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Directorate-General for Trade

Directorate E - Neighbouring countries, USA and Canada
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Meeting Report

Green Week Trade and Biodiversity event

I spoke as a panellist at a Green Week event on the above subject on 5th June 2015. The other panellists were MEP Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy (ALDE, NL) and Mario Abreu, Vice-President for Environment, Tetrapak (food packaging). The audience was of about 45 people.

MEP Gerbrandy made a general statement to the effect that trade is good but regulation is also needed. As distances between production and consumption increase it becomes harder for the consumer to know about the origin and production process of a product. Trade should not lead to a lowering of environmental standards, regulations should be implemented and enforced, the EU should not be afraid of setting standards (eg Ecodesign Directive, REACH), there should be lower tariffs for “green” products such as sustainable palm oil (he stated that the environmental goods agreement did not have a lot to offer for biodiversity). He stressed the potential of public-private partnerships for sustainable trade as well as the potential of ICT technologies and labelling for better consumer information. Nevertheless the biggest constraint to better biodiversity conservation was a lack of political will to pursue ambitious policies.

I echoed some of Mr Gerbrandy’s statements saying that trade can be positive for biodiversity but can also have negative impacts, which is why regulation is needed domestically and internationally. I made the point that, contrary to some opinions, WTO does allow trade restricting measures to be taken for environmental reasons provided certain principles such as non-discrimination are followed. I pointed out how compliance with biodiversity-relevant MEAs such as CBD and CITES is a requirement for countries in the GSP+ scheme and in new generation EU trade agreements, also noting that specific articles on biodiversity are now included in trade and sustainable development chapters of these agreements. I also pointed out that provisions in trade agreements on geographic indications can help promote specific crop or animal varieties.

Mr Abreu underlined Tetrapak’s commitment to sustainability, not only in the carton used in its packaging but also plastics, which are increasingly bio-based (sugar cane). He highlighted several partnerships with environmental NGOs and the difficulties in measuring performance in biodiversity and on-going work to develop indicators in this regard. He also pointed out current work to evaluate the impact of forest certification on the ground in a partnership with FSC Sweden.

In the ensuing discussion there were quite a few questions, of which about half were related to TTIP. Mr Gerbrandy defended TTIP, noting that in some areas US rules were stronger than the EU’s, and said that he would support it as long as the right to regulate was unambiguous in the text. Questions included: the impact of TTIP on agrobiodiversity, the increasing concentration of trade in a few crops such as wheat, rice and

soya, the impact of trade deals on traditional seed varieties used by local farmers in developing countries, DG Trade's view on carbon border tax (dismissed as outside the scope of the discussion), what is the EU doing about influencing other countries' bilateral trade agreements eg China. I answered that some of these questions would merit a conference by themselves and that trade policy was just one factor in such global trends, for instance in many developing countries urbanisation and the spread of supermarkets were leading to demand for (less biodiverse) large volumes of uniform products or varieties irrespective of whether they had trade agreements with the EU.

The event was an opportunity for DG Trade to reach out to an environmental audience and fortunately the MEP on the panel was broadly supportive of the Commission's overall approach. However based on this event and a recent meeting with NGOs I think that DG Trade has to develop further Lines to Take on the impact of trade agreements on smallholder agriculture, both in general and with reference to specific countries or regions, as well as the EU.