

## 10 Minutes For The Planet

### French Neo-farming ©

by Valentine Rinner



Hello everyone and welcome to this week's episode of 10 minutes for the Planet. They call themselves "permaculturists", "agroecologists" or "agroforesters", and ten of them were welcomed by the Minister of Agriculture Stéphane Le Foll on January 24th. They were awarded a prize for setting up innovative organic farming projects. The prize was organised by a network called "Fermes d'avenir", which was launched in 2013 and is a growing national success.

From goat cheese to educational farming, from gherkins to magical edible forests, the selected projects cover a wide range of farming activities but all have pledged to reinvent agricultural practices in our country and to prove there are sustainable alternatives to large and environmentally-costly monocultures. These mostly newly-converted farmers will receive participative funding to develop their projects as well as knowledge support from the "Fermes d'avenir" network.

Estimates say that before the 1940s with one fossil energy calorie we could produce over two calories of food. Now we need between five and ten fossil energy calories to produce one single calorie of food. This is mainly due to food having become an industrial commodity. Today food production depends on high levels of chemical input, heavy mechanical engineering and long distribution chains. The farming industry seems to have gone from being dependant on hordes of low-paid over-worked farmers, to being dependant on the availability and prices of fossil energy and a few less farmers however still low-paid and overworked. It looks as though we've got a tiny bit of it right but a whole lot still needs to be reinvented.

New farmers rewarded by the Fermes d'avenir prize all seem to adopt a "back to basics" attitude towards farming practices. Practices that exclude most heavy machinery and require more manual labour. Practices that hopefully will lead them to be less dependent on fluctuating external resources. Today in France the farming industry is highly subsidised mainly through the European Common Agricultural Policy (the infamous PAC), sometimes by as much as 50% of the final product price. This leaves quite a lot of room for innovative farming projects to prove more sustainable than the 21st century mainstream practices, but sets a high barrier to entry for these new alternative systems as prices are strongly biased.

Additionally, new ways of producing also come with new ways of distributing and with today's sovereignty of supermarkets and centralised pricing, the current system is not quite the ideal fit for new small local productions. However, the demand for food from non-intensive farming practices is raising in France. It is now becoming less risky for conventional farms to switch to organic farming thanks to the rising and stable demand, which wasn't the case a few years ago. This rising demand also allows neo-farmers to go one step further than organic farming, testing alternative techniques and inventing their own specificities. Once they prove that some of the techniques are sustainable then political leverage will be crucial in order to lift the barriers that today promote outdated ways of producing. Unfortunately agriculture is a sensitive topic in French politics as it is usually identified with the extreme left. But we'll talk about that in a future episode...

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