



European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



Opening address by Mr Janusz Wojciechowski at the 2023 EU Agricultural Outlook Conference, Brussels

Brussels, 6 December 2023

Distinguished guests,

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the **Agricultural Outlook Conference, 2023**.

This year is special, as we also host the expanded **EU Agri-Food Days** for the first time.

This year's conference has also been made special by the contribution of President Von der Leyen.

I would like to thank Madame President for her introductory words, and for the recognition she has paid to our farmers and food sector.

I would also like to welcome students from Spain, Belgium and Sweden, who are present in the room today. It is positive to see the interest and engagement from our future generations.

Indeed, the title of this year's conference is: "**Sowing the Future of EU Agriculture**".

The title is very fitting, because now we are laying the foundations – or indeed, sowing the seeds – for the future of our farming sector.

Today, and over the coming days, you will hear contributions from experts in agricultural policy and science; you will hear from leaders in farm economics and sustainable food systems.

You will also hear contributions from farmers and foresters, with practical knowledge, rooted in the ground.

Sowing the future of agriculture is now in our hands. Personally, I have a clear vision of how this future should look, beyond 2027.

This vision is based on '4 S's – security, stability, sustainability and solidarity.

Food security

First of all, any discussion of farming must begin with food.

Food security is the foundation of society, and the primary function of agriculture. We need durable food security for all our citizens.

In recent years, the resilience of our food supply has been tested;

- by the COVID pandemic,
- by the impacts of Russia's brutal aggression in Ukraine,
- and by the devastating effects of climate change.

So far, our farmers have maintained a secure supply of food in the face of these challenges.

For this, I once again offer my **deepest thanks**.

In moments of crisis, the European Commission has stood by our farmers:

- we brought in exceptional measures during the COVID pandemic
- we adopted exceptional support packages in the face of market disturbances, and extreme weather events;
- and we introduced derogations, allowances for state aid, and flexibilities for the amendment

and re-distribution of CAP payments.

By taking these actions, we reinforced the work of our farmers, and enabled them to maintain production.

But in the longer term, from a strategic perspective, I believe we must work on the principle that all future policies, legal regulations, and investment tools affecting agriculture and rural areas should always be preceded by a detailed analysis of the potential impacts, focusing in particular on agricultural activities and food security.

Stability

To safeguard food security into the future, we must also take a wider range of actions, and this brings me to the second area I would like to address: the **stability of our farming community**.

By stability, I mean economic and legal stability.

We must recognise that **funding for the Common Agricultural Policy should continue beyond 2027**, with a strengthened budget that is appropriate to the challenges and tasks faced by agriculture.

To put it simply, the production of **food depends on farmers**.

However, between 2010 and 2020, we lost 3 million farms in European Union, falling from 12 to 9 million. That is equivalent to roughly **800 farms, disappearing every day**.

This alone lays bare the social challenges faced by our farming and rural communities.

I firmly believe that we need to **strengthen support for small and medium-sized family farms**, counteracting excessive land concentration, while adopting mandatory capping, which involves reducing direct payments for the largest beneficiaries.

In addition, we need to protect agricultural land from being acquired for non-agricultural purposes.

And while the number of farms is decreasing, the average age of our farmers is increasing – in 2020, it rose to almost 57 years old.

Generational renewal is a fundamental challenge we face. We have already foreseen some provisions in the CAP, but clearly, **more has to be done**.

Because we cannot have a secure food supply without a stable farming community, supported by stable incomes. The economic viability of farms is a point we have to focus on: Farmers have to make a decent living by working the land.

We ask a lot from our farmers nowadays:

- to produce high quality, safe food for almost half a billion Europeans
- to look after the natural landscape,
- to tackle weather phenomena
- and to and preserve the vitality of our countryside.

All this requires a good and stable economic return.

And that is why we have our **Common Agricultural Policy**.

The CAP provides a crucial income safety net for Europe's farmers: accounting for roughly 23% of farming incomes, on average.

In their CAP strategic plans, Member States are also directing stronger levels of support to those who need it most.

For example:

- more than 10% of EU direct payments, representing €4 billion annually, will be reallocated through redistributive payments benefitting small and medium-sized farms,
- the plans will support over 370,000 young farmers to establish their careers in agriculture,
- the plans also include greater support for farmers facing specific difficulties, as well as female farmers and entrants from outside the farming sector.

Stability is also how we deal with crises. Of concern to me is that the budget of our agricultural reserve, which we use to cope with crises, is not strong enough. Our farmers are facing more

frequent and extreme weather events, and this should be addressed with a proper budget, to provide more effective compensation.

Sustainability

This brings me to the third 'S': **sustainability**.

In recent years, our farmers have been placed at the front line of extreme weather events.

In recent months, I visited the flooded valleys of Greece and Slovenia.

I cannot put into words the levels of destruction, and devastation, that I witnessed.

As I mentioned before, the Commission stepped in to provide emergency support for these farmers, and will maintain solidarity throughout their recovery.

But more than this, our recent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy includes **stronger incentives to help our farmers adopt more sustainable practices**, while maintaining their productivity:

- 32% of the total CAP budget has been allocated to voluntary actions advancing the environmental, climate and animal welfare objectives.
- For example:
 - we see the promotion of organic fertilisers Bulgaria,
 - In Spain, we see extra funding for sustainable grazing and mowing practices, to reduce soil degradation and improve biodiversity,
 - And in my home country of Poland, we see an eco-scheme providing significant support to improve living conditions for livestock.

These are the **tangible actions** we are taking with farmers, **tangible differences** we are making as a society, to strengthen the sustainability of our food production.

Beyond 2027, we should continue to promote sustainable agriculture.

I believe that new measures for farmers – under the CAP or other policies – should be based on financial incentives rather than legal compulsion.

We should support **eco-schemes** in particular, to drive practices beneficial for our climate and our environment, our biodiversity, and the welfare of our animals.

This should include carbon farming, soil health and improving water management, as well as the continued development of organic farms, and increased support for livestock farms who increase animal welfare standards.

Solidarity

Coming now to the final "S" for the future: **solidarity**.

Internationally, the European Union has a major responsibility in safeguarding global food security.

In particular, our role as a food exporter is vital: last year, 60% of EU wheat went to Middle-East and North African countries, and 26% to sub-Saharan Africa.

But to provide food for a growing global population, which may approach 10 billion by 2050, we must work together with international partners.

That is why we are supporting over 70 partner countries around the world to **boost local food production**.

For instance, with the African Union, we have set out a Rural Transformation Agenda, to strengthen rural communities and accelerate the transition to resilient food systems.

Another aspect of solidarity is maintaining **fair and open trade** with our international partners.

We need to support open trade of agricultural and food products on global markets, advocate for the removal of trade barriers, and continue efforts toward free trade agreements with third countries.

Simultaneously, we must strive to maintain fair competition and the principle of reciprocity, ensuring that imported food into the EU adheres to the same safety, environmental, health, and social standards required of farmers and producers within the European Union.

And of course, we must also foster **solidarity in our own food system**.

Here, CAP support for producer groups, producer organisations, local markets, short supply chains and quality schemes is expected to reach around 760,000 farms (corresponding to roughly 8% of all farms).

I believe this support should be increased, beyond 2027, to strengthen solidarity with farmers, among farmers, and between farmers and consumers.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have presented my vision for the future of agriculture:

- **Security** needs to be ensured,
- agricultural **sustainability** needs to be strengthened,
- **stability** promoted,
- and **solidarity** developed.

I know that some of you will have different perspectives to me, on the challenges we face, and the solutions we must implement.

I acknowledge these differences, and I welcome them.

Because when it comes to "Sowing the Future", difference does not mean division – it can also mean creation.

Just as a **seed cannot grow without different elements**, so our **society cannot progress without different ideas and perspectives**.

Too often, in our debates on food and farming, our differences present obstacles to finding solutions.

But by combining our different perspectives, I believe we can **create new solutions**, and together we can **grow a common vision** for the **future of European agriculture**.

In this spirit of co-operation, we can embrace our upcoming **strategic dialogue**, and all of our debates on the future of agriculture:

I thank Madame President von der Leyen for her initiative of strategic dialogue, announced during her State of the Union address in September.

As the President confirmed this morning, the launch of the dialogue will be in January.

Stakeholders across the diverse agricultural sector will be invited to come together:

- to **strengthen our understanding** of current and future challenges,
- to make better use of the **opportunities** offered by **knowledge** and **technical innovation**,
- to set out the best ways of **working together**, for a more sustainable and resilient food system,
- and to ensure our **rural areas become more attractive**.

With these goals in mind, **I wish you a constructive day of debate and discussion**, and I look forward to hearing the outcomes of the conference.

Thank you.