

The state refuses to position resources on the front line for ensuring a high health status of agricultural crops

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The upcoming plant protection campaign aimed at achieving a high health status of the three strategic, structure-defining agricultural crops in Bulgaria – **sunflower, maize and oilseed rape**, which are the focus of special attention in this issue of the journal "Plant Protection", once again opens space for professional dialogue among the participants in this very complex, dynamic and changing environment, encompassing the degree of weed infestation and the weed species, the strength and range of the pathogenic potential, the composition and behaviour of pests in an unstable climatic environment.

The starting point in this problematic case, which concerns all agricultural crops, is undoubtedly the way of structuring an informed choice of plant protection products and the technology for their application. The profile of the informed choice includes the availability of different types of knowledge. The first of these is the ability to forecast the development of the phytosanitary environment under specific conditions. The second is to select efficient, high-quality products and to use them in the most appropriate way. What is the practice in our country, what is the real situation? The specifics of today's agricultural production require the highest possible level of connectivity and shared responsibility among the participants in this mission – operational administration, science, education, business. This connectivity presupposes the "production" of an information product, a genuine information product, desperately needed for choosing reliable solutions in an uncertain environment, for achieving sustainability and a high health status of the cultivated agricultural crops.

Let us see what is the participation of the operational administration in this process. A few years ago the National Plant Protection Service (NPPS) was liquidated. Pieces of it were stitched on like patches to the newly created Bulgarian Food Safety Agency (BFSA). The idea of integrity and autonomy of plant protection within the new mega-structure was buried lightly, with a maximum dose of short-sightedness. The current Plant Protection Department within the BFSA is represented by a handful of specialists with tied hands. Their professional capacity cannot be used as intended. In other words: this boned-out administrative dwarf, considered an instrument with regulatory functions, whose job description also includes the obligation to manage plant protection at national level, based on forecasting and warning, serves no one!

And what is the role of the Agricultural Academy in fostering collaboration among plant protection researchers – weed scientists, entomologists, phytopathologists – scattered here and there across the institutes within the Academy's system, in order to increase the efficiency of work of this valuable scientific resource? The answer is: the Agricultural Academy has no position or opinion, nor any plans whatsoever for change... Or rather it does! It placed the Institute of Plant Protection in Kostinbrod under the "umbrella" of the "N. Pushkarov" Institute of Soil Science. This strange symbiosis put an end to its autonomy. The few researchers remaining there do not deal with practical issues of plant protection. The dominant factor in their activity, according to the director Prof. Olya Karadzhova, is their participation in European projects oriented towards fundamental scientific discoveries!

As regards the National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAAS), which until recently was entrusted with great expectations to increase the awareness and professional skills of agricultural producers, to orient their practices (including plant protection measures) in the right direction, to participate in building a new, higher level of connectivity among the participants in agricultural production, the disappointment is total. Every day (unfortunately) brings evidence that this project is barren, the product of bureaucratic manufacture. The fragile

notion that things are about to happen or will finally gain momentum is evaporating like smoke. This sad picture suggests that the project was never actually conceived to function as intended, as an actively engaged partner of domestic farming. Time has shown that such state institutions, such false authorities, are of no use to anyone, least of all to the people working in the fields. We have seen enough steps in the wrong direction, costly experiments and irrational decisions. Once again we are engaged in a futile chase after illusions!

What are the guarantees for achieving a high health status of sunflower, maize and oilseed rape in our country under an uncertain climatic and phytosanitary environment – this is the topic of this issue of the journal "Plant Protection". We have tried to remind our readership which institutions are responsible for the informed choice of plant protection products and the technologies for their correct application. From the examples we have cited, it is, we hope, clear that the state, represented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and its structures – the BFSA, the Agricultural Academy and the NAAS – does not participate constructively in preparing the farming community to structure the tools for its plant protection practice.

At this point, prominent analysts and commentators with broad knowledge of the subject will probably kindly remind us that we fail to note the role of the representations of multinational agrochemical companies in shaping the informed choice. We will reassure these concerned voices. Here is what we think on the matter. The highest class of plant protection, represented by the world's leading agrochemical companies, is present here in Bulgaria. The teams of these companies, composed of professional experts with reputable agronomic credentials, operate according to all market rules in a strongly competitive environment. The companies maintain active dialogue with their partners – distributors and end users. Agricultural producers in the country have the privilege and opportunity to receive objective, creative, accurate and up-to-date information on every product from the commercial portfolio of each of these companies, listen to presentations, receive consultations in their own fields, and visit company demonstration platforms across the country. This high professional activity at corporate level undoubtedly influences the formation of opinions, choices and positions regarding one product or another, one technology or another. However, this in no way means that the trading companies on the pesticide market render meaningless, underestimate or neglect the positions of the other participants in the process of developing specific plant protection strategies.

The state is obliged to participate actively in the organisation of agricultural production, in the engineering of operational plans for effective action against the harmful phytosanitary environment. This is all the more necessary because Bulgarian agriculture has entered the next stage of its intensive, integrated and positional development. Production is transforming very rapidly, on a broad front – the concepts of "green" policies and precision agriculture are no longer vague future horizons but a present reality. The role and participation of plant

protection, as part of this large-scale renewal process, require a new type of connectivity and sharing of responsibilities among all front-line participants who work with intellect and ideas to achieve a high health status of agricultural crops.

The point is that both the Bulgarian state and the multinational companies of the agrochemical industry have a common goal – our agriculture to be a sustainable, growing and profitable sector of the national economy. However, the approach to achieving this high-value economic goal is currently different. The impression remains that the state of Bulgaria is of the opinion that the global companies operating here are more or less obliged to mobilise their entire resources, responsibility and energy to make this happen! Which, as you can guess, excludes the concept of connectivity among administration, science, education and business. Such a position is unacceptable and destructive, leading to a dead end. It is urgently necessary for the state to correct its plant protection policy.

Because, as is well known, plant protection is an indispensable factor in agricultural production!