



Brussels, 24 July 2024

Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Subject: Urgent Call for Action on Pesticide Reduction to Protect Public Health and Biodiversity

Dear President von der Leyen,

We would like to congratulate you on your re-election to the esteemed position of President of the European Commission. On behalf of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "Save Bees and Farmers!", we sincerely hope you will be able to continue developing the urgently needed sustainable leadership and vision for Europe.

Farmers and citizens ask for consistent and future proof policies that enable the sustainable production of abundant and healthy food for a fair price. Those must ensure that family farming businesses have a future. Healthy soil, clean water and biodiversity are key factors to achieve this. Ecosystem services such as pollination and healthy soils that ensure fertility and water retention are of major importance to the future of EU food production.

The current model of chemical agriculture is at a dead end. The scientific community is very clear: doing nothing is not an option. The decline of pollinators and degradation of soils and pollution of our water with pesticides are very serious threats to food security and jeopardise our health and biodiversity. Farmers are the first victims of pesticides, next come their families and neighbours, while consumers are exposed to toxic pesticide residues in their food on a daily basis.

As the representatives of this ECI, we would like to respectfully remind you that over 1 million European citizens have asked for a phase out of synthetic pesticides by 2035 and a restoration of biodiversity in agricultural areas, with a financial support to farmers in the transition towards pesticide-free agroecological practices, excluding GMOs and NGTs.

At the start of your last EU mandate, we were encouraged by your vocal support for biodiversity and your commitment to environmental sustainability, and a healthier Europe. In execution, however, this hit a dead end. The current crises in biodiversity and farming ask for clear and consistent answers.

Your initial position is supported by the Conference on the Future of Europe, a project you have championed, unequivocally highlighting citizens' desire for substantial reductions in pesticide use.

In addition, EU citizens regularly voice their concern about the impact of pesticides on their health and the environment. Two, out of only 11 successful European Citizens Initiatives (ECIs)^{1,2} demand phasing out of synthetic pesticides. The food Eurobarometers^{3,4,5,6} consistently show that the presence of pesticides in food is a significant source of concern for a vast majority of citizens. Moreover, a recent IPSOS poll⁷ conducted in six EU countries found that approximately 80% of citizens are concerned by the impact of pesticides on their health and the environment and ask for a drastic reduction in pesticide use by the uptake of alternatives by farmers.

Citizens are not alone in their demands. The scientific community views⁸ the previous decisions that resulted in weakening environmental protection and exposing citizens to chemicals as poorly justified and dangerous, as they roll back environmental standards and regulations that have been developed over decades and are strongly supported by both scientific evidence and societal consensus.

In addition, the current model of industrial agriculture has led to the collapse of the farming community and a drastic reduction of the number of farms. The chemical-intensive agricultural model promoted by the CAP has also led to a reduction of the resilience of European farms towards droughts and market fluctuation, and high prices of chemical inputs.

Finally, exposure to pesticides increases the probability of the development of a series of diseases among the farming and rural area community. Higher incidences of diseases such as Parkinson's disease, that is now recognized as an agricultural occupational disease in four Member States. Cancers related to exposure to endocrine-disruptors, such as breast and prostate cancers are also higher among people regularly exposed to pesticides.

In many Member States, the EU elections have seen a rise in the distrust of citizens towards political parties, as well as doubts on the capacity of the European Union to ensure citizens' well-being. More than ever, it is imperative to align actions with the clear demands expressed by citizens.

For these reasons, we ask for urgent actions, to preserve farmers' health and livelihood security, restore biodiversity, preserve ecosystem services and protect citizens.

1. Response to the ECI "Save Bees and Farmers!"

With the retraction of the SUR proposal, the main citizens' demands are left unanswered. We call for the urgent preparation of the **new plan for reducing the use of pesticides and a swift ban of the most problematic candidates for substitution and all PFAS pesticides**, conducted in close cooperation with Member States, using an indicator that measures real progress.

2. Ensure the support for farmers transitioning to agroecological systems with the support of independent advisory system

3. Link the financial support for farmers to the transition to sustainable agricultural practices, including organic farming.

This will improve soil health, water quality and biodiversity, the foundation of any farm production.

4. Enhanced monitoring and enforcement of legislation in the EU Member States

¹https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/initiatives/details/2017/000002/ban-glyphosate-and-protect-people-and-environment-toxic-pesticides_en

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_2084

³<https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/corporate/pub/eurobarometer19>

⁴ https://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-09/EB97.2-food-safety-in-the-EU_report.pdf

⁵ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2241>

⁶ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3173?s=03>

⁷ <https://www.pan-europe.info/resources/reports/2023/10/pesticides-play-it-safe>

⁸ <https://zenodo.org/records/11493585>

Ensure compliance, protect farmers' and public health and preserve biodiversity, vital for farmers' livelihoods and overall food security and to ensure a level playing field for farmers.

We therefore respectfully ask you to establish a plan to ensure a rapid and continuous reduction in pesticide uses, through the uptake of available alternatives. The EU needs a framework that financially supports farming systems that ensure the production of healthy food in a healthy manner.

We look forward to your continued support and decisive action on this critical issue.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Martin Dermine

Dr. Helmut Burtscher-Schaden

representatives of the *Save Bees and Farmers!* ECI

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The image shows two handwritten signatures in blue ink. The first signature, 'M. Dermine', is positioned above the name 'Dr. Martin Dermine'. The second signature, 'Helmut Burtscher-Schaden', is positioned above the name 'Dr. Helmut Burtscher-Schaden'.