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Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development

2020/2077(INI)

7.12.2020

OPINION

of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development

for the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

on the new Circular Economy Action Plan
(2020/2077(INI))

Rapporteur for opinion: Claude Gruffat

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SUGGESTIONS

The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development calls on the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following suggestions into its motion for a resolution:

1. Considers that the agricultural, food and forestry sectors and rural areas are important components of the circular economy and bioeconomy; believes that since it is closely based on natural cycles and processes, sustainable agriculture is fully compatible with the properly functioning circular economy model, helping to produce healthy and affordable food;

2. Considers that in order to reap its full potential, the bioeconomy must continue to be a priority for the EU and the measures available and funding must therefore be coherent; underlines that the circular economy and bioeconomy can provide solutions to the challenges facing the agricultural sector, including those brought to light by the COVID-19 crisis;

3. Considers that the circular economy approach has the potential to enhance not only the sustainability of our farming sector, but also its long-term competitiveness; stresses the important role that young farmers and generational renewal in agriculture, as well as small and medium-sized agri-food enterprises (SMEs), can play and are already playing in the transition to a circular economy;

4. Underlines that the circular economy and the move towards a more inclusive, sustainable, environmentally- and climate-friendly food supply chain can foster business creation and entrepreneurship among SMEs;

5. Welcomes the Commission communication on the new Circular Economy Action Plan, as it fully reflects the changes required of an economy as it evolves to meet the needs of sustainable development, making it possible to create jobs while protecting the climate, the environment and biodiversity;

6. Stresses that the circular economy approach could offer more opportunities to make the entire agri-food value chain more resource efficient, by reducing the amount of external inputs and the leakage of excess nutrients, thereby helping to close nutrient cycle loops, reduce negative discharges to the environment, diminish price volatility, lower production costs and achieve sustainability;

7. Notes that in 2015 the bioeconomy represented a market estimated to be worth over EUR 2.3 trillion, providing 20 million jobs and accounting for 8.2 % of total employment in the EU;

8. Takes the view that the announcement of the action plan is a clarion call for qualitative change to reorient and optimise farm production models towards more sustainable production practices, new concepts and systems, such as agroecology, organic farming, integrated production, low-till and topsoil conservation, using inter alia precise and smart techniques to address the degradation and scarcity of natural resources and the subsequent need to improve production;

9. Notes that the action plan points the way towards a more sustainable, resource-efficient, self-sufficient and resilient type of farming; stresses that the circular economy model and the changes involved will also have an impact on the food processing and retail sectors and the whole agricultural bioeconomy;

10. Considers that the principles of the circular economy entail, inter alia:

– better use of energy resources, such as fuel use and the thermal efficiency of buildings;

– retaining and saving water, such as via water-saving irrigation systems, by recovering and recycling water from closed systems, and water storage and retention, especially in the soil, soil biota and vegetation;

– more efficient use of resources used for feed, such as relocalising and rationalising animal feed and nutrition, and shortening transport distances;

– greater use of organic bio-sourced products derived from natural processes (biofertilisers, biostimulants and biocontrols), replacing non-renewable chemical inputs (e.g. synthetic fertilisers and pesticides) where possible;

– allowing farmers and groups of farmers to develop collaboration and synergies, enabling equipment and facilities to be used more effectively and preventing the excessive accumulation of equipment, which is often associated with investment management based on tax planning;

– greater cooperation between stakeholders, including promoting cooperative models and pursuing more synergies on the ground, underpinned by collective and shared commitments;

11. Underlines that the circular economy can provide solutions to the challenges brought to light by the COVID-19 crisis, notably by reducing the vulnerability of agri-food value chains;

12. Considers that the EU's economic recovery plan – Next Generation EU – should provide support to create and strengthen local and regional agri-food value chains and increase their resilience, establishing new sustainable farming practices and circular economy initiatives;

13. Calls for a strategic EU plan for the supply of plant proteins to be implemented as soon as possible through Member States' strategic plans, preferably no later than the entry into force of the next common agricultural policy (CAP);

14. Considers that such a plan should advocate the production and consumption of legumes, including grain proteins as nitrogen-fixing crops, and of own-grown forage crops, which offer a number of agronomical and environmental advantages and can cut import dependencies from distant countries, including those with no regard for the environment, biodiversity or human rights;

15. Underlines that this plan should prohibit the import of products that breach EU health,

environment and climate standards or contribute to deforestation; considers, moreover, that growing more protein crops in Europe could provide opportunities for farmers; underlines the essential role of research and innovation in reducing the EU's dependency on protein imports and calls on the Commission to ensure adequate support through Horizon Europe and the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) under the CAP for agricultural productivity and sustainability;

16. Considers that the circular economy and bioeconomy offer potential for farmers and their cooperatives in the transition towards climate neutrality; recalls the opportunity of enabling farmers to use agricultural waste and residues on farms and the production of recycled organic fertilisers as alternatives for imported phosphorous, whose global resources are dwindling, or synthetic nitrogen;

17. Takes the view that the production of these organic fertilisers must adhere to strict health and environmental standards and to traceability rules set at EU level;

18. Notes the general need for farmers, especially those producing for certification schemes such as organic schemes, to ensure that such fertilisers are free from soil-polluting contaminants[1];

19. Highlights the need to explore with further research the value-added use of agricultural residues and the potential of bio-based innovation to deliver new value chains, technologies and processes, economic activities and employment, with the potential for revitalising regional economies and local and rural areas;

20. Notes the opportunities of manure management for promoting organic fertilisers, improving soil carbon content and thus contributing to carbon sequestration;

21. Stresses that European biofuel production can only be consistent with the principles underpinning the circular economy if it is generated from by-products and the recovery and use of waste or residues, if it takes up a small share of agricultural land and if it is not responsible for an increase in the price of foodstuffs;

22. Notes, in this context, the potential for regional development and employment of locally-sourced agricultural waste, food waste and green municipal waste used in biogas production plants; highlights the role of sustainable, renewable and climate-friendly energy production as an effective substitute for fossil fuels;

23. Underlines that it is essential that forestry is sustainably managed so that wood-based materials can function as carbon stores and substitute fossil-fuel derived or non-renewable materials in industrial applications such as construction, fibre products, textiles, composites, bioplastics and chemicals;

24. Calls for the promotion of sustainable wood products storing carbon in the long term in order to substitute greenhouse gas-intensive substances and production; notes, furthermore, that increasing forest areas under the appropriate conditions may increase carbon sinking, while also providing jobs and boosting incomes in rural and urban areas; believes that achieving a sustainable forestry sector and compensating for public

[1] Heavy metals, pharmaceutical residues, hormones, microbial pathogens, microplastics, glass, etc.

goods and services rendered through nature conservation can help to strengthen the EU-wide bioeconomy;

25. Highlights that developing circular bioeconomies would require business incentives to be aligned with policy goals and require new skills and the acquisition, sharing and application of knowledge gained by training and education in order to meet the needs of the sector and ensure that skills and jobs are better matched;

26. Stresses that the uptake of the circular bioeconomy must be promoted through strong research and innovation policies; notes that every euro invested in bioeconomy research and innovation under Horizon 2020 would generate about EUR 10 in added value;

27. Notes the potential of the circular economy to contribute to a more efficient use of resources, to promote regional and local food systems which ensure a fair price for producers, to strengthen short supply chains and the link between food products and their origin, to develop rural areas, rural economies and thus social and territorial cohesion, and to encourage diversification and crop complementarity on and between farms;

28. Notes, in addition, the potential of the circular economy to strengthen the position of farmers in the food system and society; emphasises the role of national, regional and local administrations in building these short supply chains;

29. Calls for biodiversity and the environment to be fully respected within the wider circular economy incentives regarding carbon sinking; calls for the Commission to look into devising a regulatory framework including robust and transparent carbon accounting to monitor and verify the authenticity of carbon removals;

30. Supports the Commission in its efforts to better inform consumers on nutritional and ecological claims and by improving origin labelling; calls for voluntary labelling highlighting the sustainability credentials of products;

31. Emphasises the rights of EU citizens to precise and accurate information about the environmental impacts of food, feed, forestry and other bio-based products; calls for solid, accurate and harmonised calculation methods to evaluate those impacts based on reliable peer-reviewed science; underlines that those calculation methods/weightings should incentivise sustainable production methods and should take account of the efforts made by first movers;

32. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to invest in new circular economy initiatives in order to develop better infrastructure for the circular economy;

33. Calls for a hierarchy of measures in the fight against food waste which first prioritises prevention, then explores the possibilities for donating or processing food waste, and lastly examines the possibility for converting food waste into animal feed or fuel;

34. Calls for prevention measures to be stepped up in all parts of the food chain, both through intensified awareness-raising among EU citizens and through suitable measures and initiatives for food producers, processors and traders;

35. Calls for further measures to help shorten the food chain and thus reduce the number of stages at which food waste is produced; stresses that food wastage has huge environmental consequences, contributes to climate change and represents a waste of limited resources such as land, energy, water and biodiversity; urges the Commission, therefore, to use the Farm to Fork Strategy to swiftly introduce proposals to implement the goal of halving food waste by 2030;

36. Highlights the need to strike the right balance between food packaging that is tailored to individual needs but that also prevents food from spoiling and thus food production resources from being lost;

37. Calls on the Commission to consider the distinction between avoidable waste and unavoidable losses due to unforeseen circumstances;

38. Calls for recognition for agricultural sectors that already work within the principles of the circular economy, such as those using agricultural waste streams and food waste;

39. Points out that food packaging performs important functions, as it improves hygiene, quality and shelf life and provides useful product information;

40. Calls on the Commission to propose new legislation to tackle over-packaging and waste generation and to provide support for the creation of an integrated single market for secondary raw materials and by-products;

41. Calls on the Commission to take account of the functions of food packaging when taking steps to realise the objectives of the new Circular Economy Action Plan;

42. Notes the potential within the circular economy for optimising the use of food that is unavoidably lost or discarded and of by-products from the food chain; stresses the opportunities to reduce wastage at the production stage by using innovative techniques and technologies to convert products that do not meet market standards into processed goods;

43. Notes the benefits of cooperation between producers and innovations in digitalisation that facilitate access to data, demand forecasts and advance production programmes for farmers, thereby enabling them to adapt their production to demand, better coordinate with other sectors in the food supply chain and minimise wastage;

44. Calls for a multi-stakeholder approach for the purposes of collecting unsold, unconsumed and inedible food and redirecting it to feed manufacture; calls on the Commission, in consequence, to analyse legal barriers to the use of old foodstuffs in feed production and to promote research in this area, while also stressing the need for greater traceability and compliance with biosecurity standards and for separation and treatment processes that completely nullify food safety risks;

45. Highlights the importance of research and development for sustainable agricultural technologies, which should be adapted to the needs of farmers and broader society; notes, in particular, the specific needs of small- and medium-scale farmers and the need to focus research and development on access to scale- and cost-appropriate technologies;

46. Considers that all innovations in the circular economy should be covered by EU legislation, should be consistent with the principles of the European Green Deal, and should do no harm to the environment, biodiversity or health, in accordance with the precautionary principle;

47. Calls on the Commission to carry out impact assessments of all the measures proposed under the new Circular Economy Action Plan in order to protect companies' existing and future economic interests and to ensure a do-no-harm approach, in the interest of all EU citizens;

48. Highlights the role of Cluster 6 of Horizon Europe for advancing knowledge, building capacities and developing and demonstrating innovative solutions that will accelerate the transition to a circular economy and, in so doing, create attractive jobs in rural communities and enhance value creation, sustainability and competitiveness;

49. Considers that agricultural land is primarily destined for food and feed production and that bio-sourced materials for plastics should be primarily produced from waste material other than food;

50. Calls for farm waste collection, sorting and recycling facilities to be set up throughout Europe, drawing on the collective responsibility of all actors, farmers, distributors and industrialists;

51. Considers, moreover, that the Commission's draft plastic waste strategy is particularly relevant to agriculture, since the challenges and costs involved in recycling agricultural plastics entails huge challenges for the sector;

52. Calls for oxo-fragmentable plastic films to be phased out and advocates the use of bio-sourced and biodegradable materials which degrade within a short period of time into CO_2 and water under natural environmental conditions and meet EU requirements on curbing waste, soil pollution and bioaccumulation in particular; underlines the need for clear labelling of plastics that are fully biodegradable under normal conditions and plastics that are merely bio-sourced and non-biodegradable;

53. Welcomes the intention to develop a policy framework for sourcing, labelling and using bio-based plastics; highlights that waste products and side streams of agricultural production and the agro-food industry which cannot be used for food, feed or compost should be the main source for bio-plastics;

54. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to invest in new recycling technologies in order to optimise and promote the technological development of sorting and recycling plants and their infrastructure, as well as re-use procedures and techniques; calls on the Commission, in this context, to develop a uniform labelling scheme for recycling systems;

55. Welcomes all initiatives which seek to incorporate waste management and prevention principles into the specifications of products with EU and national quality marks;

56. Highlights the presence of old, disused agricultural buildings which pose serious problems in terms of their removal costs (asbestos, etc.), even before new uses can be

made of them or the space they occupy; underlines, moreover, the overall need for a transition to a sustainable and more circular economy in the sourcing and manufacturing of construction products and materials used in the agricultural sector; stresses that any efforts undertaken in this regard must be made in line with ISO standard TC 323 on the circular economy;

57. Calls for the blue bioeconomy to be integrated into Member States' strategies on the Circular Economy Action Plan.

INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

Date adopted	1.12.2020
Result of final vote	+: 43 –: 0 0: 2
Members present for the final vote	Mazaly Aguilar, Clara Aguilera, Atidzhe Alieva-Veli, Álvaro Amaro, Attila Ara-Kovács, Carmen Avram, Adrian-Dragoş Benea, Benoît Biteau, Mara Bizzotto, Daniel Buda, Isabel Carvalhais, Asger Christensen, Angelo Ciocca, Ivan David, Paolo De Castro, Jérémy Decerle, Salvatore De Meo, Herbert Dorfmann, Luke Ming Flanagan, Cristian Ghinea, Dino Giarrusso, Francisco Guerreiro, Martin Häusling, Martin Hlaváček, Krzysztof Jurgiel, Jarosław Kalinowski, Elsi Katainen, Gilles Lebreton, Norbert Lins, Chris MacManus, Marlene Mortler, Ulrike Müller, Juozas Olekas, Pina Picierno, Maxette Pirbakas, Bronis Ropė, Anne Sander, Petri Sarvamaa, Simone Schmiedtbauer, Annie Schreijer-Pierik, Veronika Vrecionová, Sarah Wiener, Juan Ignacio Zoido Álvarez
Substitutes present for the final vote	Petros Kokkalis, Ruža Tomašić

FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

43	+
ECR	Mazaly AGUILAR, Krzysztof JURGIEL, Ruža TOMAŠIĆ, Veronika VRECIONOVÁ
GUE/NGL	Luke Ming FLANAGAN, Petros KOKKALIS, Chris MACMANUS
ID	Ivan DAVID, Gilles LEBRETON, Maxette PIRBAKAS
NI	Dino GIARRUSSO
PPE	Álvaro AMARO, Daniel BUDA, Salvatore DE MEO, Herbert DORFMANN, Jarosław KALINOWSKI, Norbert LINS, Marlene MORTLER, Anne SANDER, Petri SARVAMAA, Simone SCHMIEDTBAUER, Annie SCHREIJER-PIERIK, Juan Ignacio ZOIDO ÁLVAREZ
Renew	Atidzhe ALIEVA-VELI, Asger CHRISTENSEN, Jérémy DECERLE, Cristian GHINEA, Martin HLAVÁČEK, Elsi KATAINEN, Ulrike MÜLLER
S&D	Clara AGUILERA, Attila ARA-KOVÁCS, Carmen AVRAM, Adrian-Dragoş BENEA, Isabel CARVALHAIS, Paolo DE CASTRO, Juozas OLEKAS, Pina PICIERNO
Verts/ALE	Benoît BITEAU, Francisco GUERREIRO, Martin HÄUSLING, Bronis ROPĖ, Sarah WIENER

0	-

2	0
ID	Mara BIZZOTTO, Angelo CIOCCA

Key to symbols:
+ : in favour
- : against
0 : abstention