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Experts on organic farming agree on long-term solutions towards sustainable production systems

Current organic issues are discussed in the organic NJF-conference started in Mikkeli on 19th June 2017. Experts on organic farming agree, that food production must aim towards more sustainable production.

Professor John P. Reganold has shaped his career by his interest in agriculture and the environment. He has over 30 years of experience in researching the effects on organic, integrated, and conventional farming systems with focus on productivity, financial performance, environmental quality, and social wellbeing.

According to Reganold, a blend of organic and other innovative farming systems will be needed for future global food and ecosystem safety. Moreover, further actions are needed, from reducing food waste to changing consumption patterns.

- All this requires policy instruments to facilitate the development and implementation of sustainable farming systems, Reganold emphasizes.

Tuning up sustainable organic animal production

Professor Lotta Rydhmer, who is an expert on animal breeding and genetic, highlighted in the conference different perspectives and choices to make when tuning up organic animal production for more sustainable solutions.

When targeting for a more sustainable production, there is a need to consider various sustainability aspects with many goal conflicts.

- The first step is to admit the existing conflicts. All of them cannot be solved scientifically, they need political decisions, Rydhmer emphasizes.

For instance, how to get high profit in a short-term economic perspective and simultaneously reach high animal welfare. In an evaluation of 15 different pig production systems in Europe, production systems with high pig welfare had the worse farmers' economy in general.

In the Nordic countries, a high proportion of the consumed cattle meat is a by-product of milk production. A breeding resulting cows with high milk production leads to less cows and thus less meat. If we still want to consume the same amount of cattle meat, we have to increase the number of beef cows. In general, animal production with beef cattle has a larger climate impact than with dairy cattle.

- Although dual-purpose breeds and animal welfare have a key role in organic production, this example illustrates well the importance of studying the whole production system, Rydhmer states.

The organic production is sometimes discussed as one homogenous system. However, there is a huge diversity among producers, from small farms to bigger units. Different production systems have different challenges, and the farmers need different advisory support. For scientists, this means that different studies and research results are needed to improve the production systems.

- Regardless of differences between organic and conventional production systems, we should strive for continuous improvement and sustainability assessment practices, Rydhmer says.

As for the future, there are two alternative paths to follow according to Rydhmer. When thinking of merely marketing aspects, "tuning up" could mean more complicated rules for organic production in order to maintain a gap between organic and conventional production.

Seeing organic production as a way to sustainable development on a larger scale, these complicated rules may cause decreasing the number of organic farms. Hence, "tuning up" could be adapting the rules for organic production together with new scientific results, not letting the precautionary principle lead to dead ends.

Do organic food systems produce healthy diets?

Organic food consumption patterns seem to be close to both recommended healthy dietary patterns as well as sustainable diet patterns.

- European studies show that people who prefer organic food also follow overall healthier diets. This means that they eat more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains and less meat, Strassner states.

Hence, the search for evidence of better health outcomes needs to be considered from the dietary level to the social practice level. A future field of study can be found from school meal systems.

- Studies show that a school with a healthy-food policy favors organic food in meal choices. Hence, an organic school policy can promote healthy eating in general, Strassner emphasizes.

More information:

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- § <https://www.facebook.com/NJF2017Mikkeli/>
- § Conference material (will be published): www.orgprints.org

Current organic topics were discussed in the NJF-organic research conference in Mikkeli during 19th-21st June 2017. The conference held every fourth year, gathered about hundred participants from 13 different countries.