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**Address at the first annual congress of the European
Union project
QualityLowInputFood**

**“The importance of research into organic and low-
input food production”**

Newcastle, 07 January 2005

Check Against Delivery

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi

Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Dear participants,

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for your invitation. I am privileged to be addressing so many researchers, farmers, processors, retailers and consumers who gather around a European project on organic farming.

Allow me first to start by saying few words on the important challenges that the European Union faces in coming years.

We, and by that I mean all of us in Europe, will have to do more to become more competitive in the global economy, in order to preserve our way of life and to ensure a safe and prosperous future for our children. At the same time, we need to make sure that this future will mean a prosperous and safe Europe with clean environment and safe food.

I believe that putting knowledge at the heart of our efforts can help us address this challenge. Only more knowledge and better use of it can help us to become more competitive in the global economy, without compromising our determination to protect nature and live healthy lives at the same time. Europe cannot and will not compete with cheap labour or at the expense of the achieved level of social security or of the quality of the environment which we live in and

feed from. Therefore we need to base our growth on knowledge. We need knowledge for growth. This should be at the heart of the revitalised Lisbon strategy.

When I say knowledge I mean all three sides of the triangle which constitutes knowledge, namely education, research, and innovation. I am privileged to be responsible for one of them as Member of the European Commission in charge of science and research. In the next five years, I will do my best to help to create conditions allowing European science to be the best in the world and to have the world's best scientists working in Europe. I am certain that science will be an engine for growth which should allow us to address changes in our society in a responsible and sustainable manner.

The results of the scientific work must lead to an increase in the quality of life for all citizens of Europe. And I am certain that they will. We must make sure that society understands the actual and potential benefits of ongoing research. I believe that importance of research into organic and low-input food production can be a perfect example of how science can unlock potentials for human well-being.

Two years ago the European Union launched the strongest attempt yet to change its agricultural policy. The main objective was to create a policy that helps rural

areas play their vital social and economic role in European society. To create a policy that delivers benefits to all citizens, through safer and better-quality food, demanding environmental standards and tough animal welfare provisions. And to create a policy that allows European agriculture to prosper in an increasingly competitive world economy. I believe that organic farming and low-input food production figure prominently in the future of European agriculture. And agricultural research can play a prominent role in achieving those objectives.

There are many challenges we need to respond to in the field of agricultural research. Recent food crises, trade globalisation and stronger international competition, dwindling resources of fossil fuels, increasing concern to protect the environment, increasing consumers' interest in knowing what they eat and where it comes from, global warming and the debate on GMOs are all among them. And research is indispensable to respond successfully to these challenges. More specifically, in the field of organic farming, issues that need to be addressed include consumer acceptance, the improvement of food safety and quality, animal welfare, the influence on the environment and the maintenance of biodiversity. In addition, socio-economic aspects such as the guarantee of a sufficient income for farmers and acceptable market prices for consumers should not be overlooked.

Projects like Quality Low-input Food are therefore expected to give more science-based information and to produce new knowledge on the role that organic farming and low-input agriculture can play in addressing these issues.

Providing the consumer with safer food of better quality from sustainable production systems is what projects like *Quality Low-Input Food* are targeted at.

This project demonstrates what can be achieved at European level when researchers work together, collaborating across country borders in order to create the necessary multidisciplinary teams and to achieve critical mass of scale and scope. It is the first time in the field of organic farming research that a very large-scale project covering the whole food chain and a wide range of products (vegetables, dairy products, pork and poultry) has been funded at European level.

The project is expected to have a significant impact on increasing competitiveness of the organic industry in a number of sectors to the benefit of European consumers.

This project is of course not an isolated phenomenon. For example, I am pleased to note that a project (ORGAP) has just been selected for funding in the framework of the European Action Plan on organic food and farming. Other topics are currently open for proposal submission and there will be more possibilities for research in future calls.

It needs to be acknowledged that research in the field of organic and low-input farming is not a novelty in the context of European level research. A number of projects addressing related issues in the Fifth Framework Programme - for example, on organic marketing initiatives and rural development to the production side of organic farming, directed towards end-users, in particular farmers - are still on-going.

Moreover, it is estimated that more than 800 million € are being spent in the current sixth Framework Programme to support research in the field of agriculture, aquaculture and food research in various forms. A significant part of this budget, roughly 50 million Euros, is already or will be allocated to organic and low-input farming related research.

Of course, when I am speaking to you today you would be surprised if I did not say a few words about co-existence of conventional, organic and GMO farming. Organic farming has an important role to play in the general GMO debate and the Life science and biotechnology strategy of the EU pushes research on these issues to the foreground, to allow policy decisions to be taken on sound scientific grounds rather than on the basis of emotional factors. Among various important ongoing projects allow me to cite the project CO-EXTRA “*GM and non-GM supply chains: their co-existence and traceability*” which will

hopefully provide food chain stakeholders with appropriate tools and methods for practical implementation of co-existence and traceability requirements. In addition, the Joint Research Centre, which also falls within my responsibility, is developing a range of studies on organic farming and co-existence.

Finally I would like to say some words on our preliminary orientations towards the next framework programme and beyond. Here, I foresee the following research axes that might be relevant to create new opportunities for a sustainable agricultural research, apart from the central axe of collaborative research:

- First, improvement of the coordination of national and regional research programmes. At this moment, the ERA-NET concerted action CORE-organic brings together researchers from 11 European countries to establish trans-national co-operation. A similar project already selected for funding is providing the same opportunities for efficient linking of national programmes in new Member States. Future coordination initiatives will build on these activities.
- Second, establishment of several Technology Platforms with an impact on agricultural research. The two most relevant examples are the Technology Platform on ‘Plant Genomics and Biotechnology’, and the one on ‘Global animal health’, which was launched recently.

- Third, the development of research infrastructures of European interest. Infrastructures for agricultural research include plant/animal/micro-organisms genetics resources centres, ecosystems observation sites and high-containment facilities for research on animal infectious diseases.

Allow me a few concluding remarks.

Firstly, we want to make Europe the most competitive, knowledge-based economy in the world. At the same time we do not want to compromise on social cohesion and environmental sustainability. This is the difficult and challenging task that Europe faces. Promoting the concept of knowledge for growth is vital for achieving that objective.

Secondly, an important part of this concept of knowledge for growth is a substantial increase of research investment. Only that can help us achieve the necessary growth with our natural resources remaining sustainable. For these reasons the Commission proposed doubling of research funds in the next European Union budget.

And finally, perhaps more immediately pertinent to the issues discussed at this conference - research in the area of agriculture and in particular organic and low-input farming are good examples of how to tackle complex research issues which can have a direct interest for citizens and a large impact on the industry.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Co-operation in research and added-value at European level cannot be achieved without clear and transparent communication on research planning and findings.

The development of seminars and conferences where not only the scientific community but also end-users of research and other stakeholders participate is therefore very important. This is why I welcome initiatives such as this, bringing together all the actors of civil society. Again I congratulate you for this large multidisciplinary and integrated project and wish you a continuous success!

I very much regret that I will not be able to stay with you for much longer, but I am sure that you will enjoy the remaining fruitful discussions and the delightful northern food - I trust it is all organic? - awaiting you at the food stands.

Thank you for your attention!