

EU must reconsider eradication plan for olive disease outbreak

Written by Rosa D'Amato on 9 July 2015 in Opinion
Opinion

There are better solutions to tackling the current outbreak than massive pesticide use and uprooting centuries old trees, argues Rosa D'Amato.



The ancient olive groves of Puglia in southern Italy are being destroyed. The olive trees in this beautiful region provide much of the highly prized oil that Italy exports worldwide, but a devastating disease known as Olive Quick Decline Syndrome or CoDiRO, caused by an insect-borne bacterium - *Xylella fastidiosa* - is spreading across the region.

The European commission and the Italian government have developed what many consider to be an irresponsible unproven plan to create a mile-wide exclusion cordon stretching from the Adriatic to the Ionian Sea.

The large scale use of pesticides and cutting down of trees that is central to this plan will see the extensive and extremely aggressive destruction of more than 230,000 hectares of land.

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This will happen despite the fact that the effectiveness of this solution has never been scientifically proven.

Across Puglia many experts and local farmers are protesting against these measures, arguing for example on the need to preserve the valued heritage of centuries-old olive trees such as those in Salento - recently submitted to Unesco for official cultural status - and to avoid the risk of untold damage to the region's economy and social fabric.

According to a European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) report on the *Xylella fastidiosa* outbreak, the large scale use of pesticides would have only a limited impact on the spread of the disease but could have disastrous consequences on human health and the environment.

EFSA also said that "there are no indications that the option of eradication will be successful once the disease is established in an area".

It was because of these reasons that I asked the commission to revise its plan, and instead look to implement good agricultural practices and avoid poisoning our soil and damaging our ecosystems with such a large scale use of pesticides.

In a position paper drawn up with the Italian Federation of organic agriculture (FederBio), Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Europe and two other important Italian farmers' associations, the Confederazione italiana agricoltori and the Confederazione produttori agricoli, we reiterated these requests to the commission.

Additionally, I asked for the disclosure of data on the estimated number of infected olive trees and in particular on the number and geographical location of the plants tested, the results of the individual tests, the statistical methods used to quantify the extent of the 'epidemic', as well as any trends and protocols currently being used to diagnose infections.

I believe that we should replace the mass eradication of plants and trees and the use of pesticides with much more sustainable environmental and economic measures. The real solution should be linked to the best organic practices and international scientific research.

Recent studies and analyses have demonstrated the effectiveness of these alternative measures and in Puglia these are currently being applied with successful results.

During a recent meeting with the commissioner for health and food safety, Vytenis Andriukaitis, I invited him to visit Puglia so he could evaluate the situation on the ground himself and to find out more about the good practices that farmers, researchers, agronomists and organisations are already sharing and implementing to counter the drying of our olive trees.

I am sure the commissioner will appreciate the efforts that Italian farmers and researchers are doing and will reconsider how to tackle this emergency in a more respectful way for both Puglia's olive oil producers and for the environment.

About the author

Rosa D'Amato (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, Italy) is a member of parliament's regional development committee

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