

# Session Plant pathology and society – where are we heading for?

## How to bridge the gap between farmers and NGOs

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An EU-seminar on Sustainable Agriculture and Pesticides in Paris (25/26 November 2008) revealed a huge gap in way of thinking on crop protection between the agricultural community and the environmental movement. The agricultural community was talking about pest control systems. The environmental movement was talking about integrated food systems, including the role of the food industry, consumers and policy-makers. In fact the two opposing parties did not listen to each other. This finding provoked the sociological question on how to bring the two opponents on speaking terms.

In-depth interviews with representatives of farmers and NGOs revealed common interests in the field of soil quality. For arable farmers soil quality is a crucial production factor. When soil quality gets poor, pests and diseases get higher impact, plant protection costs increase, yield levels decrease and economic results fade away. Soil quality is a matter of sustainability for arable farmers. For NGOs, soil quality (and especially soil life) is the basis of all life on earth. Soil organisms feed plants, plants feed animals, humans live from plant products and animal products. Consequently, a vigorous soil life is a matter of sustainability for NGOs.

As a result, NGOs have another perspective on emission of pesticides than policymakers and the agricultural community. Most stakeholders associate emission of pesticides with volumes escaped to the atmosphere, surface water, ground water and non-agricultural areas. NGOs however consider the total volume of pesticides applied as emission to the ecosystem. They are afraid that pesticides have a negative impact on soil organisms in agricultural land and may affect biological mechanisms in the ecosystem. Research of PPO and LEI has indeed revealed an example where pesticides indirectly increased

infection pressure.

Soil quality is also a topic for governments. The American president Roosevelt already stated in 1937: 'A nation that destroys its soil, destroys itself'. In other words, the soil is the basis for food production and food security and governments have a responsibility for soil protection. Moreover the soil is an important source of biodiversity. According to Agenda 21 of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, governments have the responsibility to protect biodiversity, including the biodiversity in soils.

In summary: soil quality is a common interest for both farmers (crucial production factor), NGOs (basis of global ecosystem) and governments (crucial for food production). As a result, soil quality can function as a bridge between the agricultural community, the environmental movement and government. Putting soil quality on the agenda for crop protection policy also implies exciting challenges for crop protection research. Tools for measuring soil quality and certification systems for rewarding achievements in soil quality need to be developed.

### References

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