Improving time-to-market for biocontrol

23 April 2024 - A few take-aways

On 23 April, 2024, the ELO hosted a dinner debate on biocontrol, in collaboration with Bayer. The event brought together a diverse array of stakeholders, including policymakers, farmers, and industry representatives, to discuss the intricacies of biocontrol solutions within the agricultural sector. Amidst unanimous support for biocontrols and high industry growth expectations, the dialogue uncovered multifaceted challenges and opportunities surrounding their implementation and adoption. The report below summarizes the rich discussion and conclusions from the biocontrol debate, shedding light on the complexities and potential pathways forward in this critical domain.

Although everyone is in favor of biocontrols and there is a large growth expectation from industry, there are no simple biocontrol solutions and they require a different, integrated approach. IPM is complex to put in place, to monitor and identify risks, and farmers will need support to protect their yields. Biological alternatives require advanced sophistication. There is also a possible reluctance to adopt from farmers due to skepticism with regards to efficacy and complexity.

Most existing biocontrols cannot replace 1/1 conventional ones – though some recent innovations appear to move in that direction – but be used in conjunction with them. With that in mind, rejection of SUR has enabled a less tense conversation around their adoption, while not questioning the necessity to reduce our dependency on conventional pesticides. There remains a strong pressure for new solutions, as 30-40% of Active Ingredients (Ais) are not being reauthorized and we need an enabling regulatory framework to speed up time to market and reduce costs for innovative solutions to be available in the farmers toolbox -which includes precision farming to minimize non-biological inputs.

Although biologicals represent half of the new AIs, they are unevenly distributed and concern mostly specialty crops. Another hurdle is at member state level, notably with data requirements and more innovative tech. There is a combination of measures possible to address this, from guidance to testing, to training, to financial grants for biocontrols, but the conditions of such grants have made it difficult for some member states to participate. In theory, the regulatory environment envisions a low-risk-path already, and reopening of 1107 may not be such a good idea. The institutional support for biologicals is there. However, EU might not be the right level for authorization (pushing a single-market of crop protection products) as there are strong differences in conditions

and public opinions in MS. Subsidiarity will remain at MS (and sometimes regional or lander level). What we need is more MS (like CTGB the Netherlands) embracing the necessity of biocontrols. There could also be dedicated units at EFSA and in Member States to support applicants.

Alongside the Green Deal, we need an industrial deal to enable those ambitions. SUR was a missed opportunity to bring clarity and process to the sector, but it focused on the wrong measures and incentives. There is a strong momentum in the decoupling of biocontrol and SUR. Reductions can be achieved through providing solutions, rather than hard targets. Other parts of the world have shown that combining biocontrols market growth and chemical input reduction was possible, given the right (enabling) regulatory framework and a focus on efficacy. We should support farmers to adopt the most effective practices taking their farming conditions (soil, climate, biodiversity) and our ambitions into account. Bioinputs should be available at a fair price to support adoption by farmers.

We don’t have a crystal ball to predict what type of innovation there will be in a couple of years, and rigid definitions without flexibility for future innovation will lead to an impasse… emphasis should be on defining principles. It also shows the limits of 1107. That is not to say we can't look at provisions in 1107 to support applicants, or amend, for instance by enabling longer -perpetual- authorisation or interzonal evaluations.

Some MS specializing could be part of a solution by creating a coalition of the willing and ensure there is a framework for working together. MS regulatory agencies require explicit support -political and financial- from their governments to make progress toward reforms that improve their operations within the existing legislation, including greater collaboration with other EU (or even non-EU) regulatory groups on best practice for enabling biocontrol innovation.

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