

## Update on the French national agroecology programme

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France is one of the first industrialised nations to start to re-orient its agriculture sector towards methods that give equal weight to environmental and social goals as well as to economic ones. The 2014 French *Law for the Future of Agriculture, Food and the Forest* actively promotes agroecological approaches and set a target of implementing these on 200,000 French farms by 2025. It also adds agroecology to the curriculum of agricultural colleges across the country. Under the slogan “*produisons autrement*” (let us produce in other ways), the law looks to agroecology for solutions to current problems. In 2014, the French state employed over 200 new researchers and tutors to teach agroecology across the country as a core part of the national agricultural educational programme.

The new law includes promoting crop diversity, ecological interactions and biodiversity as guiding principles for arable and horticulture production, forestry and livestock rearing. The Ministry of Agriculture itself has taken the lead on this new agroecological approach, providing support via education and research and grants for collective projects by groups of farmers. The policy emphasises that environmental objectives do not need to be in conflict with economic aims and encourages farmers to join forces with other stakeholders to manage resources at a landscape level in cross-sector ‘environmental and economic interest groups’ (GIEEs by their French acronym). The law also makes a fundamental change in land policy, protecting farmland from competing land uses and making it easier for young farmers to get started.

Chapter 9.1 in PAN International’s book on phasing out Highly Hazardous Pesticides with agroecology gives the history and policy background to the development of France’s rethinking of its farming production methods, including crop protection, and how this fits with the national goal of reducing pesticide use by half over a ten year period<sup>1</sup>. It also gives some examples of agroecological reference farms set up early in the programme, in which farmers work with agronomists and researchers to explore ways to reduce reliance on agrochemical inputs and to make use of ecological interactions between species in more diverse cropping systems.

### ***Key steps in transition to a new French agricultural paradigm***

In the first two years of progress, the agroecology programme has been putting flesh onto the bones of the original framework. Working with farmers and technical support, the Ministry has refined its ‘road map’ for changing the current farming paradigm and identified 12 key steps needed for farmers to achieve economic, environmental and social high performance<sup>2</sup>. Six of these steps relate to practices at farm-level:

1. **Fostering natural mechanisms for pest control:** linked to the national pesticide reduction plan Ecophyto, this element looks to biological control to manage pests, rather than eradicate them.
2. **Enriching the soil:** conserving soil carbon content and restoring or improving degraded soils to meet the challenges of food security, adapting farmland to climate

- change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions
3. **Encouraging beekeeping:** ensuring good health for pollinators, biodiverse habitats and an effective beekeeping sector
  4. **Using trees to improve production:** encouraging uptake of agroforestry in crops and livestock farming, using all available space and resources to improve yields and productivity
  5. **Selecting the right seed:** a sustainable agriculture and seeds plan to identify species and varieties that are more closely suited to local soils, climates and farmer needs.
  6. **Reducing the use of veterinary antibiotics:** the Ecoantibio plan aims to combat inappropriate use on livestock in order to reduce the risk of resistance

Another six key steps are about supporting farmers to shift to more ecological practices:

7. **Training for farmers:** preparing farmers to take up more sustainable methods via the action plan on 'Teaching to produce differently'
8. **Developing and leading collective projects:** helping farmers adopt more holistic approaches which see the farm as a whole, rather than each field separately, means working in groups for environmental, as well as economic, goals.
9. **Advising farmers:** to support technical advisors move to more agroecological methods, via an agroecology diagnostic tool to use at farm level.
10. **Assisting transition:** using the revised European Common Agricultural Policy framework to re-focus farmer subsidy and other support to benefit agroecological practices
11. **Encouraging organic farming:** making organics a full part of the agroecology programme
12. **Mobilising sectors and regions:** to encourage synergies between farmers and collective projects, with involvement of regional organisations and local government authorities

As part of its hosting of the global climate change conference in 2015, France launched a national plan to sequester carbon in soils for food security and the climate. Titled "4 per 1000", the plan refers to the experts' estimates that increasing the carbon levels in soils by 0.4% per year can halt the annual increase in CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, deliver more fertile soils and help farmland adapt to climate change. The agroecology programme encourages more plant cover via:

- Avoiding leaving soils bare and work them less, e.g. with reduced tillage methods
- Introducing intermediate crops, intercropping between rows and grass strips around fields
- More hedges planted and agroforestry schemes
- Optimised pasture management, e.g. with longer grazing periods
- Restoring land in poor condition

### ***Increased awareness and uptake of agroecological practices***

A presentation by the agricultural counsellor, Eric Giry, at the French embassy in London in May 2016 gave a useful summary of progress with the agroecology programme<sup>3</sup>. He explained how the programme needs to take agroecology beyond a small number of pioneer farmers to reach the 'average' French farmer. This involves adapting training curricula to build in agroecological knowledge and reforming the farm advisory system, as well as supporting innovative cropping systems and gaining better understanding of individual farming agroecosystems. As important as the 'hardware' of new farm practices is the 'software' of supporting a true transition in farming and this requires more inclusive forms of governance, involving farmers more fully in the programme design and monitoring. To be successful, agroecology also needs supportive supply chains and the programme is helping local Chambers of Agriculture work more closely with farmer groups and their advisors experimenting with new methods and crops. The agroecological assessment tool has been tested on over 500 farms and is now available for farmers to assess their practices and measure their agroecological performance compared with other farmers. Public subsidy support is being re-oriented towards agroecological farming, with emphasis on young farmers and on growing more protein crops. The national seed evaluation criteria are being revised to take into consideration environmental performance.

By April 2016, 250 collective groups have been set up, covering 4,000 farms on 300,000ha. All farms run by public institutions now have at least one agroecological project running. Farmers cultivating over a million hectares have applied for support in organic production.

The programme monitoring of a large sample (800) of French farmers confirms that almost 80% have now heard about agroecology and considerable numbers are starting to take up specific agroecological methods, with 92% of farmers surveyed putting at least one practice in place and 73% implementing three or more practices. Encouraging progress is reported by farmers interviewed:

- ✓ 76% are now limiting their use of agrochemical inputs
- ✓ 72% are improving their soil quality and limiting erosion
- ✓ 61% are conserving their water resources
- ✓ 55% are using practices that encourage beneficial insects
- ✓ 44% are exploring how to become more self-sufficient in their farm resources
- ✓ 39% are adding value to their produce grown with more sustainable methods

The agroecology programme is making efforts to engage with the French public in their role as both consumers and as citizens, to build understanding and more support for agroecological methods and produce. Programme partners organised a 'night for agroecology' on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016, with evening discussions in dozens of locations across France, at which farmers involved explained to the public how they are putting agroecological principles into practice.

## References

1. France: new law to promote agroecology. Peter Crosskey. In: Replacing Chemicals with Biology: Phasing out highly hazardous pesticides with agroecology. PAN International, 2015, Chapter 9.1, pp. 154-162. Via: <http://www.panap.net/sites/default/files/Phasing-Out-HHPs-with-Agroecology.pdf>
2. The agroecology project in France. Leaflet in English, Ministry of Agriculture. Via: <http://agriculture.gouv.fr/sites/minagri/files/1604-aec-aeenfrance-dep-gb-bd1.pdf>
3. The French agroecology plan. Presentation by Agricultural Counsellor Eric Giry of the French Embassy in London to UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Agroecology, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2016. Via: <http://agroecology-appg.org/ourwork/presentation-on-the-french-agroecology-action-plan/>