to more than 2 million MT annually, all domestically sourced as a by-product of France's biodiesel industry. France currently ranks above average in being protein-independent for the feed sector among EU Member States. Under the current policy conditions and with no major genetic breakthroughs for domestic soybean or pea production, France would continue to be a major consumer and importer of soybean meal (see [GAIN report FR9089](#)).