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For a sustainable and inclusive school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme

EVU welcomes the EU's school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme as a way of improving the health of children and adolescents as well as promoting and educating about healthy nutrition in schools and other educational institutions. We also welcome the Commission's ambition to adjust the scheme in order to enhance its contribution to more sustainable food consumption as stated in the review's inception impact assessment.

EVU believes that one aspect of the scope of eligible products the initiative identified as a problem to approach, has the potential to address several issues at once: By including plant-based dairy alternatives in the scheme, the Commission can integrate more sustainable choices that take everyone into account.

School milk for everyone

At present, not everyone can fully benefit from the school scheme. There are lactose-free options for lactose-intolerant people, which is important as it is a common food intolerance in Europe and worldwide. However, lactose-free milk is not an alternative for many who cannot get used to its particularly sweet taste. Additionally, according to EFSA, cow's milk protein is a common cause of allergic reactions in childhood and approximately one per cent of the children living in Europe have cow's milk allergy.

Furthermore, a growing number of people decide not to use animal products in their lives, for ethical, health or environmental reasons. This applies in particular to young people who are targeted by the school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme. There are, for example, numerous types of diets people choose according to their convictions. Vegans neither drink milk nor consume any other animal-based product. Ovo-vegetarians refuse milk and various other animal products. In general, more and more people want to make individual everyday choices about what they eat or drink, based on their knowledge. This trend goes hand in hand with efforts of the Union's policy, like extensive food labelling, to enable consumers to make informed choices on what they buy.

Integrating all these different people into such programmes, and thus giving them the chance to participate in governments' actions for health improvement by putting plant-based dairy alternatives on the product list, would be a forward-looking approach and a commitment to empowering the European public to pursue of lifestyles of their choosing.

Plant-based dairy alternatives, such as soy, oat, spelt, rice and nut drinks, can be similar to cow's milk in its nutritional composition and are used for exactly the same purposes, for example as a breakfast drink or baking and cooking ingredient. They can be healthy and sustainable alternatives for those currently excluded from benefitting fully from the programme.

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Sustainability

Globally, the majority of food-related emissions are caused by the livestock sector, which emits 8.1 gigatons of CO₂ equivalents yearly and accounts for around 16% of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.¹ Livestock and aquaculture products provide only 37% of protein and 18% of calories to humans' diets, but contribute 56-58% of food-related emissions.² In the EU, livestock farming is responsible for an estimated 12-17% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions, and is predicted to increase over the next decades.³

Plant-based foods generally compare favourably when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions. Studies suggest that personal food-related carbon footprints could be halved with the adoption of a plant-based diet.⁴ At the same time, the average European diet lacks in consumption of plant-based foods and overconsumes meat and other animal foods. The latest report of the EAT-Lancet Commission on a sustainable food system that is healthy for both humans and the planet, states that a "diet rich in plant-based foods and with fewer animal source foods confers both improved health and environmental benefits".⁵

By focusing on the distribution of fruit and vegetables, extensive education on dietary guidelines, health recommendations, the impact of food and agriculture on the climate and the environment and the positive aspects of plant-based foods, as well as integrating plant-based dairy alternatives, has the potential to align the school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme with Europe's Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy.

¹ FAO (2018): Global Livestock Environmental Assessment Model (GLEAM). GLEAM 2.0 - Assessment of greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation potential. Available at <http://www.fao.org/gleam/results/en/> and IPCC (2014): Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 46.

² Poore, J. & T. Nemecek (2018): Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. *Science*. 360, p.990.

³ Bellarby, J., R. Tirado, A. Leip et al. (2013): Livestock greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation potential in Europe. *Glob Chang Biol*. 2013 Jan. 19(1), p. 9.

⁴ Wissenschaftlicher Beirat für Agrarpolitik, Ernährung und gesundheitlichen Verbraucherschutz & Wissenschaftlicher Beirat Waldpolitik beim BMEL (2016): Klimaschutz in der Land- und Forstwirtschaft sowie den nachgelagerten Bereichen Ernährung und Holzverwendung and Scarborough, P. et al. (2014): Dietary greenhouse gas emissions of meat-eaters, fish-eaters, vegetarians and vegans in the UK. *Climatic Change* 125, p.179–192.

⁵ EAT (2019): Summary Report of the EAT-Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets From Sustainable Food Systems, p. 3, 5. Available at https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/01/EAT-Lancet_Commission_Summary_Report.pdf

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