

Could protein crops save EU agriculture?

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Opinion

Protein crops are the solution Europe needs to ensure its agriculture is healthy and sustainable, says György Hölvényi.



György Hölvényi | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Several economic and policy factors have led to the decades-long decline in areas dedicated to protein crops in the EU. European agriculture has long been characterised by intensive and specialised production systems, with a heavy reliance on the use of synthetic fertilisers and massive imports of protein-rich feed materials.

This unsustainable trend should be reversed. We may already have a solution, in the form of ordinary but lesser known crops, such as faba beans, field peas, lupin, alfalfa and clover, to name only a few. Protein crops are more than just soybeans - they include many other grain and forage legumes that can be used in a wide diversity of agro-climatic and soil conditions across Europe.

Thanks to their remarkable characteristics, namely their capacity to fix nitrogen from the atmosphere and to make it available to the rest of the ecosystem, they offer numerous environmental benefits.

Farmers using fewer fossil fuel-based fertilisers reduce both greenhouse gas emissions from the farm and indirect emissions stemming from the production of synthetic fertilisers.

Protein crops also improve soil properties through higher organic matter content and improved structure, not to mention increased carbon storage.

In addition, when introduced in crop rotations, the so-called 'break-crop effect' contributes to a reduction in disease levels. They also help protect biodiversity, as they may serve as habitats for some species and provide food to pollinators, particularly bees.

In addition to their valuable agricultural assets, we cannot ignore their beneficial side effects for human health. Legumes are a great source of nutritional benefits, and therefore also play an important role in ensuring sustainable and healthy human diets.

I come from Hungary, where the constitution dictates that our agriculture must be GMO-free. I am very proud that thanks to a Hungarian-German proposal this summer, 13 member states signed the European soya declaration, which aims to boost non-genetically modified soya production and other protein crop cultivation in Europe.

It is a powerful level to promote the transition towards more sustainable agri-food systems, shifting from rather uniform input-intensive crop monocultures to diversified agro-ecological systems. It also helps Europe fight its high rate of dependency on soya imports, the majority of which are produced with genetically modified seeds. Most European consumers prefer healthy and GMO-free food.

The soya declaration smartly recognised that in order to preserve the GMO-free character of the European food market, we need to encourage domestic and European production of protein crops - free from any genetic modification, of course.

However, taking on this challenge must start with investing heavily in research and plant breeding. This is desperately needed to solve the pressing agronomic issues limiting the cultivation of protein crops, such as yields levels and stability or nutritional quality.

Once we have the momentum, we must take the opportunity to make European agriculture greener and healthier.

About the author

György Hölvényi (EPP, HU) is Parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee opinion rapporteur on a European strategy for the promotion of protein crops

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