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Alternatives for contentious inputs: Research well on track

The final event of RELACS at the Organic Innovation Days 2021 was a successful demonstration of promising innovations

On 30 November and 1 December, the Organic Innovation Days 2021 entitled “Better inputs for organic agriculture” took place online. This public event was organised in collaboration with the two Horizon 2020-funded EU projects [RELACS](#) and Organic-PLUS. Both projects aim to reduce the use of controversial inputs in organic farming. About 140 participants gathered and actively engaged, participating in the intense discussions, exchanging views on the various alternatives to controversial inputs in organic farming and strategies to minimise their use, as well as the socio-economic aspects involved.

Day 1: Alternatives to contentious inputs in organic farming

All about plant protection

Annegret Schmitt from the Julius Kühn Institute explained that promising alternatives for copper have been developed but show some limitations. Nikolaos Katsoulas (University of Thessaly), another expert on this topic, emphasised in his presentation that zero-copper in plant protection cannot be achieved by a simple substitution strategy; it requires a profound reconstruction of the crop production system. Vincenzo Verrastro from CIHEAM-IAMB showed the participants that alternatives to mineral oils are feasible, effective, in line with EU policies, and a safe option for the environment.

Soil and nutrients

In the session on soil and nutrients, Jakob Magid from Copenhagen University stressed that to avoid soil nutrient depletion, recycling of societal waste streams needs to be further developed and researched. Anne-Kristin Løes from Norwegian organic research institute NORSØK stressed that the demand for nutrients and organic matter to be applied in organic agriculture will increase significantly due to the EU Farm to Fork target of 25% organic land target by 2030. On the use of plastic and biodegradable mulch films, Francis Rayns from Coventry University remarked that many types of alternative materials are available, but more knowledge about treatment technologies and applications is needed.

Alternatives used in livestock husbandry

Michael Walkenhorst from FiBL presented how to combat mastitis, with essential oils and explained that Animal Health and Welfare Planning (AHWP) could halve antibiotic use under certain conditions. According to Spiridoula Athanasiadou from SRUC, Scotland’s Rural College and Tove Serup from Danish research centre SEGES, alternatives to anti-worm drugs in organic animal husbandry have shown huge potential, however these should not be seen as a new drug. Håvard Steinshamn discussed the work of RELACS on the reduction of vitamin B2 supplements in organic chickens. Finally, Federico Righi presented novel bedding materials researched within Organic-PLUS, including studies conducted on poultry, broilers and dairy cattle µ.

To conclude the first day, Judith Conroy from Organic-PLUS pointed out the differences between countries. There is no single solution; a combination of alternatives must be sought. Lucius Tamm from RELACS added that robust varieties and biodiversity are key to all alternative solutions to contentious inputs. In various cases, the results of this research can be relevant for conventional farmers, too.

Day 2: Socio-economic aspects and the way forward for contentious inputs

Socio-economic aspects

Adrian Evans from Coventry University highlighted the benefits of working together with citizens and farmers in the frame of Organic-PLUS. Next, Assumpció Antón reported on the limitations of the environmental impact assessment of controversial inputs and organic alternatives carried out according to the EU-



recommended Life Cycle Assessment (LCA). Lucius Tamm presented a detailed analysis of the socio-economic and environmental impact of the alternative tools and technologies proposed by the RELACS project. Finally, Mathilde Calmels from IFOAM Organics Europe closed the session with a presentation on the development of European roadmaps for the reduction of controversial inputs.

Policy debate: Tackling contentious inputs in organic farming

The policy debate moderated by Eduardo Cuoco, Head of the TP Organics Secretariat, brought together Nathalie Sauze-Vandevyver, Director for Quality, Research & Innovation at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), Werner Vogt Kaute, advisor at Naturland and project coordinator, and Faustine Bas-Defossez, External Impact Director at IEEP.

The panellists agreed that it is a challenge to reach the 25% organic target and at the same time reduce the contentious inputs. To overcome the challenges and reach the target, the results of projects such as those presented at the Organic Innovation Days must be used and implemented. All panellists agreed that research and innovation are crucial, and it is important that research results reach the ground.



Next steps

RELACS Project Coordinator Lucius Tamm closed the event by arguing for a systems approach that reshapes agricultural landscapes. New solutions require ecological and economic impact assessments. Acceptance along the value chain, independent advice and real cost accounting are crucial. Organic-PLUS Project Coordinator Ulrich Schmutz agreed and stressed the need for working together to improve organic systems. Other R&I actions should also be looked at, and farmers should be involved.

Recordings and presentations of all sessions are available on the [TP Organics website](https://www.tporganics.com).

About this news story and RELACS

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RELACS: 'Replacement of Contentious Inputs in Organic Farming Systems' (RELACS) builds on results of previous research projects and takes far-advanced solutions forward. As a system approach to sustainable agriculture, organic farming aims to effectively manage ecological processes whilst lowering dependence on off-farm inputs. The RELACS partners will evaluate solutions to further reduce the use of external inputs and, if needed, develop and adopt cost-efficient and environmentally safe tools and technologies.

Project website: www.relacs-project.eu

Social media: Facebook (RELACSeu) & Twitter (@RELACSeu)

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