

Innovation conference: one toolbox, one Market – access to innovation for EU farmers



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Europe's farmers face a paradox: they are expected to produce more sustainably with fewer tools at hand. Climate change, fragmented policies, and growing global competition make innovation not just desirable but essential. On 13 October 2025, the European Landowners' Organization and CropLife Europe, with the support of the European People's Party (EPP), gathered policymakers, scientists, farmers, and industry leaders at the European Parliament to explore how biocontrol and new genomic techniques (NGTs) can build a more sustainable, resilient, and competitive European agriculture. And what are the hurdles still preventing them from getting into the farmers' toolbox.

Europe's farmers stand at a crossroads. Their ability to remain competitive, productive, and climate-resilient will depend on whether Europe can turn scientific progress into practical solutions.

At the Innovation Conference – “One toolbox, one market: access to innovation for EU farmers,” hosted by MEP Stefan KÖHLER, experts from across Europe came together to debate how biocontrol and NGTs can deliver on this promise – if regulation allows it.

In his opening remark, MEP Stefan KÖHLER, EPP set the scene:

“We have at our disposal scientific tools that can make our agriculture more resilient, more sustainable, and more productive. As policymakers, we need to legislate for the present, but also for the future. The European Parliament is working on an own initiative report on biocontrol. The report is not just a formality, but a political signal. Its goal is clear - to give the Commission our perspective and input on how to best speed up authorization procedures and reduce the deadlock on applications.”

Alain THIBAULT, Chairman of Agriodor, captured the challenge faced by many SMEs: “We use natural plant scents to protect crops, but it takes up to ten years to bring a biocontrol product to market. Innovation can't survive such delays.” For THIBAULT and others, Europe's lengthy and fragmented approval procedures are discouraging investment and slowing farmers' access to greener solutions.

Klaus BEREND from DG SANTE confirmed that the European Commission is aware of the problem. The upcoming “Omnibus” proposal, he said, will include a clear definition of biocontrol, reinforce mutual recognition between Member States, and strengthen EFSA's capacity to handle applications more swiftly. “I am confident that we will present a nice package to the Parliament and the Council. The topic of biocontrol itself is generally supported politically, though we expect some controversy in the definition area” BEREND concluded.

For Olivier DE MATOS, Director General of CropLife Europe, simplifying the process is essential. “Automatic mutual recognition, provisional authorisations, and a EU wide future proof definition of biocontrol would help bring innovation faster to farmers. To be competitive, they need complementary solutions in the toolbox,” he said.

When the discussion shifted to New Genomic Techniques (NGTs), the consensus was equally strong: Europe must break the deadlock. Jose Maria CASTILLA (ASAJA) stressed the urgency. While other regions advance rapidly, European farmers risk being left behind. “Give us the same tools as our competitors,” CASTILLA said. “That's real sustainability.”

On mandatory labelling and traceability, Garlich VON ESSEN (Euroseeds) noted: “the question should be why do we want it for category 1 NGT plants, when EFSA has concluded that they are equivalent to the conventionally bred ones? It doesn't bring any concrete benefit and the burden will mostly be felt by smaller players”. Kristiina DIGRYTE (Permanent Representation of Estonia to the EU) echoed the same concern: “We are not ready to handle NGT 1 labelling and traceability because we don't have methods to analyse the final products. Should this be required, there will be no NGT crops available in Europe.”

From the scientific side, Hilde NELISSEN of VIB-Ghent University reminded the audience that innovation in plant breeding is incremental: “We are improving tolerance, resistance, and quality step by step – each one matters.”

Closing the event, Macy MERRIMAN (independent consultant) and Jurgen TACK (ELO) summarised that innovation does not happen in isolation. It takes scientific development, political will and cooperation between stakeholders to make it accessible: “Europe has a tremendous opportunity to lead – but it must walk the talk. The rest of the world is already moving forward”, Macy MERRIMAN concluded. “If there is a common denominator between biocontrol and NGTs, I think that denominator is related to the fact that farmers and landowners need trusted, practical, and predictable pathways. For us, innovation is not a threat but a means to reconcile productivity and conservation. Let us give our farmers a toolbox which is both effective and accessible so that the next generation of land managers can keep Europe productive, resilient and rich in nature”, Jurgen TACK added.

For ELO and its partners, the message is clear: to be a leader of sustainability, Europe must give its farmers a toolbox that is both safe and usable, allowing innovation to flourish at home – not abroad.

