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Protect plants – protect life!

The Agricultural University in Plovdiv, the emblem of Bulgarian agriculture, traditionally hosted the latest celebration of plant protection in our country.

This professional holiday was an exception to the rule. It took place in a strictly businesslike manner. The reason for this attitude of those present in the university's ceremonial hall – employees of BFSA and RFSA, the Plant Protection sector, researchers and lecturers, specialists, representatives of industry and business, students – is of a serious nature. By a UN resolution, **2020 was declared the International Year of Plant Health.**

Bulgaria, in its capacity as a contracting party to the International Plant Protection Convention, is actively participating in this large-scale initiative. Nikolay Rosnev, Deputy Executive Director of the BFSA, Plant Protection sector, launched the national information campaign "**Protect plants – protect life**". The focus of this large-scale initiative is to raise awareness among the public and the political class of plant health and its importance for achieving sustainable agriculture, protecting the environment and stimulating economic and trade development. Next: to encourage efforts to safeguard plant health in the context of global trade, the increasing movement of goods, climate change and new risks from the invasion of new pests.

According to the sector, a guarantee for the success of this project will be political support. Plant protection, as an indispensable factor, needs sufficient financial resources for the development and modernization of phytosanitary capacity, and for the implementation of policies and systems to maintain a high health status of cultivated crops.

Prof. Hristina Yancheva, Rector of the Agricultural University in Plovdiv, informed the professional audience about some aspects of the European "Green Deal", recently officially presented by the new European Commission. This is a strategic project with an exceptionally ambitious goal – for Europe to become the first carbon-neutral continent, independent of climate turbulence and changes in the climate and phytosanitary environment. In this mega formula for future sustainability, agriculture is in the "eye of the storm", the focus of particular attention, the main actor responsible for structuring a high-quality food chain. Plant protection, without any doubt, is a limiting factor for risk and production management, for ensuring the health status of agricultural crops, and for improving its environmental profile.

The national conference on **Plant health – new threats and prevention** was the expected finale of this professional holiday, attracting marked interest. Speakers at the forum were Maria Tomalieva, Chief Expert in the "Plant Protection and Control of Plant Protection Products" Directorate of the BFSA, Prof. Olya Karadzhova from the N. Poushkarov Institute of Soil Science, Agrotechnologies and Plant Protection, Neli Yordanova, Director General of the Association of Plant Protection Industry Bulgaria, Prof. Rumen Tomov from the University of Forestry in Sofia and Prof. Vili Harizanova, Dean of the Faculty of Plant Protection and Ecology at the Agricultural University in Plovdiv.

The presentations outlined several important trends. In real terms, world agriculture will develop in a highly dynamic environment – adverse climatic and phytosanitary changes, a decreasing area of agricultural land. In this very complex situation, by 2050 production must be increased by 50%, because in 30 years the Earth's population will exceed 10 billion. The "green" continent Europe has even more ambitious goals – intensive,

sustainable, growing agricultural production with a maximally high environmental status! In the context of this super-activity, new-generation plant protection, with a new conceptual drive and long-term vision, is at the forefront of this large-scale transformation. The characteristics of precision agriculture, the engine of the third “green” revolution that has started on the Old Continent, include radical changes in the philosophy of plant protection and generate new ideas. Visionary missions and formats, fundamental research projects and initiatives are underway. The corporate engineering structures of multinational companies from the agrochemical and seed industries and all leading research centres in Europe and worldwide are on a “war footing”. The digitalization of key activities related to good practices in precision agriculture, the establishment of satellite systems for early warning, diagnosis and prevention, the definition of intervention solutions, the creation of active databases for the formulation of pesticides with hitherto unknown activity and spectrum of action. The breeding of agricultural crops, including creative techniques, including genome transfer, to achieve extremely high resistance to biotic and abiotic factors. Note – new-generation plant protection is already “heading” for the field! Soon we will witness technological breakthroughs with an unexpectedly high effect. Just one of the “curious” examples, quoted by Prof. Vili Harizanova. One of the directions in the creation of a new generation of insecticides is that the product should not kill but manipulate the pest. In this way, the biological balance in the agroecosystem will not be disturbed.

What should be the conduct of Bulgarian plant protection in this highly active environment? Its innovative capacity is practically zero. Only one possible course of action remains – to choose the best in the world, to carry out transfer and to implement it. To achieve this relatively modest goal, political support, administrative capacity, expertise and professional competences are undoubtedly needed.

What is the reality in our country? At present, the political class and the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture do not show any particular interest in the topic. This neglect is blocking the drafting and adoption of the necessary legal regulations. The administrative capacity of the Plant Protection sector, under the umbrella of the BFSA, is below the critical minimum. The professional competences of agricultural producers in our country on the current issue – protection of production from pests – are very low, because the presence of agronomists in the field is either absent or only incidental. The only bright spot against the background of this bleak picture seems to be the Faculty of Plant Protection and Agroecology of the Agricultural University in Plovdiv. Its scientific expertise is at a very high level, according to all assessments of the accreditation bodies of the Ministry of Education and Science. Another question is why these agronomists, who have received high-level education, are not visible in the field.

Green revolution

The third “green” revolution is underway in Europe. The EU is investing a colossal conceptual and economic resource in its success already in the current programming period 2020–2025. Bulgaria should be strongly interested in being part of this horizon, of this perspective. “Green” ideas can also find fertile ground for development in our country.

In historical terms – 114 years after the beginning, marked by a decree of Prince Ferdinand, our plant protection has had achievements, positions and authority valued beyond the borders of the country. The political conjuncture managed to erase them from the European map. Today the situation is favourable, and all the conditions are in place for us to return there. Will this happen? It depends on the will of those in power. And this is extremely uncertain, bearing in mind that even through the absence of politicians and administrators from the lowest levels of power at the professional holiday of plant protection, the phenomenal Bulgarian syndrome was demonstrated (for the umpteenth time) – lack of rationality, deficit of pragmatism!