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Opinion Piece

A full plate for European rice producers in 2019

Dear colleagues and partners,

Last week I was in Brussels, where I had the honour of being re-elected Chairman of the Copa-Cogeca Working Party on Rice; my Spanish colleague Miguel Minguet was re-elected Vice-Chair. As we are reaching the end of the year, I cannot help but look ahead to the many challenges that we will have to face together in 2019. Many believe that next year will be nothing short of a turning point for the future of rice production in Europe.

Rice is grown in eight countries of the European Union, from Portugal to Bulgaria. In these countries, its cultivation is extremely important from an economic, environmental and cultural standpoint. Rice production is vital to preventing rural exodus but also to safeguarding wetlands and their biodiversity, in particular for many species of waterfowl, insects and amphibians.

However, this heritage is now at risk as international competition is becoming unbearable. At the same time, the tools made available to rice producers to protect their crops from pests and diseases are insufficient (or are simply ripped out of their hands).

This is why we will need to get rapid answers early next year on the most pressing issues for European rice producers. In this regard, a first essential milestone is the enforcement by the College of Commissioners in mid-January of a safeguard clause, applicable for 3 years, on unfair rice imports from Cambodia and Myanmar. Cambodia and Myanmar have benefited greatly in recent years from the “EBA” (Everything But Arms) agreement, enabling them to export considerable tax-free volumes to Europe. From 27,000 tonnes in 2009, exports to the EU rocketed to more than 300,000 tonnes in 2017. If quota- and duty-free rice imports from Cambodia and Myanmar continue at the current pace, they could, in the worst-case scenario, bring about the abandonment of EU rice production. This would run against the objective of the Common Agricultural Policy, which encourages agriculture to contribute to the maintenance of biodiversity.

During our Chairmanship, we will also be very careful that any new free trade agreements do not have a negative impact on the rice sector. A recent study by the Joint Research Centre has analysed the effects of free trade negotiations on EU agricultural markets. The study shows that the rice sector will be among those most affected because the increase in imports, mainly from Thailand, will lead to a decrease in both EU rice production and rice prices. It is also worth mentioning that this study covers only the major exports, i.e. from the Mercosur countries, Thailand and Vietnam, but not from India or Australia.

Against this backdrop, I also believe that European consumers could be our greatest ally when safeguarding our tradition of producing rice. However, for this to be possible, we need to raise awareness among consumers and provide them with clear information. This is why we will encourage our members to submit their most appropriate promotion programmes for co-financing by the European Commission. The challenge when promoting the rice sector is making

consumers aware that this crop complies with high production standards and provides full traceability, in particular in non-rice producing Member States. The key promotion messages should focus on the nutritional value of rice, its environmentally friendly production method, the various ways of cooking it, and its compliance with high production and food safety standards.

In parallel to promotion programmes, origin labelling should be made mandatory at EU level. The label should state the country in which the rice was produced, i.e. where it was harvested, and should be compulsory for all Member States. This will allow consumers to make informed choices and will give farmers an opportunity to increase their market recognition.

Finally, the CAP should be a tool to help the sector face all of the above-mentioned challenges. Two strong pillars must be ensured. There must be at least 60% ring-fencing for direct payments (BISS) in pillar I, without excessive transfers between pillars. In addition, coupled support should be maintained at its current level at least. The new green architecture and enhanced conditionality bring with them many new obligations and an increased level of compliance. Farmers can only comply with these obligations if they are sufficiently rewarded for their work. Moreover, the proposed eco-schemes should be simple, should not compromise measures in pillar II, and should be economically sound. Finally, under the new green architecture, rice should be exempted from crop rotation for practical reasons (wetlands).

As is my tradition at the end of each year, I would like to make a wish for the year to come. I wish for European rice producers to be able to continue to ensure the vibrancy of their sector in all our regions, while receiving a decent income for their many commitments towards achieving the CAP's general objectives.

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