Climate instability concerns across Europe put pressure on farmers, spurs calls for reform of crop gene editing regulations

leverage the proposed European Green Deal (EGD) announced in December 2019, the EU aims to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. Growing evidence of a more unstable climate is creating a sense of urgency. The Green Deal envisages fundamental changes in EU policies in several areas ranging from agriculture to industry, from energy to transportation.

Recent years have provided numerous reasons for the EU to take the necessary measures to address the escalating climate crisis. During the summer of 2022, some countries experienced the worst drought in the last 500 years; up to 30% yield loss in products such as corn and soybeans; yield losses due to extreme heat during the flowering period and dry periods in southeastern countries; a huge increase in electricity, water, and other production inputs, and even increases in prices of some of the inputs exceeding 300%.

The “Adaptation to 55” legislative amendment package published by the European Commission in July 2021, reviewed EU climate, energy, land use, transportation and taxation policies to ensure a 55% emission reduction by 2030 compared to the 1990 level.

Last year, Europe made a series of decisions promoting organic nutrition to be implemented in the coming years. The EU also targeted eliminating CO2 emissions and improving energy efficiency. The package included: reducing the use of chemical pesticides by 50% by 2030, reducing the use of fertilizers by at least 20% by 2030, 25% in organic agriculture areas by 2030 and a certain increase in organic aquaculture, etc.

Almost three years later, war and climactic events in Europe are reshaping these proposed agriculture and climate policies. Poland, Spain, and Hungary are pushing to change the “Farm to Fork” regulations.

Although food safety and security in the EU are not under threat, the European Union is going through a challenging period. The ongoing effects of COVID-19, price shocks in global food energy and fertilizer markets, as well as the current tense geopolitical situation have led to shortages of some raw materials. High inflation, the Covid-19 crisis and the Russia-Ukraine war have negatively impacted the EU. In the last 2 years, around 7 million immigrants took refuge in European countries. Due to the economic sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia and the decline in industrial production capacity resulting from the interruption of natural gas flow, the negative economic effects has led to economic stagnation.

Within the framework of the Green Agreement, the ecological transition of EU member states — reducing the use of pesticides and fertilizers, developing organic agriculture and protecting biodiversity — have brought new burdens to farmers. On the other hand, with bilateral trade agreements, the increase in the import of cheap agricultural products from countries producing outside EU standards has stirred anger among EU farmers, while farmers in France literally “invaded” Paris, claiming that “farmer suicide is increasing due to bankruptcy and difficulties.”
The head of the farmers’ organization said: “Who will help the farmers in their time of need?” We have not received any help in this mess so far. That’s why we demand help that goes directly into the pockets of the farmers, we should not play with the food.”

Climate regulations and the Green Deal are at the top of their list of concerns. Among the main reasons for the protests: related agricultural policies, water restrictions, efforts to remove or reduce subsidies, and grain imported from Ukraine.

There is a growing belief among these groups that the main culprits of global warming, climate change, and carbon emissions, are products of the global colonial order, vaguely referred to as the “west” or global capital, and the irresponsible industrialization they cause amidst their consumption explosion, while trying to make farmers pay the price for excesses.

Farmers are also concerned about the legal regulations in place hampering gene editing innovations. Farmer organizations want gene editing to be treated differently than GMOs, which are rarely approved. The European voted in support of new gene techniques by 307 votes to 263 (41 abstentions); the legislation is now in the hands of the EU Commission. New gene techniques enable the breeding of new plant varieties that are climate-resistant, resistant to pests, have higher yields and require less fertilizer and pesticides. Under the proposal, GMOs, which use ‘foreign’ DNA, will still be mostly banned.

The Green Deal is very important for many countries in the EU. This is not only about the EU streamlining its agricultural policies but also helping the European countries standardize regulations. Meanwhile, European farmers are continuing their protests against the implementation of the Green Deal.

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