

Federal referendum of 13 June 2021

Thoughts on the two agricultural initiatives

“Switzerland without synthetic pesticides” and “drinking water and healthy food”

by Esther and Felix Bürge

The pressure on our farmers has been increasing for some time. Environmental and animal welfare requirements are constantly being adjusted and raised. At the same time, however, production prices are being pushed down and farmers are receiving less and less pay for their valuable work of providing the population with healthy food.

The farming world has changed dramatically: in 1955, 19 percent of the total population was still engaged in agriculture, in 2005 it was only 2 percent. Unfortunately, under today's conditions, more and more farms and agricultural land are endangered or have to be abandoned.

What are the two popular initiatives demanding?

“Pesticide-free initiative”

It wants to ban the use of synthetic pesticides nationwide. This ban affects both conventional agricultural production and organic farming. There, too, synthetically produced “organic pesticides” (e.g. copper products) have to be used in part to protect the crops. Copper is also an effective plant protection agent against fungal diseases for organic farming. Doing without the fungicide copper would lead to massive yield losses, especially in organic viticulture, as well as in potatoes and fruit cultivation.

“Popular initiative”

edit. For our readers from near and far abroad, here is a brief note for a better understanding of the direct democratic instrument of the Swiss “popular initiative”.

In hardly any other country do the people have as many rights of co-determination as in Switzerland. Up to four times a year, voters decide on political issues.

Anyone who has the right to vote in Switzerland can launch or sign a popular initiative to *amend the Constitution*. For a vote to be held on a popular initiative, 100,000 valid signatures must be collected within a period of 18 months.

Currently, five proposals are being intensively debated in Switzerland, including the two popular initiatives on “drinking water protection” and “pesticide use”.¹ Every Swiss citizen can vote for or against these proposals until 13 June.

Every amendment to the Constitution must be put to a vote (mandatory referendum) – whether the proposed amendment was passed by Parliament or put forward by popular initiative. For a new constitutional article to come into force, the consent of a majority of the People (popular majority) and the 26 cantons (majority of the cantons) is needed (double majority).

Even if most initiatives fail they play an important role: they lead to public discussions on the topics they involve. The Federal Council and Parliament will sometimes make counter proposals to initiatives, to address the initiative's concerns in a different way.²

¹ Cf. *Esther und Felix Bürge*, “Thoughts on the two agricultural initiatives” as well as *Anne Challandes*, “The primary goal of agriculture is to provide sufficient and optimal food”. You find both articles at www.schweizer-standpunkt.ch.

The ban also affects the processing of agricultural products (e.g. use of biocides as disinfectants), the soil, landscape conservation, and the import of foodstuffs containing synthetic pesticides.

La Constitution est modifiée comme suit:

Art. 74, al. 2bis

^{2bis} L'utilisation de tout pesticide de synthèse dans la production agricole, la transformation des produits agricoles et l'entretien du territoire est interdite. L'importation à des fins commerciales de denrées alimentaires contenant des pesticides de synthèse ou pour la production desquelles des pesticides de synthèse ont été utilisés est interdite.

Art. 197, ch. 12

12. Disposition transitoire ad art. 74, al. 2bis

¹ La législation d'application afférente à l'art. 74, al. 2bis, entre en vigueur dans les dix ans à compter de l'acceptation de cette disposition par le peuple et les cantons.

² Le Conseil fédéral édicte provisoirement les dispositions d'exécution nécessaires par voie d'ordonnance en veillant à assurer une mise en œuvre progressive de l'art. 74, al. 2bis.

³ Tant que l'art. 74, al. 2bis, n'est pas totalement mis en œuvre, le Conseil fédéral ne peut autoriser provisoirement les denrées alimentaires non transformées contenant des pesticides de synthèse ou pour la production desquelles des pesticides de synthèse ont été utilisés que si elles sont indispensables pour repousser une menace fondamentale pour les hommes ou la nature, notamment une pénurie grave ou une menace exceptionnelle pesant sur l'agriculture, la nature ou les hommes.

Concerns and consequences

All parties, politics and agriculture agree that the conservation of soils and the plants growing on them are of crucial importance for sustainable nutrition. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that in order to maintain a reasonable and crisis-proof level of self-sufficiency in Switzerland, a quantity of food corresponding to the population must also be produced. Crops are exposed to the weather and various pests (fungi, spores, mites, etc.). There has long been an awareness of the need to use as few and environmentally friendly products as possible to combat these pests. The use of chemicals has been reduced by 40 percent in the last 10 years. Intensive research is being conducted in this direction. The "Federal Action Plan for Plant Protection" and the "Reduction Pathway for Risks of Plant Protection Products" have been initiated.



The initiative focuses on Swiss farmers as the sole cause of the problem and also penalises organic farms that rely on the purchase of feed. (Picture mt)

In this sense, the initiative with its unrealistic demands for a total ban on pesticides is not well enough conceived, does not do justice to the complex problem and would torpedo the current efforts in agriculture.

"Drinking water initiative"

The initiative for clean drinking water and healthy food wants to tie the receipt of direct payments to farmers to several new rules. Namely, the renunciation of synthetic pesticides, the renunciation of prophylactic antibiotic therapy in livestock herds and the keeping of animals only if their feed can be produced 100 percent on their own farm.

La Constitution est modifiée comme suit:

Art. 104, al. 1, let. a, 3, let. a, e et g, et 4

¹ La Confédération veille à ce que l'agriculture, par une production répondant à la fois aux exigences du développement durable et à celles du marché, contribue substantiellement:

a. à la sécurité de l'approvisionnement de la population en denrées alimentaires saines et en eau potable propre;

³ Elle conçoit les mesures de sorte que l'agriculture réponde à ses multiples fonctions. Ses compétences et ses tâches sont notamment les suivantes:

a. elle complète le revenu paysan par des paiements directs aux fins de rémunérer équitablement les prestations fournies, à condition que l'exploitant apporte la preuve qu'il satisfait à des exigences de caractère écologique, qui comprennent la préservation de la biodiversité, une production sans pesticides et des effectifs d'animaux pouvant être nourris avec le fourrage produit dans l'exploitation;

e. elle peut encourager la recherche, la vulgarisation et la formation agricoles et octroyer

des aides à l'investissement, pour autant que ces mesures soutiennent l'agriculture eu égard aux let. a et g et à l'al. 1;

g. elle exclut des paiements directs les exploitations agricoles qui administrent des antibiotiques à titre prophylactique aux animaux qu'elles détiennent ou dont le système de production requiert l'administration régulière d'antibiotiques.

⁴ Elle engage à ces fins des crédits agricoles à affectation spéciale et des ressources générales de la Confédération, surveille l'exécution des dispositions concernées et les effets qu'elles déploient et informe régulièrement le public des résultats de la surveillance.

Art. 197, ch. 12

12. Disposition transitoire relative à l'art. 104, al. 1, let. a, 3, let. a, e et g, et 4

Un délai transitoire de 8 ans s'applique à compter de l'acceptation de l'art. 104, al. 1, let. a, 3, let. a, e et g, et 4, par le peuple et les cantons.

Après l'adoption de l'article 104, alinéas 1 lettre a, 3 lettres a, e et g et 4 par le peuple et les cantons, une période transitoire de huit ans est applicable.

Concerns and consequences

Federal Councillor *Guy Parmelin*, himself a farmer, says: "Swiss drinking water is already well protected today, so we can drink it safely." "A study by *Agroscope* (Swiss Federal Agricultural Research Station) has also shown that if the drinking water initiative is adopted, 9 to 20 percent of farms would be excluded from direct payments. This could not be accepted."

The initiative focuses on Swiss farmers as the sole cause of the problem and also penalises organic farms that depend on the purchase of feed. They would also be excluded from direct payments if they used copper-based plant protection products.

All food imports would not be affected by this initiative!

The demand concerning the prophylactic use of antibiotics also shows a lack of expertise. This has been banned since 1999, making Switzerland, along with Sweden, a pioneer. Antibiotics may not be used on farm animals without a veterinary prescription.

How poorly conceived the two initiatives are, can also be seen in terms of their impact on the

important Swiss alpine farming sector. The summering area accounts for about one third of the agriculturally used land in Switzerland. Many animals are grazing in this natural pastureland during the summer. Although alpine farming is one of the most natural forms of production, a large proportion of summering farms would have to give up farming if the drinking water and pesticide initiatives were adopted, explains the *Swiss Alpine Farming Association* (SAV): "The initiatives are well-intentioned, but have dangerous unintended consequences due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the initiators."

The drinking water initiative only allows farm-produced fodder – this requirement takes no account of annual fluctuations in fodder production. In the event of severe drought or snowfall, it may also be necessary to use additional feed from other sources on the alpine pastures in order to avoid deficiency symptoms in the animals. With the drinking water initiative, Swiss agriculture would be so severely restricted that the animal population in the mountain landscape would decrease massively, fewer animals would have to be summered and alps would have to be abandoned. The consequences of a mountain environment without these summering farms would be, above all, the rapid scrub encroachment of the alpine region by green alder, a decrease in biodiversity and a reduction in self-sufficiency.

The arguments and examples presented suggest that the two initiatives would not lead to a sensible agricultural development but would contribute to a weakening of our food sovereignty.

Both initiatives should be rejected in the referendum of 13 June 2021.

