

SESSION 5

Sustainability & Agriculture: Rising to the Climatic, Biodiversity and Food Security Challenges

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- Panelists agreed on the list of Climatic, Biodiversity, and Food Security challenges at hand but – reassuringly – seemed to agree that differences in approach between the US and Europe could be overcome because we share the same fundamental goals.
- Both the EU and US administrations agreed that the relationship was on a positive trend, with respect for each other's differences and opportunities to reach common goals. There are pockets of good news in an overall gloomy picture of food insecurity and climate change.
- Fundamental changes in the EU, including consolidated farms, have allowed productivity and production to grow. Greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 20%. Contrary to global trends, research spending on food, the bio-economy, and agriculture has increased more than twofold. The US-EU Collaboration Platform on Agriculture has allowed administrations to build mutual trust and compare notes on research.
- The challenge for the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is to find a way to increase outputs while reducing inputs, thanks to innovation. The USDA aims are first to expand existing programs that fund US farmers to engage in more efficient practices and second to spend more on research on climate-smart production techniques. As both are rolled out, more funding will also be devoted to measuring and monitoring results to spot the best ideas.
- Legislators take on the same challenges. Voters tend not to see food security as a matter of international security, partly because the US consumer has not witnessed widespread shortages since WWII (although high prices do mean that it is difficult for many Americans to eat healthily). On EU-US cooperation, while praising progress made, it was suggested that more parliament-to-parliament cooperation would help unlock longstanding misunderstandings.
- The US and the EU will only be able to cooperate better if the appropriate infrastructure investments are made to allow transboundary movement. There is excitement at prospects for digital applications in the agriculture sector. An example is a smart pesticide sprayer with a camera that can tell the difference between crops and weeds.
- The level of frustration from farmers over compliance remains huge. Well-meaning new regulation that adds to the already substantial red tape farmers face is problematic – and can be misguided – e.g., to cut pesticide use by half instead of a better goal of reducing “pesticide risk” by half. Digitization of compliance and customs forms and ensuring these new systems are compatible can help.