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Date : Zoetermeer, the Netherlands, the 31st of January 2023
Subject : Invitation meeting Dutch greenhouse horticulture on the energy transition
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Dear Vice President,

This winter, Europe is going through the most challenging energy crisis we have seen in modern history. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, global energy markets have been put under huge pressure as the Russian Federation is weaponising energy supply. Meanwhile, the impacts of the climate crisis are becoming ever more evident across the planet. Our way out of this crisis goes through more renewables and energy efficiency. Themes on which the Dutch greenhouse horticulture sector has already been working intensively in recent decades. Full commitment to the European energy transition is necessary to make the energy costs for our society bearable and keep our economy afloat.

Under your leadership, the European Commission has set out the course to phase out Russian fossil fuels as soon as possible, save energy, and foster renewables deployment. With RePowerEU, the Commission puts the bar higher on those targets in Fit for 55. To achieve these ambitions, we need to invest in grids, cooperation, raw materials, and new skills. In an enabling environment, the Dutch greenhouse growers are ready to contribute to scaling renewables deployment in the immediate future. The sector's own climate neutrality ambition in 2040 remains unchallenged, even if the pathway may change.

Repower the energy transition

Dutch horticulture could play a crucial role in incentivising the generation of sustainable energy. And thus accelerate our independence from (Russian) natural gas. In the Netherlands, 10 per cent of the daily electricity demand is already produced by greenhouses, which can amount up to a quarter per day on cloudy days. Together with our European partners, we want to scale our contribution to sustainable energy production. Firstly, we would like to unroll our innovative character for a sustainable European society, since many of today's common energy innovations such as LED lightening and geothermal heat originate in greenhouses and later benefit society as a whole. Secondly, horticulture lends itself perfectly to decentralised energy production. Considerable amounts of solar, wind, and geothermal heat as well as hydrogen can be generated by our greenhouses. With their combined heat and power plants (CHP) adjusted to hydrogen, they would be able to respond flexibly to market demand and meet shortfalls in sustainable energy demand quickly and efficiently. Not only the energy consumption of the sector itself will green by switching to sustainable energy sources, but above all it can provide local communities and SMEs with renewable energy and thus make their region more sustainable. Energy transition as part of regional development.

More importantly, greenhouses could function as ideal heat and electricity buffers for households and SMEs. Concretely, this means that growers collect and store heat and electricity in their greenhouses off peak, so during the day and at night, to grow crops. During peak times in the early morning and evening, they can return the heat and electricity from their buffers through the grid to households and SMEs. This buffer function in the electricity and heat grid is becoming increasingly important due to an increase in fluctuating sustainable energy sources and the limited grid capacity. In this way, we relieve the grid, prevent energy losses, and make optimal use of the available sustainable energy as Europe.

However, our societal role in optimising sustainable energy production requires a few pre-conditions. First of all, infrastructural expansion of the geothermal, residual heat, hydrogen, and electricity grid around greenhouses should be prioritised under RePowerEU. Our growers want to electrify their operations and at the same time support local society in this heat and electricity transition. That calls for adequate infrastructure. In addition, scaling green hydrogen production could use a stronger incentive in RePowerEU. For the time being, EU hydrogen policy is mainly aimed at supplying large industry, whereas growers collectively could purchase electrolyzers and convert (self-generated) solar and wind energy on the farm into green hydrogen. Finally, it is currently still financially more attractive to capture and store CO₂ via CCS instead of recycling it for growing crops. Nonetheless, CCU is an already proved technique that recycles CO₂ by capturing emissions from near industries and re-using it in the greenhouse. This CO₂ is needed to increase the CO₂ concentration in the greenhouse and consequently stimulate the growth rate and yield of healthy fruit and vegetables and green flowers and plants. An improved focus in European policy, including recognition of CCU as carbon sequestration, on recycling CO₂ could make it (financially) more attractive and reduce direct natural gas solely used to raise the CO₂ concentration in cultivation systems. Our sustainable energy potential for society can only be realised in collaboration with the Commission. In view of the energy crisis, the Dutch greenhouse horticulture sector would therefore like to accelerate the reduction of natural gas consumption and CO₂ emissions through RePowerEU in the short term.

Our invitation

As an innovative frontrunner, EU horticulture is ideally placed to make a positive contribution to the European Green Deal. Dutch greenhouse growers, as major horticulture producers in the internal market and energy producers, are eager to find solutions with the Commission on fostering the energy transition across Europe. During its visit to Brussels on the 27th (and 28th) of March 2023, the praesidium of the Dutch Organisation for Greenhouse Horticulture, fully consisting of growers themselves, would therefore like to have a constructive dialogue with you on enabling their potential role in this transition. Similar dialogues will be organised with the Council and Parliament on these days. Together with the EU institutions, we want to take responsibility for Europe's climate ambitions and we would accordingly be honoured to discuss with you on how we can contribute to the goals of RePowerEU and the European Green Deal most effectively. We are looking forward hearing from you. Must you have any questions, we are happy to be at your disposal.

Sincerely yours,

