

Fertilizers Regulation: Cadmium limits in the new fertilizers regulation must be based on sound risk assessments

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News

New standards should not be based on a precautionary approach, argues Elisabetta Gardini.



New rules will defines the types of fertilizers that are 'EC approved' | *Photo credit: Fotolia*

The proposed regulation on fertilizer bearing the CE marking is designed to modify the current legal framework represented by EC Regulation 2003/2003. This defines the different types of fertilizers that are 'EC approved' and can move around freely in the European market.

It represents the first practical application of the circular economy package and so has huge political relevance.

Covering a broader range of fertilizer products (including those made using secondary raw materials),

this new proposal will help to create a more comprehensive internal market, as well as reinforcing investment by SMEs in the circular economy.

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The challenge is a large one, and we all have to do our best. However, we must also not go too far, imposing requirements that are impossible to meet.

One of our key priorities is to ensure that human and animal health, as well as the environment, are properly protected, but we need to take into account the socio-economic consequences of such measures. In addition, it is important that we protect food safety and ensure that we can carry on meeting the demands of a growing population.

All of these aspects are intertwined with the question of cadmium limits, an element which, while only representing part of the proposed content of the regulation, is the most politically controversial issue.

When it comes to cadmium, there are problems in terms of protecting human, animal and environmental health as well as issues surrounding international trade and geopolitics.

Cadmium is a constituent of phosphorites, meaning phosphate fertilizers contain cadmium in relation to the original deposit. This creates some alarm because it does not offer any fertilizing benefit, but can have potentially harmful effects on health, the biodiversity of the soil and the quality of groundwater.

We therefore need to define a limit, also in line with the logic behind the proposed regulation.

Unfortunately, what has been suggested by the European Commission on this point combines unattainable limits and timescales. It defines a roadmap that relies on techniques and technologies that have not yet been developed, or where they have, they exist only on a small scale or in the laboratory.

The Commission would like to set thresholds that would be by far the most restrictive in the world (Japan, New Zealand, California and Australia all have much higher thresholds - at least twice the levels of those in the proposal), without taking into account the consequences of such an approach.

Above all, they seek to do so without having sound scientific data to justify the choice. There are studies indicating that the levels of cadmium in the soil is reducing significantly, and that thresholds

even higher than those proposed would not result in any build-up in the ground.

"Unfortunately, what has been suggested by the European Commission on this point combines unattainable limits and timescales"

It is also a position that is somewhat dated. The most effective way to reduce soil contamination is actually so-called "precision agriculture", which involves either reducing fertilizers to the minimum required, or using more effective products.

The new standards should be based on a sound assessment of the risk and not on the principle of caution. Otherwise, it could result in unjustified restrictions and hinder some products reaching the internal market.

Only where there is valid scientific data where we can conclude that there are risks to the environment or to human and animal health, should these technically demanding requirements be imposed.

This is the principle that has inspired my work as a rapporteur for the Parliament's ENVI Committee.

This is the only way our farming industry will be able to carry on producing, and farmers can continue using, high quality products.

This is also the only way we can guarantee the protection of human, animal and environmental health. Finally, it is the only way the sector will be able to continue to hold its position as world leader. These three factors are not mutually exclusive, but are actually complementary.

About the author

Elisabetta Gardini (EPP, IT) is Parliament's ENVI committee rapporteur on the fertilizers regulation

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