

PEN SPEAKS TO **PATRICK WRIXON**, PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN INITIATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AGRICULTURE (EISA), ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SMART AND INTEGRATED FARMING

What IF

AN alliance of national organisations of seven European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Sweden and the UK), the European Initiative for Sustainable Development in Agriculture (EISA) was founded in May 2001 with the aim of developing and promoting sustainable farming systems, which are an essential element of sustainable development.

EISA's members operate under the ethos that Integrated Farming (IF), meets the potentially conflicting challenges of the conservation of finite resources, the protection of the natural environment and the production of food at the farm level.

In an interview with Pan European Networks, EISA president Patrick Wrixon talks about IF and smart farming, and his hopes for the future of European agricultural policy and scientific research.

Given the growing global population (as well as the challenges posed by food security, climate change, growth and jobs in rural areas), how important is integrated farming to the future of sustainable agriculture, and how will EISA continue to promote this?

Integrated Farming is a route to sustainable agriculture. It is about having a greater regard for resources and an awareness of how the use of those resources has an impact on land use in the short and long-term. Ever since man set foot on the planet there has been a reduction in biodiversity, and the current and increasing population means that there will always be tremendous challenges in areas such as food security, climate change,



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growth and jobs in rural areas. As such, it is crucial that we become smarter and more innovative than ever before. IF goes some way to finding solutions to these problems, but it must not be seen as a cure-all.

EISA will continue to make efforts to influence both politicians and farmers as to the importance of IF being a site specific, whole-farm management system that addresses these challenges. Indeed, we have to be able to demonstrate the benefits of this system – benefits to the bottom line for the business as well as benefits to the environment and to social health and wellbeing.

This involves continuous efforts in communication on the part of our national and associate members and, of course, on the part of EISA itself. For example, LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) has a range of tools to assist farmers such as The Green Box monitoring kit, the self-assessment LEAF audit and LEAF Marque accreditation for products conforming to IF protocols.

Open Farm Sunday, which has attracted over one million visitors to farms over its eight year existence, provides an excellent opportunity for farmers to show consumers how their food is being produced. A network of demonstration farms in several member countries gives farmers and politicians the chance to see some of the progressive management systems at work on the ground.

Smart farming and an holistic approach more generally have a key role to play here. How will the EISA work to also promote this, and do you feel that enough attention is paid to issues such as the precautionary principle and IPM?

IF embraces and encourages innovation, and precision farming is certainly an example of this. Controlled traffic for protecting soils, variable

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fertiliser applications for saving resources and protecting water quality, satellite guidance systems giving precise spray boom shut-off, and potential selective spray applications to specific weed targets – all of these are areas of huge importance to growers and ultimately consumers alike.

Precision farming fits in very comfortably with the whole-farm approach in that it is never done in isolation. For example, tyre selection with the appropriate inflation, timing of operation and method of cultivation would all be considered in the decision making process. It is important to have the science (the knowledge) behind all these interacting factors which come together to make IF so useful.

The EISA IF framework serves to give practical guidance on how to engage with the process of taking so many different factors into account. The framework also works to some extent to incorporate a precautionary principle approach by providing a science-based assessment of actions on the farm.

Since the essence of the principle lies in the responsibility for the action being taken by the actor, a farmer working on the basis of the EISA framework is in a much stronger position to make informed choices than he might otherwise be.

IPM is very much a part of IF, of course, and is a key component within an integrated system.

Now that an agreement between the European institutions over the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been reached, what are your hopes for the future of the CAP?

Although there has been some agreement on CAP reform, many of the details still need to be worked out. It is incredibly difficult to develop a system of control for European agriculture in its entirety given the wealth of differences in topography, climate, culture and production systems. However, a common policy is the policy of choice in the EU, and it is therefore important to try to incorporate the different issues and European viewpoints in order to ensure that it is comprehensive and of maximum benefit to all.

Nevertheless, we all yearn to have less legislative control and less red tape surrounding it, and it would be very heartening to see IF recognised as a part of the solution to reducing those burdens whilst maintaining equal opportunities for farmers across the EU.



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With 40% of the EU budget devoted to agricultural policy, where do you believe future EU priorities should lie?

Future EU policies must take account of the need for more food from less environmental degradation, but they must also make clear to the consumer the role and relationship of public money for public goods. The role of farmers to the benefit of society is enormous, but often goes almost unnoticed, and it is therefore fundamental that this benefit comes to be recognised by all parties concerned.

It is encouraging to see that younger farmers are to be given some financial incentives to continue their careers in the agriculture sector. A healthy, profitable and viable countryside is dependent on the next generation, and they need to be supported with adequate research so that they can bolster their innovative and dynamic management with solid science.

Horizon 2020 will provide over €31m to help address major concerns shared by all Europeans such as climate change, developing sustainable transport and mobility, making renewable energy more affordable, ensuring food safety and security, or coping with the challenge of an ageing population. The aim of the projects is to make international co-operation a priority and to provide measures to create a single market for knowledge, research and innovation.

EISA supports these ambitions and hopes to play its part in achieving them, given our existing international links.



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