

Syngenta chief calls for debate on 'sustainable agriculture'

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Time to have a big debate on sustainable agriculture, Syngenta's boss says

Swiss agrochemicals giant Syngenta, recently taken over by ChemChina, said there should be a wide-scale debate on what constitutes "sustainable agriculture" in face of a number of current controversies over pesticides.

"We have a lot of discussions about specific products. I think it's really important to step back and have a real discussion with the government,

and with NGOs and academics about what is a sustainable agriculture," Syngenta chief executive Eryk Fyrwald told AFP in an interview.

Neonicotinoid pesticides are widely used in agriculture, but recent studies have suggested a strong link with declining [bee populations](#), especially over the last decade.

Fyrwald said he agreed with the definition of [sustainable agriculture](#) recently put forward by French minister Stephane Travert.

"The objective is to have affordable food with tools that are safe for the farmers, for consumers, and good for environment," he said.

In a recent debate with environment minister Nicolas Hulot, Travert had said he was open to the use of neonicotinoid pesticides—one of which is manufactured by Syngenta—to protect crops where there are currently no alternatives in order to maximise yields.

"We have to feed the planet and we have to pay attention to the environment and to the safety of farmers and consumers," he said, calling for "honest and open" discussions between NGOs and the industry, instead of debates that were politicised and unscientific.

Fyrwald suggested [neonicotinoid pesticides](#) were not as dangerous as was being suggested.

While France has confirmed its plans to ban the products from 2018 and the EU Commission will debate the matter in the autumn, the Syngenta chief said that "when you look at the data, we believe pesticides have very little impact on bees, on the health of bee colonies."

Other factors affected bee health, such as varroa mites, diseases and cold weather, he argued.

"It's important to understand that we produce a lot of seeds, and our seeds require bees to pollinate the crops, so we have high value for bees. Without bees our business would not exist," Fyrwald said.

Syngenta has 100,000 beehives, including 10,000 in France.



The problem with organic farming is the small yield, Fyrwald says

Pesticides in organic food

Fyrwald said that no declines in bee colony health was seen where its thiametoxam pesticide, marketed under the brandname Cruiser, was used.

While Syngenta also makes organic pesticides and fertilizers, Fyrwald

fired off some criticism at the organic sector, saying it uses "more land... more water and makes more (greenhouse gases) per unit of food, because it's lower yield."

"Why don't NGOs look at organic pesticides and decide which ones are good and which ones are bad? Why are they not examined?," he asked.

Fyrwald questioned the use of copper, for example, as a fungicide in organic farming.

"Copper is a heavy metal. You put a lot of metal in the soil, is that good for the soil? Is that good for the consumer? For the farmer? I don't know," the CEO said.

"All I am saying is that the regulators have to look at all technologies and decide what is really sustainable."

Following its takeover by ChemChina, the combined Swiss-Chinese group will rank third worldwide in the agrochemicals sector behind two other giants currently in the process of being created from the mergers of Bayer and Monsanto, and Dow and Dupont.

In order to catch up with the other two, Syngenta was "very interested in making acquisitions in seeds" all over the world, the CEO said.

But he declined to name any possible takeover targets.

Regarding the advent of Syngenta's new Chinese owners, Fyrwald said there was no noticeable difference in corporate governance, aside from the appointment of two ChemChina officials to the supervisory board.

"The Chinese want us to perform well but they are not quarterly focused. We call it the long view. It's fantastic," he said.

"I believe ChemChina bought us with full support of Chinese government because they are very interested in making sure that the Chinese people have plenty of food," he said.

And there was plenty of room to grow in China.

"We have a business in China which is smaller than in France, and we plan to double our sales within the next five years, which are of the order of 300 million euros right now," Fyrwald said.

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