

EU sustainable food system framework

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European Commission initiates stakeholder consultation on transition to a more sustainable food system

Sustainable EU food system – new initiative

Update

In 2023, the European Commission intended to publish a law that would ensure sustainability plays a central role in all food-related policies. This legislation was intended to reinforce the EU's [Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy](#), and to strengthen the resilience of food systems. However, the Commission has not published a proposal for a sustainable food system framework, and the initiative is not included in the [Commission's published work programme](#) for 2024. This delay has been criticised by environmental groups ([EU Food Policy Coalition 2023](#)).

What is changing?

The Commission announced the development of a legal framework for future food policy and legislation that fully integrates sustainability into decision-making. This would include ([European Commission 2022b](#)):

- common definitions (e.g. food system, sustainable food system, food environment, food system actors, sustainable diets)
- general objectives regarding food system sustainability in all future EU and national law, anchoring in law the objectives of the Farm to Fork Strategy
- general principles for policymakers, to which future and existing legislation will be adapted
- governance provisions to encourage multilevel engagement
- favourable food environment provisions
- enforcement provisions.

The Commission emphasises the need for both "push measures" (forcing businesses to integrate sustainability into their operations, e.g. corporate governance due diligence initiative); and "pull measures" (encouraging actors to make choices that advance sustainability). Pull measures include providing consumers with information on sustainability, and introducing sustainability aspects into public procurement. The Commission sought feedback from stakeholders on both of these aspects in its consultation. It is not clear whether such measures

will be included in the framework legislation, or will be the subject of separate legislative initiatives.

Why?

An inception impact assessment ([European Commission 2022a](#)) identified problems that are not currently addressed in policymaking, including:

- inconsistent uptake of sustainable production across the EU
- lack of incentives for actors to produce sustainable food
- short-term decision-making by actors in the food chain
- environmental and social costs of food, which are not reflected in the food price
- lack of common understanding across the EU on the objectives of sustainability
- insufficient reduction of food loss and waste across the food value chain
- imbalances in market power across the food chain
- insufficient transparency on sustainability, including inadequate information for consumers.

Timeline

The proposal was intended to be published in Q3/Q4 of 2023. This did not take place, and the initiative was not included in the [Commission's published work programme for 2024](#). The timeline for the sustainable food systems proposal is therefore currently uncertain.

What are the major implications for exporting countries?

An important aspect for non-EU countries is how sustainability is defined by the EU, and the extent to which the sustainability challenges of developing countries would be taken into account in the European policy-making process.

In its consultation, the Commission defined a sustainable food system as one that:

“provides and promotes safe, nutritious and healthy food of low environmental impact for all current and future EU citizens in a manner that itself also protects and restores the natural environment and its ecosystem services, is robust and resilient, economically dynamic, just and fair, and socially acceptable and inclusive. It does so without compromising the availability of nutritious and healthy food for people living outside the EU, nor impairing their natural environment” ([SAPEA 2020](#)).

Non-EU countries may consider that they face challenges in their transition to sustainable food systems that require more direct engagement from the EU than is implied by the “do no harm” approach in the above definition. Some consider that the impacts of the Green Deal on non-EU countries need to be more closely integrated in policymaking, emphasising the importance of dialogue with developing countries ([Koch & Keijzer 2021](#)).

Sustainability labelling and public procurement

If the European Commission decides to include food information-related provisions within a food systems proposal (e.g. for sustainability labelling), this may have more direct impact on non-EU country suppliers. Conditions for public procurement of food (e.g. for schools and public institutions) could impact the competitive relationship between EU produce and non-EU country produce. For example, an emphasis on conditions of procurement (e.g. short supply chains), or on certain dietary priorities (e.g. increased fruit and vegetables), could affect demand for certain products.

Resources

European Commission (2022a) [Sustainable EU food system – new initiative](#).

European Commission (2022b) [Legislative framework for a Union sustainable food system](#). Presentation to Advisory Group on the Food Chain and Animal and Plant Health.

EU Food Policy Coalition (2023) [Joint call on the Commission not to backtrack on the work on food systems – Open letter on the EU legislative framework for sustainable food systems and strategic dialogue in the future of food](#).

Koch, S. & Keijzer, N. (2021) [The external dimensions of the European Green Deal: The case for an integrated approach](#). Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) Briefing Paper No. 13.

SAPEA (2020) [A sustainable food system for the European Union](#). Science Advice for Policy by European Academies.

Sources

European Commission (2022a) [Sustainable EU food system – new initiative](#).

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