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HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

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Brussels,

Dear Minister,

European food is famous for being safe, nutritious and of high quality. Our goal is to make it also a global gold standard for sustainability. The Commission has just adopted the ‘Farm to Fork’ strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system, aiming to reduce the environmental and climate footprint of the food system, lead a global transition towards competitive sustainability from farm to fork and tap into new growth opportunities.

Citizens and economic players across value chains, both inside and outside the EU, will play a key role in transforming our food systems. In particular, efforts will be needed to reduce the use and risk of synthetic chemical pesticides, the use of antimicrobials in livestock farming and aquaculture and to ensure high standards of animal welfare.

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly brought to the fore the importance of a **robust and resilient food system** that continues to function in all circumstances, capable of ensuring access to a sufficient supply of affordable food for citizens. It has also made us realise the interrelations between our health, ecosystems, supply chains, consumption patterns and planetary boundaries.

Farmers, fishers, food processors, transporters, retailers and other food chain actors are playing a key role in ensuring that food supply disruptions are minimal in this period of crisis. However, the pandemic also highlights the dependence of our food chain on a well-functioning regulatory and policy framework and effective EU-wide coordination, in particular for the management of borders, the internal market, transport and labour.

In this context, the importance of the proper implementation and enforcement of EU law could not be overstated, and I would like to confirm our determination to take decisive legal action in case of systematic non-compliance. There are a number of critical issues directly linked to the ‘Farm to Fork’ strategy in relation to plant protection products, the sustainable use of pesticides and animal welfare where insufficient enforcement in the Czech Republic is a matter of serious concern to the Commission, and where I count on your personal support and commitment to their resolution.

Mr Miroslav Toman
Minister of Agriculture
Těšnov 17,
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Czech Republic

Ensuring the safety of plant protection products and controls on their use is integral to sustainable food production. The Commission is very concerned that Member States are not respecting the deadlines set out in EU rules for completing the assessment procedures for the approval or renewal of active substances and authorisation of plant protection products.

This situation results in repeated, unjustified extensions of approvals, which are increasingly criticised by the European Parliament and some Member States as potentially unsafe substances and products can stay longer on the market. Furthermore, this situation delays the availability of new and safer products to farmers and also delays the withdrawal of unsafe products from the market. This situation is unsustainable and immediate action must be taken to address it. I would therefore call on you to ensure that the competent authorities have the necessary resources and expertise to complete their tasks on time; the Regulation on plant protection products explicitly provides that Member States can charge fees to applicants to recover all the costs related to the resources they need. Our evaluation shows that, in general, fees are not being sufficiently used to finance the relevant competent authorities' work.

We see much room for improvement also as regards the implementation of our rules on the sustainable use of pesticides. Our assessment of Member States' national action plans, findings from audits to Member States, web-based surveys and other sources of information, demonstrate that, despite the progress made by Member States, there are still gaps in many areas of their national action plans, as well as serious weaknesses in the implementation of the Sustainable Use Directive.

In relation to this issue, I would remind you that implementation of Integrated Pest Management general principles is an obligation for all pesticide professional users, and that the control authorities need to verify this during official controls at farm level.

Animal welfare is another priority area for the Farm to Fork strategy, which is absolutely vital for the sustainability of food systems.

In relation to animal welfare, the main issues in the Czech Republic are that the tail docking of pigs is a routine practice, although this is prohibited as a routine measure by EU rules, and the transport of live animals. Regarding tail docking of pigs, the percentage of pigs reared with intact tails has barely changed since 2016 and conditions on farm must improve if the number of tail-docked pigs is to start to decrease. On transport of live animals, exports by road to Turkey take place during the summer months in extremely high temperatures.

We are aware that often in cases where Member States fail to enforce legislation properly, this is often linked to resources and/or a lack of political commitment, particularly where enforcement imposes, or is seen to impose, costs on producers, as for example, in the case of animal welfare. It is critical, therefore, that the Czech Republic devotes adequate resources to implementing EU rules in the above areas. There are recurrent requests to further EU legislation in the area of animal welfare, both from stakeholders and Member States, it is therefore essential that the existing legislation is fully implemented and enforced.

I ask therefore for your strong commitment to expedite the necessary actions to ensure immediate and full compliance with EU requirements in these areas. My services will closely monitor the issue and will be in contact with your services to follow up that the necessary actions are taken.

The Commission will also play a strong role in supporting Member States through audits and training programmes on these topics.

It is important that the Czech Republic makes the best possible use of all the tools available to support the objectives of the Farm to Fork strategy. Among others, the national strategic plans under the proposed new Common Agricultural Policy should make full use of the range of tools available, and they will be assessed and approved by the Commission on this basis.

I look forward to our continued and close cooperation on these matters, which are of increasing importance for our citizens.

Yours sincerely,

A grey rectangular box redacting the signature of Stella Kyriakides.

Stella Kyriakides