

Planting a seed

Minister of Agriculture Petr Gandalovic shares how ecological agriculture has been given the green light in the Czech Republic...

At the end of 2008 there were 1,802 agricultural enterprises in the Czech Republic, almost 500 farms more than in 2007; the number of biofood producers had also increased from 253 to 410. The acreage of agricultural land dedicated to biofood came to 338,722ha, and this accounted for almost 8% of the total acreage of agricultural land. It turns out that ecological agriculture and biofood production is not just a fashion trend, but a stable and prospective business opportunity for agriculturists and food producers. The main stimulus for development is not just state support, but also the high demand from biofood consumers. This is reflected not only in the increase in the number of biofood producers, but also in the growing areas of certified arable land. Among the fastest growing ecological agricultural area are orchards and vineyards. Their acreage has increased year-on-year by about 70%. The development of the certified bioseed market can also be expected alongside the increasing acreage of arable land.



The 'Action Plan of the Czech Republic for the Development of Ecological Agriculture to 2010' states that one of the most important objectives is to achieve a share of 10% of agricultural land for ecological agriculture

In the Czech Republic the strategy for the development of ecofarming is laid down in the 'Action Plan of the Czech Republic for the Development of Ecological Agriculture to 2010'. This document states that one of the most important objectives is to achieve a share of 10% of agricultural land for ecological agriculture. This is realistic and achievable in view of the present situation. The main areas that, according to the Action Plan, need to be resolved are promotion and the sale of biofood; the relationship of ecological agriculture with the environment; research, education, consulting and animal welfare. The results are already apparent: the awareness of consumers about biofood and its benefits has increased significantly since 2004.

However, the contribution of ecological agriculture does not merely rest in the supply of biofood. It has been proven that eco farming increases biodiversity. According to research, more species of plants and animals live on ecofarms than on traditional farms and these are often protected species. The biodiversity of the land is also greater. Another significant benefit is the fact that old, traditional varieties of field crops, such as emmer wheat, spelt, buckwheat or triticale, are often cultivated on ecofarms, and regional breeds of animals, such as the česká červinka (Czech Red Cow), are also bred.

The inland position of the Czech Republic in the heart of central Europe predetermines the relationship of the territory to the European river network. Although there is no high mountain range in the Czech Republic, it can be described as lying 'on the roof' of Europe. It is the watershed of major European rivers the Labe (Elbe) and Oder and also has the Danube flowing through it. The territory is therefore divided according to the outflow of the water into the North, Baltic and Black Seas. The divide between the basins of the Rivers Labe, Oder and Danube meets at one point. This hydrographically important point lies on the summit of Klepý (1,144 metres above sea level) in the mountain range of Králický Sněžník, which is situated on the border between Bohemia and Moravia, near the Czech-Polish border. The fact that virtually all water flows out of Czech territory means available sources are limited and so naturally there is a history of containing water in reservoirs.

The basic hydrographical network of the Czech Republic consists of about 76,000km of water courses with natural



and regulated riverbeds and 23,000 fishponds and reservoirs. The major courses in Bohemia are the River Labe (370km) and the Vltava (433km); in Moravia the River Morava (272km) and the Dyje (306km); in north Moravia and Silesia the Oder (135km) and the Opava (131km). The total length of these major water courses is 15,536km. The state enterprises called Povodí (River Basin) and in turn Povodí Vltavy, Povodí Ohře, Povodí Labe, Povodí Odry and Povodí Moravy are in charge of the water management of the major water courses and waterworks. The crucial managers of the small water courses are Zemědělská vodohospodářská správa (Agricultural and Water-management Administration) and Lesy ČR, státní podnik (Forests of the Czech Republic state enterprise).

Water management within the agricultural sector in the Czech Republic was of a multipurpose nature from its beginnings. Today it serves to supply drinking water to rural regions for plant and animal production, and for the needs of the food industry. The most important surface water consumers are water companies, industry and the energy sector. One of the important functions of water courses and reservoirs is to adjust the flow and absorption of floods. Waterways are used for navigation and all the

water courses and reservoirs hold an irreplaceable ecological function. Extremely important to the electric grid is the electricity generated in hydro-electric power plants, so-called 'clean energy', which helps cover effectively the peak load of the electricity grid.

In the last few decades great attention and effort have been devoted in many countries to exploring potential climate change. Floods and droughts

pose the biggest natural threats in the Czech Republic. There are subsidies for protection against flooding such as cleaning fishponds and landscaping aimed at anti-flooding measures that ensure and support all these areas. About CZK15bn has been allocated to these subsidies for the period of 2007-2012.

The Czech Republic also has a long tradition of planning for the utilisation of water sources. It is the fundamental tool for the harmonisation of public interests in water management – water protection, protection against the negative effects of water and ensuring water management services. It is under the Czech presidency of the EU that the Plans for the River Basin Areas will be published throughout the EU. This includes the national requirements and those of European directives for water management.

The Czech Republic wants to make significant progress during its forthcoming presidency in the debate on the EU quality policy review. This will ensure a long-term perspective for high quality agricultural and food products on the EU internal market and with regard to third countries. One of the tools associated with securing quality products is also a system of protection of so-called data on the origin of products (agricultural designations and marks of origin). The Czech Republic is greatly active in this area. It has already negotiated community protection for the marks of several products within the Accession Treaty and for now has the most agricultural and food products marked for protection of all the new EU member countries. The Czech presidency wants to continue with this rich experience and focus on simplifying the registration procedures and increasing the restrictively limiting assessment time. This, above all, concerns time limits set by the European Commission. Quality arguments in support of an application or the rejection of any objections require an enormous amount of professional, true research work – for example material for the recently recognised registration of the mark České pivo (Czech Beer) that was gathered from archived 11th century documents.

The process of reassessing the quality policy has been initiated and it will be under the Czech presidency that professional discussion will come together. This was launched by the Commission with the publication of the green paper in October 2008. The Czech presidency will organise a ministerial conference on this issue in March



The protection of human health and the need to maintain a balance between ensuring sufficient healthy food and protection of all aspects of the environment is the main priority of the Czech Republic

2009 with the participation of European-Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel.

The Czech presidency will deal with the food quality policy, the issue of marking food and maintaining set rules. The Czech Republic has for a long time been against any relaxation of standards, for example regarding the proposal of the chemical treatment of refrigerated poultry, because our food producers have been forced for a long time to meet the highest standards and this has required substantial investments whose purposefulness could be threatened. The only weapon the Czech Republic will have is the quality of its own foodstuffs, its good reputation and the long-term trust of European citizens.

The marking of authenticity that is harmless to health and will not mislead the consumer is one to be discussed by all producers. It will, on the contrary, provide the consumer with as much transparent information as possible that will interest and assure him of the high hygienic standards required in the entire processing procedure. Unless it meets these minimum standards, a product has no place on the EU market.

The Czech Republic certainly does not want more bureaucracy with a review of the EU's quality policy, but rather more transparent information for the consumer and a clear indication of quality. However, the definition of quality needs to be treated carefully. A quality product is one that is considered one of quality by the consumer. No other definition can be made and if we accept it then it is binding to a considerable extent. We can define the minimum contents of the fruit ingredient in juices, milk fat in dairy products and cross muscle in meat products, but these are quality parameters. Quality is a far more subtle phenomenon and this is the way quality policy needs to be approached.

A hot topic that awaits the Czech presidency is the 'inherited agenda' of how to achieve progress in the preparation of a draft new regulation on the use of pesticides in agriculture.



The present dependence of agricultural production on plant protection agents (pesticides) is still considerable. Their qualified use against diseases, animal pests and weeds maintains the stability of the production and quality of harmless food. Healthy food may be produced only from healthy plants. They also enable better assessment of all work and material input into production.

On the other hand, plant protection agents carry potential risks to the health of humans, animals and the environment.

The protection of human health and the need to maintain a balance between ensuring sufficient healthy food and protection of all aspects of the environment is and remains the priority. Through the State Plant Medicine Administration, the Czech Republic has, for a long time, been replacing in the register of permitted plant protection agents those that carry adverse side effects with new ones that contain more favourable properties. The risk agents are thereby eliminated from use.

Laboratory checks are also being consistently carried out on agents launched on the market, and conditions are being maintained for application by agricultural enterprises.

Subsidy policy also supports the restriction of the number and careful use of plant protection agents. Agriculturists who have undertaken to meet and demonstrably meet stricter conditions for the use of pesticides are recipients of subsidies for difficult management from the 'Rural Development Programme' Agroenvironmental Measures.

EU2009.CZ



MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC



Petr Gandalovic
Minister

Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic

Tel: +420 221 811 111

info@mze.cz

www.mze.cz