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## Putting Innovation at the Heart of Europe's Agri-Food Policy

In May 2014, a group of 11 EU-level associations representing agricultural and food business interests across Europe presented their joint “Vision for unlocking the potential of agriculture and food industries in the EU.”

The group, calling itself the Agri-Food-Chain Coalition (AFCC), includes agricultural input industries such as suppliers of machinery, seed, fertilisers, crop protection, animal health, feed and biotechnology-based products, as well as the agricultural trade, EU farmers and the European food and drink sector. Together, these industries account for more than 30 million jobs and some 3.5 per cent of the EU's gross value added.

The ‘Joint Vision’ underlined the importance of providing a secure and safe supply of food not only for EU citizens, but also for those beyond Europe's borders—and to do so in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner. At the same time, the coalition pointed to the economic weight of these sectors, and with that their important relevance in achieving overarching EU policy goals such as higher employment and economic growth.

In summary, the joint vision is a common call for a more streamlined EU policy agenda that places the promotion of innovation for and in agriculture at its core in order to sustain healthy, high-quality and affordable food production and resulting choice for consumers. More pointedly, Europe's Agri-Food Chain was calling for nothing less than an EU policy shift, and it logically addressed the designated new European Commission and the freshly-elected European Parliament (next to Member States' governments) with its call for change and action. So where are we today, almost two years after the launch of the joint vision?

I think it is fair to say that the initiative by and large has achieved quite a bit. First of all, assembling 11 quite different EU-level industry organisations around a set of common policy objectives is a success that should not be overlooked. For the five years term of the EU institutions, the AFCC defined seventeen specific policy recommendations that were submitted to European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker and cover the fostering of innovation, jobs and productivity, resource-efficiency, and better and smarter policymaking, in order to ensure that innovation is at the heart of new EU agri-food policy. And indeed, some progress has already been made.

For example, the recent decision to set up the new Scientific Advisory Mechanism (SAM) is an important indicator for a commitment to bring science back into a central role when taking new legislative action. Such a new mechanism will not only allow the Commission to take advantage of independent advice from eminent scientists—it also contains new administrative tools to scrutinize new legislative initiatives at an early stage which may impact on the EU's ability to innovate. This is vital for the competitiveness of our economy as a whole and specifically for the agri-food chain, as it is our largest sector in terms of jobs and growth opportunities.

Furthermore, the designation of a special adviser on innovation is another signal that hopefully will result in concrete recommendations and reports on how to best mobilise new and coordinate existing resources to stimulate and improve the innovation capacity of the EU.

And last but not least, there are the EU's budget with up to 3.6 billion euros earmarked for research and development funding under the EU's Horizon 2020 program and the Commission's long-term strategy

for European agricultural research and innovation by 2020 and beyond, which is supposed to act as an overall vision to keep agri-food industries thriving.

The AFCC, however, sees a need to go beyond such individual actions. What is needed is a more fundamental change of mind-set to embed a pro-innovation attitude and consequent policy approach across all relevant societal groups as well as administrative and political levels.

Today, companies and farmers are often prevented from reaching their potential as an overly risk-averse policy approach dominates all EU-level debates and decisions.

Recent examples include national opt-outs from authorisations of GM crops assessed as safe, a rising number of restrictions on pesticides and biocides, and ever-higher costs for product applications for veterinary medicines and feed and food additives due to increasing legal requirements, compounded by strict threshold policies in the public and animal health areas. Numerous traceability and labelling requirements not only create legal and economic burden; they are often abused to stigmatise products and technologies. In many cases, these policies do not address any practical risk, but they do delay or even prevent market access of new products. That creates crippling effects on our research capacity, which is crumbling under an EU policy mantra that addresses consumer perceptions as opposed to consumer protection issues.

As a consequence, Europe is falling behind. This is underlined by the EU's declining share of new agricultural patents, as recently demonstrated by the EU's own Joint Research Centre. Just at a time when Europe is supposed to lead on climate change and other sustainability goals, our research and innovation pipeline runs dry. The EU will fail the expectations of its citizens if it doesn't fully capitalise on technology-driven solutions available to address global challenges.

The AFCC shares the sense of urgency that our industries feel today. That is why we insist on the need for a truly integrated EU policy approach that favours the development of a comprehensive policy toolbox that fosters innovation across the agri-food chain, allowing Europe to be more productive and more sustainable at the same time.

Only then will we unlock the full potential of our innovation capacity and generate the desired benefits for farmers, industries, consumers and society at large. The Agri-Food Chain Coalition stands ready to work with all European institutions and stakeholders to ensure a competitive and sustainable Europe that turns today's challenges into tomorrow's opportunities.

*Editor's Note: Garlich von Essen is the secretary general of the European Seed Association and is currently chair of the European Agri-Food-Chain Coalition. AFCC is comprised of 11 EU-level associations from agricultural input industries such as suppliers of machinery (CEMA), seeds (ESA), fertilizers (Fertilizers Europe), crop protection (ECPA), animal health (IFAH), feed (FEFAC) and biotechnology-based products (EuropaBio), the agricultural trade (COCERAL and CELCAA), EU farmers (COPA-COGECA) and European food and drink manufacturing sector (FDE).*

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