



10 Minutes For The Planet **Salon de l'Agriculture**

©

by Valentine Rinner

Hello everyone and welcome to this week's episode of 10 Minutes for the Planet. A few weeks ago, the annual Salon de l'Agriculture was held in Paris, with its characteristic parade of politicians and especially on this election year, the candidates for the upcoming presidential elections. With over 600,000 visitors each year, the Salon de l'Agriculture is a milestone before votes must be cast in May, as well as a compulsory test for future candidates.

Farmers today seem to have little trust in the government's will to support their livelihood and the Salon is a prime opportunity to get public and political attention on issues that are dear to them. This year, the atmosphere was decidedly tense: with bird flu a problem in the South West of France, dread over the negotiations for the next 2020 European Common Agricultural Policy, and the unfortunate passing of Xavier Bellin, one of the leading agricultural representatives since 2010, who died suddenly, only a week before the Salon.

On February 28th, halfway through the Salon, the Minister for Agriculture, Stéphane Le Foll, announced that 343 million euros would be freed in order to pay overdue subsidies over the next few months. This was welcome news, as all farmers transitioning from conventional to organic agriculture are eligible for a 5-year "transition subsidy," followed by a lighter 5-year "maintenance subsidy," under the European Common Agricultural Policy, to cover their initial losses. Shockingly, an estimated 25,000 farmers, representing about 80% of organic farms in France, still haven't received their financial subsidies for the past two years.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, the delay was caused by a bug in the software dealing with subsidy calculations. The Government has the money; however, they are encountering difficulties allocating it correctly. 2 years later and despite the Ministry's efforts to recruit extra analysts, teams are still catching up with the problem. Subsidies have been calculated one after the other, starting with larger farms – leaving smaller farms, which are often organic, last on the list. So, little wonder farmers are having trouble keeping their tempers, as well as their financial equilibrium. A significant number of recent organic farms have closed due to lack of cash, while many of those remaining face heavy financial difficulties as they have debts to reimburse due to their "transition" investments. Without subsidies, the challenge is too great.

The number announced by Le Foll represents 80% of the outstanding amounts due for 2016. However, overdue subsidies for 2015 are still awaiting their turn.

In the meantime, the demand for organic food continues to increase and has grown 20% in 2016 alone. As of today, we face difficulties meeting the demand even though farm conversions from conventional to organic have exploded, reaching an increase of 40% in 2016. Conversion is a heavy process that takes between three and five years, and given the current circumstances, it looks like present-day and future organic farmers will have growing difficulties responding to rising demands. We can only hope the issue will start emerging in the presidential programs and debates.

Bye everyone and see you next week for a new episode of 10 Minutes for the Planet.