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Agricultural Symposium – “Wintertagung 2017”

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Report Highlights:

In the week of January 30 2017, the most important Austrian agricultural symposium, “Wintertagung 2017,” took place. The symposium is a platform to discuss current developments, challenges and opportunities in the agriculture, food and forestry sector. This year’s overall motto of the “Wintertagung” was: “Our Food. Our Regions. Who will provide us tomorrow?” Key topics of the event were the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy and how to support Austria’s small scale agriculture in the future.

In the week of January 30 2017, the most important Austrian agricultural symposium, "[Wintertagung 2017](#)," took place. The symposium is a platform to discuss current developments, challenges and chances of the agriculture, food and forestry sector and is organized by the [Ecosocial Forum Austria](#), a think-tank promoting eco-social market economy with focus on agriculture. Ten meetings at various locations in Austria discussed specific issues and agricultural commodities. Traditionally the symposium starts with an agricultural policy and market outlook presented by high-level Austrian agricultural politicians, guest speakers from the EU Commission or other EU member states and other important stakeholders.

This year's overall motto of the "Wintertagung" was: "Our Food. Our Regions. Who will provide us tomorrow?" In his introduction, the president of the Ecosocial Forum Austria, Stephan Pernkopf, emphasized the importance of supporting and strengthening the small scale Austrian family farms. In a globalized world this topic would become increasingly important. He also stressed safeguarding a diverse agricultural sector and support for small and medium sized farms.

Speakers included Austrian agriculture minister, Andrae Rupprechter; European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Phil Hogan; the president of the Ecosocial Forum Europe, Elisabeth Koestinger; the Vice President of the European Parliament, Mairead McGuinness; and the president of the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture, Hermann Schultes. All speakers highlighted the outstanding high quality of Austrian agriculture and food products and the need for continuing support of farmers through the European Union's (EU) "Common Agricultural Policy" (CAP). There was big concern among the speakers on the upcoming "Brexit" (United Kingdom's future withdrawal from the European Union) and thus affordability of the CAP measures when losing the United Kingdom as a net contributor.

Another concern almost all speakers raised was the expected change in U.S. policy. Rupprechter especially criticized the anticipated lowering of environmental standards in the USA and proposed that the eco-social market economy could be a viable future model as an answer to the strong poles of the USA and China. McGuinness also speculated that the new U.S. policy would lead to more bilateral agreements instead of multi-lateral free trade agreements.

Rupprechter further pointed out that social responsibility, quality, regionality, labeling of origin and the socio-economic market economy are the future trends in food production and trade. In order to implement these key issues, the federal government, together with provincial and local governments, would be working on a "masterplan for the rural area." In order to support rural areas it would also need an enhancement of the CAP after 2020. The CAP should be simplified and easier understandable. It also should include support for farmers preserving unique cultural landscape.

Commissioner Hogan argued in favor of a strong CAP, which should continue to support rural development. Further key principles of the CAP should be stabilization tools for agricultural sectors, fairness for farmers in the food chain, and a quality policy. Like Rupprechter he lobbied for a simplification of the CAP which should be laid down in a blue print issued by the Commission at the end of the year.

Koestinger demanded a clear commitment to regionality and domestic agriculture stressing the motto "small is beautiful". She reflected alternate sources of revenues for the CAP like a CO2 tax or a financial transaction tax. She defended the direct payments for farmers to be the safety net for farmers. Further Koestinger called for a strengthening of the producers' organizations and trade relations and the fight against unfair trade practices.