

## 13 October 2022 EP Seminar – Transcript Cindy Franssen MEP speech

Dear participants,  
Fellow Members of Parliament,  
Hello everyone,

Please let me start by apologising that I cannot be there with you physically in the room today during this important seminar. However, I would like to give a few personal comments and thoughts on the topic of sustainable use of plant protection products and the necessary reduction and substitution of harmful chemical pesticides.

I would also like to thank professor Mark Eyskens and the organisation for inviting me to do so.

As it has been pointed out by all speakers today, the topic of reducing our use of harmful plant protection products has been on our agenda for quite some time. And rightly so. No one will disagree with me if I state action was urgently needed, and frankly overdue.

Scientific evidence on the impact of hazardous substances that can be found in plant protection products on our health and our biodiversity has been overwhelming for quite some time. Transposing this evidence in legislation has been at the core of my parliamentary work, here in the European Parliament and before in my own Member State.

In the farm to fork strategy and over the summer, the European Commission has set ambitious targets when it comes to reducing the use of chemical plant protection products. As I've already said, we needed such ambitions for quite some time. But why?

Firstly, to protect our health. In the first place the health of those who are exposed the most, our farmers. But also the health of people living nearby places where harmful substances are used or consumers in general. In the beginning of this year, we finished our work in the BECA committee on the fight against cancer, where I was the coordinator for the EPP group.

In our final report the implementation of the farm to fork ambitions was one of the cornerstones in the prevention chapter. The link between the use of harmful pesticides and cancer incidence is obvious. The most important and effective preventive measure we can take is reducing the use of these chemicals. Another recommendation was to link data sets on cancer incidence from screening programmes with occupational categories. People in high-risk occupations could be better protected based on that knowledge.

I now focused briefly on cancer, but I could do the same for other diseases, for example Parkinson's. To sum up: harmful chemical substances are bad for our health. The health related costs for society are enormous.

A second reason why we need these ambitious goals is to protect biodiversity. I do not have to go into detail on the detrimental effect of hazardous plant protection products on nature and pollinators. Both are essential if we want to keep our food production at a high level.

So when the Commission finally presented the revision of the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive this June, this was an important first step. We've all seen the resistance against this revision, both before and after the presentation. Without going into details, I do not agree with these critics.

But we also have to be honest. If we set ambitious targets, we as legislators also have to make sure they can be met. To do so, we need a legislative framework that is fit for purpose. Let me elaborate.

Yes, we need to reduce the amount of harmful plant protection products we use. I will even go one step further: we have to change the way we look at chemical substances in general. If we do so, we will drastically improve health of our citizens and our planet. Non-essential uses of harmful chemicals must be stopped and new substances should only come into the market when it is proven they are not harmful to our health. The reversed burden of proof and the precautionary principle are two elements that should be centre stage. I will always fight for these ideas. I believe we all support changing European legislation in that regard.

Reduction is one thing, but substitution is maybe even more important. We will always need plant protection products. Certainly now, when our food security and strategic autonomy is indeed more important than ever. This means supporting and helping our farmers to ensure they use integrated pest management systems based on environmentally friendly products such as biological pesticides.

Both research and quick market access are essential in that regard.

First, research, innovation and technology all play a key role in accelerating the transition to sustainable agriculture. The European budget will support this research through the Horizon Europe programme.

Second, we need these alternatives now. If we want to reach a European wide reduction target of 50% by 2030 , biologicals have to be on the market now and not in ten years. That is how long it would approximately take now. The Commission agrees to the fact that ensuring alternatives are available on the market is a key priority.

If current rules are not fit for purpose and they favour classic chemical products, they must be changed. Either by updating guidelines, revising the existing regulation on the placing of plant protection products on the market or by proposing new legislation. The bottom line is simple: we need biocontrol products and have to get them market access as swiftly as possible.

The Commission has announced they will present a study summarizing the current situation as well as identifying possible ways for improvement by the end of this year.

I look forward to this presentation and to working on the topic in close cooperation with all of you. Thank you for listening to me and I wish you a very interesting continuation of the seminar.