

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
THE CHAIR

Mr Janusz Wojciechowski
Commissioner for Agriculture
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
B-1049 Brussels

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Dear Commissioner,

On 11 March, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. At the same time, WHO calls all countries to strike a balance between “protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights”. This means, that while on European level exceptional measures to protect the health of our citizens have to be taken, the continuing flow of goods and essential services must be ensured in our internal market, as a key instrument of European solidarity.

The Institutions of the European Union have to be unanimous to provide a joint response to this common challenge, the largest since the post-war period.

The Agricultural Committee that mandated me to send this letter I represent, wants to raise your awareness to the fact that in this situation the European farmers are not only struggling to continue their daily work but even more so, face ever increasing difficulties to access the means of production and to deliver their products to European consumers. This grave situation calls for urgent action to allow the sector to continue functioning in the face of this unprecedented crisis.

We gratefully acknowledge the European Commission’s initiative to grant farmers a one-month extension for submitting their application for support under the Common Agriculture Policy. However, as it is obviously impossible at this stage to predict the end of this critical situation, we call on the Commission to prepare a strategy in anticipation of any further difficulties that might arise in terms of CAP implementation, comprising both the first and second pillar, and issues such as the timing of payments, on farm inspections for verification purposes, controls and checks, application for aid. The overall aim must be in this time of crisis to simplify procedures as much as possible while granting maximum flexibility to Member States and allowing general derogations in the implementation of CAP measures until 31 December 2020, in order to protect European agriculture and rural areas.

Due to the increasing spread of COVID-19, some Member States have taken exceptional measures such as reintroducing border controls or closing their borders completely. Therefore, we welcome the prompt reaction of the Commission with the publication of the “Guidelines for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services”, particularly important for foodstuffs, including livestock.

Nevertheless, we call on the Commission to go one step further, not only allowing foodstuffs to pass borders via the “green corridors” but also allowing essential inputs, such as feed, fertilisers and plant protection products as well as ingredients and materials for the agroindustrial sector in order to allow them to continue providing their crucial goods to European consumers. In this context it has to be underlined that any restriction on cross-border transport are an infringement of European rules and regulations which cannot be tolerated as it violates the principle of free movement of goods and services.

Even more so, and for agriculture in particular, as free movement of labour is a critical issue: several agriculture sectors, notably fruit and vegetables but also viticulture depend on seasonal labour. The crucial access of these workers, mainly stemming from Central-Eastern Europe to farms in Western Europe should be facilitated by an agreement between countries of origin, transit and destination. By issuing a “laissez-passer” granting the right to travel to the seasonal workers by means of special busses or trains or even airplanes, the functioning of the agriculture sectors could be maintained. We therefore call on the Commission to coordinate relevant actions between the concerned Member States in order to ensure the necessary supply of labour to agricultural key sectors. At the same time, measures allowing the full protection of this seasonal labour against the epidemic must be implemented. We therefore call on the Commission to provide specific guidelines to Member States on how to communicate towards farmers regarding their responsibilities as employers towards their workforce in the current context.

Another issue of concern is the critical situation on agricultural markets. Again, we gratefully acknowledge the Commission’s Communication on “Temporary Framework for State aid measures to support the economy in the current COVID-19 outbreak” and the specific provisions for the agricultural, fishery and aquaculture sectors. Member States should be encouraged to flexibly use these empowerments with utmost respect for competition rules while offering support to those enterprises most hardest hit, notably SMEs. In addition, we call on the Commission to come forward with a comprehensive strategy, much like during the crises of the European milk market in 2016, to support the most affected sectors also through the activation of emergency credit lines for farmers; while at the same time, counteracting speculative effects on specific agri-food markets.

Such special measures and targeted support is primarily necessary for perishable products, where also alternative market outlets need to be found. In this context, the aid for the “Most Deprived Persons” could be part of the solution, by generating social and economic benefits at the same time. In addition, special aid for private storage could be useful for those products and sectors whose economic sustainability is jeopardised due to the closure of crucially important market outlets such as HoReCa. The removal of these products from the market for a limited period of time but sufficiently long to overcome the pandemic, would significantly help to stabilise market prices.

Dear Commissioner, our farmers who are on the front line to maintain the food supply to citizens across Europe, thus ensuring EU food security in these challenging times, are waiting for decisive and effective actions to alleviate the impact of this crisis.

We, the representatives of the European farmers, fishers and foresters should not miss the opportunity to contribute our share.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Norbert Lins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a distinct dot over the 'i' in "Lins".

Norbert LINS

CC: Ms Marija Vu kovi , Chair of the AGRIFISH Council