

European Low Energy/Carbon Label of Agricultural Products

What is the challenge?

The European Union has set labelling in agriculture, such as the organic logo that gives a coherent visual identity to organic products produced in the EU. The reason to produce distinctive labels showing a specific characteristic of agricultural products is to make it **easier for consumers to identify these products** and at the same time help **farmers to market them across the entire EU, potentially receive better prices and economic aid**, acting as an incentive to move to more sustainable products.

Such labelling can only be used on products that have been certified for their specific characteristic (e.g., organic) by an **authorised control agency or body**, using a certain methodology to check the fulfilment of strict conditions in the production system. In case of successful certification, the label can be awarded accompanied by a display of a code number of the control body and the place of farming.

The EU does not have a label referring to the sustainable direct and indirect energy use during agricultural production that could lead farmers to greener energy use in all the processes involved. A **defossilisation labelling system for agricultural products** to be applied EU-widely in all member-states could act as an **official certification scheme for products that have been produced with sustainable direct and indirect energy use practices** that lead to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions and removals and other environmental and socioeconomic benefits, such as reduced water resources contamination and maintenance of rural population.

Policy Recommendations

EU Level:

The policies that should be followed to make the label successful are:

- The official certification scheme for direct and indirect energy use reduction (with respective GHG reduction and/or carbon sequestration) during an agricultural production should provide **clear rules and transparency to the grocery market actors** by introducing a framework for monitoring, reporting and verification of greenhouse gas emissions reductions or removals to encourage farmers to include their business in this process.
- The label should be based on the **energy use reduction level and the GHG emissions reductions or carbon removal methodologies** (based on a Life Cycle Assessment format) approved by an official authority of the EU.
- Several companies have labelled their products with **own low and zero emission labels** without scientific evidence and proof about the positive impact. This leads to consumer deception. In Germany, consumer associations¹⁴ and the Federal Ministry for the Environment and Consumer Protection condemn these practices. **Suitable legislation is needed** to avoid this practice.
- The certified energy use reduction and GHG emissions reductions or removals of an agricultural product should be **registered in an official registry to prevent double-counting and avoid green-washing** of certain products that were not sustainably produced.
- The certification framework should be initially set from the EU's responsible authority (**top-down approach**) but should also follow a **bottom-up approach** allowing stakeholders and experts to propose certification methodologies for specific agricultural products, considering geographical and pedoclimatic conditions of the production site, also counting the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) framework. The proposed methodologies should be reviewed by a specialised committee and **if approved, they could be a part of the official certification scheme**.

¹⁴ <https://www.verbraucherzentrale.de/wissen/umwelt-haushalt/nachhaltigkeit/klimaneutrale-produkte-nachhaltig-sinnvoll-oder-cleveres-marketing-79835>

- **Third-party auditors could also play the role of verification and certification bodies** assisting the official EU body to reach a verdict for an agricultural product's ability to receive the label.
- Labelling agricultural products that use low or zero fossil energy should be of **low cost for farmers (especially small holders)** and simultaneously the products should receive **higher prices in the market and specific CAP support** to attract farmers into sustainable energy use and increased efficiency.
- In case of developing this label, extension services, private advisors and innovation brokers should **inform farmers about such frameworks** and provide services such as preparing the necessary paperwork to receive this label to **promote these products in a fast pace to consumers**.

Member States Level:

Following the controversial inclusion of traffic light labels proposed by the EU, in Italy some studies carried out by the Milan Centre for Food Law and Policy and with the scientific know-how of the State University of Milan have developed a labelling system that provides a score summary relating to the quality of food products according to a holistic and multidisciplinary logic. This model goes beyond the limit of the traffic light label (green, yellow and red) which necessarily implies an implicit evaluation of consumption "authorisation", corresponding to green, and vice versa of a "prohibition", when the score falls in the red spectrum. An approach that risks triggering unwanted mechanisms of possible excessive consumption in the first case and renunciation in the second, when instead a healthy diet corresponds to a balanced consumption of a wide variety of products. The label thus conceived combines nutrition and sustainability for conscious food choices, and gives the consumer a clear, complete and multifactorial reading on the environmental, economic and social sustainability of the products.

Expected Impacts

- **Increased interest of customers** in low energy input agricultural products.
- Farmers' **shift from conventional energy use** in agricultural production to more sustainable energy use.
- **Higher prices** of labelled agricultural products.
- **Reduced energy and carbon footprint** of farming activities.
- **More rural employment**, but also **new business creation** in the certification domain, improving population indices in these areas.



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