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Agricultural Symposium – Wintertagung 2019

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Agriculture in the News

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Approved By:

Jamie Haig

Prepared By:

Roswitha Krautgartner

Report Highlights:

Wintertagung 2019 - the most important Austrian agricultural symposium – was held during the week of January 28, 2019. The symposium is a platform to discuss current developments, challenges, and opportunities in the agriculture, food, and forestry sectors. Key topics of the event included upcoming challenges for agriculture, like the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform, Brexit, climate change, animal welfare, and plant protection. Austrian Minister for Sustainability and Tourism Köstinger made it one of her highest priorities to implement country of origin labeling (COOL) for processed products in 2019 and she cautiously supported access to new breeding technologies in agriculture to address upcoming challenges to the sector.

Summary:

Wintertagung 2019 was held during the week of January 28, 2019, to address current developments, challenges, and opportunities for the agriculture, food, and forestry sectors. The symposium was organized by Ecosocial Forum Austria, a think-tank promoting an eco-social market economy with a focus on agriculture. During the week, 11 conferences featuring 160 speakers were held at various locations in Austria to discuss specific agricultural issues and commodities. Traditionally, the symposium starts with an agricultural policy and market outlook presented by high-level Austrian politicians, guest speakers from the European Union (EU) Commission or other EU member states, and other important stakeholders. This report summarizes the first day of Wintertagung, which focused on agricultural policy.

In his introductory remarks, Stephan Pernkopf, President of Ecosocial Forum Austria, emphasized the importance of Austrian farmers for the entire society, especially within rural areas. He demanded fair producer prices for Austrian farmers, who would produce foodstuffs to meet the highest quality standards. High production costs due to particularly high animal welfare and plant protection standards need to be covered by food prices. The most important challenges for farmers to overcome include extreme and changing weather situations, fewer approved pesticides, increasing presence of pests and disease, uncertainties due to the upcoming CAP reform, and Brexit.

Prominent speakers of the agricultural policy session included Minister Köstinger, Georg Strasser, the President of the Austrian Farmers' Union "Bauernbund;" Harald Mahrer, the President of the Austrian Economic Chamber; Josef Schmidhuber, the Deputy Director in the Trade and Markets Division of the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization; and Markus Hengstschläger, Executive Director of the Division of Molecular Genetics at the Medical University of Vienna. Almost all speakers highlighted the outstanding high quality of Austrian agriculture and food products, and the need for continued support for the small-scale Austrian family farms through EU CAP and national measures.

Minister Köstinger, who is responsible for the agricultural agenda, made the implementation of Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) in 2019 one of her highest priorities. Austria would adopt the COOL models of Italy and France, where origin labeling for processed meat and dairy products is already required. Similar to the requirements for processed products, the Minister called for origin labeling for meat and dairy products in public catering spaces, like hospitals and schools. A COOL system would represent transparency and fairness, and consumers in Austria and internationally would be able to distinguish the high Austrian standards connected with higher prices from cheap, low-quality products.

Minister Köstinger also highlighted the importance of Austrian family farms, particularly in rural areas. For the upcoming CAP-reform beyond 2020, she would not accept a reduction in rural development area payments, because those payments would be essential for the small-scale environmentally-friendly Austrian farms. She argued that Austrian farmers need adequate planning security. Georg Strasser, President of the Austrian Farmer's Union, argued in the same direction, that the funds of the CAP are very important to keep up the high environmental and animal welfare standards and secure the future of Austrian farmers.

Harald Mahrer, President of the Austrian Economic Chamber, advocated for stronger cooperation between economy and agriculture. He discussed the introduction of new technologies in agriculture, specifically, progressive digitalization. Farmers should not fear new technologies but rather make use of them in order to remain competitive on a world market. The Austrian medical geneticist, Markus Hengtschläger, added that new technologies – including “new breeding techniques” –are important for positive development. Ethical considerations should not hinder, but rather facilitate innovation. Surprisingly, Minister Köstinger made a cautious pro-statement towards new breeding techniques in that these techniques should be considered for emergency cases, like pest control, where no approved pesticides are available.