

Organic seed for forage crops: recommendations for a level playing field

Problems

Forage crops are the fertility engine of the organic sector, accounting for 45% of organic farmland in Europe (Willer et al. 2020). At present the use of organic seed for forages is scarce. Also, forage crops are normally sown as mixtures, but there is not a common rule across Europe: some countries consider the organic content in the seed mixture as a whole, whilst others consider the organic content of each seed component individually.

Solutions

The number of derogations is lower in countries where an established share of seed in the mixture as a whole has to be organic. This share is often set at 70%, as shown in Table 1. Some countries using the whole component approach have successfully managed to gradually increase the threshold of organic seed required, (e.g. from 30% to 70% in the UK). On the other hand, the number of derogations is higher in countries where farmers need to apply for derogations for every individual component of the seed mixture (in other words all components of the mixture have to be organic). In this case, derogations are the only option whenever a particular component is not available organically. This occurs especially when farmers want to use a highly diversified mixture.

Table 1: Thresholds of organic seed in forage mixture applied in some European countries.

Criteria to avoid derogation request	Countries
All components of the seed mixture need to be organic	Austria, Denmark, Italy, Netherlands
At least 70% of organic seed is required	Belgium, France, Germany, UK
At least 60% of organic seed is required	Switzerland

Practical recommendations

Expert groups should establish a minimum share of seed in the forage mixture that need to be organic. Although this threshold should gradually increase over time, it is advisable that a certain amount of conventional seed is allowed. This way farmers can diversify and include in the mixture minor crops for which it is currently very difficult to find organic seed. With such an approach, it would also be easier to harmonise the composition requirements across countries, ultimately resulting in a level playing field on trade in forage mixtures.

Further information

Willer H., Schlatter B., ... The World of Organic Agriculture 2020: Statistics and Emerging Trends; Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL): Frick, Switzerland; IFOAM—Organics International: Bonn, Germany, 2020.

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