

GUE/NGL debates intensive livestock farming

28.09.2016

On 28 September 2016 GUE/NGL held a debate lead by MEPs Stefan Eck (Germany) and Lúcia Senra (Galicia) on the impact of intensive livestock.

German MEP Stefan Eck presented on the dangers of industrial-scale food production. There has been an astronomic increase in meat production since the 1950s - a seven fold increase - while in the same period the world's population grew three times. FAO estimates that meat production is expected to reach 500 million tons in 2050.

Intensive livestock farming is threatening the environment and putting at risk the future of our planet. The Left, Eck maintained, has a moral responsibility to raise the uncomfortable truth of our meat addiction because this ultimately touches upon the core of Left politics and the consequences are widespread from nitrate pollution of ground water, depletion of water reserves and rising prices of basic foodstuff to the destruction of rainforests, loss of biodiversity, climate change and even world hunger.

The German MEP presented hard-hitting facts to communicate the urgency of action on this issue: to produce one kilo of meat one needs 7 to 16 kilos of cattle feed (grain or soybean). This means that the production of these staple grains for poor communities directly competes with fodder production for animals in industrialised countries. In fact, about half of the grain produced worldwide is fed to animals and this figure can go as high as 90 percent for soybean. The EU imports yearly 30 to 35 million tons of soybean or grain from the Americas for cattle feed. Without exaggeration one can designate the production of meat and its derivatives as the most effective form of food destruction - Stefan Eck added.

With the amount of arable land needed to produce one kilo of meat, one could harvest 200 kg of tomatoes or 160 kg of potatoes during the same period. One third of the global land area is used for raising cattle. According to FAO, 70 percent of the world's global agricultural land is used for livestock farming. This meat addiction in industrialised countries is fueling world hunger, triggered by an increase in prices of staple foods such as cereals or vegetables from lack of availability of arable land or water.

Agribusinesses are putting a strain on water reserves with their unsustainable practices. Ten thousand litres of water are needed to produce a kilo of chicken and six thousand litres are needed for a kilo of lamb in comparison to 106 litres for a kilo of tomatoes and one thousand litres for a kilo of bread. On top of this, agribusinesses are contributing to the erosion of groundwater and deforestation. In the past 40 years, 40 percent of total rainforest has been turned into pasture and feed for livestock in Central America. Between 2008 and 2010, meat production in the EU relied on 13 million hectares of soy plantations in South America. Our habits, Stefan Eck declared, are fueling the destruction of tropical rainforests and their rich flora and fauna.

Methane and nitrous oxide contribute to global warming. A cow can emit up to 200 litres of methane a day, a gas 25 times more harmful to the climate than CO₂. One kilo of beef produces the equivalent of 36 kilos of CO₂. In fact, according to Eck, greenhouse gas emissions from livestock are higher than the emissions from the entire transportation sector. Add to this the widespread use of dangerous pesticides and genetically modified crops, the balance in our ecosystem is being eroded.

Galician MEP Lidia Senra followed Eck's presentation with a denunciation of the power and control agribusinesses and chemical companies have on our food chain. The industrial production of fruits

and vegetables has had a negative effect on health and the environment with consequences on the social fabric of rural areas. This situation is allowed to continue because of the irresponsible EU Common Agriculture Policy, which allows for agrochemical and pharmaceutical companies to retain their position and grow even further. The recent announcement of a merger between Bayer and Monsanto is reflective of this trend and represents a threat to food sovereignty.

Small farmers in rural areas are losing their jobs and livelihoods, food security is being weakened, communities are being decimated, and smallholders are disappearing. The recurring debate on glyphosate in the EU Parliament is a manifestation of the battle being fought against big corporations that impose harmful chemicals in our food chain and want to dictate what we eat.

The Galician MEP pointed out that rural areas are being emptied out as a result but farmers are, above all, fighting back and promoting alternative models that deserve support. One such model, agro-ecology, is favouring local production for the local market and promoting production of basic foodstock by farmers for the local market. This is a step towards reclaiming food sovereignty.

The Galician MEP urged GUE/NGL MEPs to fight the EU Free Trade Agreements, as they promote liberalisation of the farming sector and spread the mass production model, and to push for reform of the EU's Common Agriculture Policy, which has been used as a vehicle to eradicate traditional farmers and sustainable farming methods.