

One quarter organic is 'not realistic'

The EU wants one quarter of its agriculture to be organic. That is not a realistic target for the Netherlands, say WUR researchers Wijnand Sukkel (Agroecology) and Katja Logatcheva (market research).

In a paper based on European Commissioner Frans Timmermans' Farm to Fork strategy, the European Commission sets a goal of increasing the acreage of organic farmland from the current 8.5 per cent (3.7 per cent in the Netherlands) to 25 per cent by 2030. The EU also wants to lower VAT on organic products and hand out 'bio-cheques' to people on low incomes. The Netherlands can learn from previous stimulation programmes, says agroecologist Wijnand Sukkel. 'The good thing about this plan is that it wants to increase demand as well as supply.' If that is not done, supply exceeds demand and organic farmers get low prices, as happened during a stimulation programme 20 years ago. This led to an effort to boost demand, which increased the market share of organic produce considerably, 'but the 10 per cent target of the time was not met,' says Sukkel.

How can demand for organic products be stimulated? For a start, the price difference between organic and regular products must be drastically reduced, thinks Sukkel. 'Just lowering VAT is not enough to bridge the difference in cost price for the farmers, which is at least 30 per cent for a lot of products. We could also reward farmers for things like ecosystem services.'

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Katja Logatcheva, a market researcher at Wageningen Economic Research, notes that the Netherlands is an agricultural export country, and that it should therefore study whether and how these measures increase demand for organic products in other EU countries. In Germany, for example, there is a growing 'eat local' trend that boosts demand for local organic products, in spite of their higher prices. This is not a demand that stands to benefit Dutch producers, Logatcheva points out. She also expects a continued demand for cheaper, non-organic food in Europe and the rest of the world, and that the Netherlands will maintain its strong competitive edge in these markets. Neither of



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these developments will promote a transition to organic farming in the Netherlands.

The greatest challenge for the Dutch market, according to Logatcheva, is to encourage consumers to start buying organic food en masse. 'When prices are different, the consumer is sort of punished for buying an organic product. Another controversial point is that traditional agriculture is also becoming more sustainable. If you tax traditional farming in favour of organic businesses, you hamper this move towards greater sustainability.' Sukkel agrees that the EU should focus its efforts to make agriculture more sustainable on the sector as a whole. 'Agriculture with a high level of biodiversity, that is resilient to climate change, diseases and pests, and that does not deplete our resources. Organic farming is one step ahead in that respect, but it still has a way to go.' AS

In this article, WUR researchers Wijnand Sukkel and Katja Logatcheva explain that the European Commissions' target of making 25 per cent of agriculture organic by 2030 is not realistic. But their fellow WUR researchers Rogier Schulte (Farming Systems Ecology) and Han Wiskerke (Rural Sociology) take a different view. Instead of 'dismissing' the EU ambition as unrealistic, they see it as the task of science to find ways of reaching the targets set. Read their views on resource-online.nl.



On Thursday 29 April at 12:00, Resource will be organizing a debate via Teams on 'Is 25 per cent organic production realistic?' with Wijnand Sukkel, Rogier Schulte and Ilse Geijzendorffer (Louis Bolk Institute). If you want to join in, keep an eye on our website and social media for the invitation and link.