



FACTSHEET Towards a more sustainable food system

What is wrong with the EU food system?

Today, the EU's food system is unsustainable on many counts. It is both affected by and a major driver of climate change, pollution and waste, loss of biodiversity, and diet-related non-communicable diseases – such as obesity and diabetes. Half of the EU adult population is overweight or obese. The EU's food system also has severe environmental and social impacts abroad, with EU consumption driving deforestation and overfishing.

What is the EU doing?

The EU has followed a piecemeal approach to advancing food sustainability to date. The result is a set of sectoral policies (on agriculture, health, trade, etc.) which lack coherence and are even contradictory at times.

In its 2020 [‘Farm to Fork’ Strategy](#) for fairer, healthier, and greener food and farming, the European Commission announced a new EU legislative Framework for a Sustainable Food System (FSFS) for 2023. This horizontal law will introduce definitions, sustainability objectives and principles to ensure that existing and future EU legislation about food consistently contributes towards the goal of a sustainable food system which operates within planetary boundaries.

What's in it for consumers?

Sustainable healthy diets are a win-win for health, climate and food security. However, consumers struggle to align food habits with sustainable and healthy eating goals. A 2020 [BEUC survey](#) showed that two-thirds of consumers are open to changing their food habits for sustainability yet face barriers – incl. price, lack of knowledge, the challenge of identifying sustainable food options and their limited availability.

The FSFS must aim at making sustainable healthy diets the easiest choice for consumers.

‘Food environments’: are we in control of our food choices?

Consumer choices are shaped by the ‘food environment’, i.e. marketing and advertising, promotional offers, food availability and price, spatial layout in supermarkets, etc.¹ The FSFS must set out clearly what ‘favourable food environments’ shall aim to achieve. These objectives should be fleshed out in concrete policy measures in secondary/sectoral legislation (either new pieces of legislation or existing ones to be reviewed and aligned with the FSFS, at EU and/or national level):

¹ The role of food environments in a sustainable food system is comprehensively addressed in this document: Policy briefing. Food Environments & EU Food Policy. [Discovering the role of food environments for sustainable food systems](#) (2021). EU Food Policy Coalition.



#OBJECTIVE 1: Make the sustainable and healthy food choice the most affordable one

How? 8 in 10 Europeans agree that food prices should reflect the costs for society, including environmental and health impacts associated with food consumption. Price incentives (e.g. reduced VAT), a repurposing of farm subsidies and a better application of ‘Polluter Pays’ in the agricultural sector can make sustainable food more affordable to consumers than unsustainable food options.

#OBJECTIVE 2: Ensure that foods contributing to sustainable healthy diets get most visibility

How? Binding EU rules are needed to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food to children, because self-regulation is failing to adequately protect children from such marketing and advertising.

The review of EU promotion policy for agri-food products should encourage the consumption of products Europeans are advised to eat more of, e.g. fruit, vegetables, pulses, and no longer promote products that Europeans should eat less of, e.g. meat, alcoholic beverages.

#OBJECTIVE 3: Make food products healthier and sustainable by design

How? Maximum levels could be set for certain nutrients in food, e.g. salt, sugars, fat content, or binding targets defined by public health authorities to reduce levels of these nutrients in food categories which contribute the most to their excessive intakes.

#OBJECTIVE 4: Support informed choices by consumers

How? Most consumers (57%) want sustainability information to be compulsory on food labels. The FSFS should spell out meaningful and trustworthy criteria which sustainability-related food information should comply with. Policymakers should design information about the environmental sustainability of food products to steer consumers towards diets and agricultural practices in line with the Farm to Fork Strategy goals (incl. less pesticides and fertilizers, more organic farming, etc.).

What type of action is needed at what level?

The shift to a sustainable food system will require concerted efforts from multiple actors across governance levels and policy areas. For instance:

- **Member States should develop food-based dietary guidelines** that integrate the environmental dimension and guide consumers towards diets which are not only better for their health, but also for the planet. They should also **develop “National Food Strategies” in the form of multi-annual action plans** detailing actions to be taken and how to monitor them.
- The FSFS should pave the ground for **new obligations and minimum sustainability requirements for economic operators and their activities**, covering all dimensions of sustainability (such as reducing net emissions, minimising food loss and waste, and respecting good working conditions)
- **Consumer organisations also have a role to play in the transition**, for instance by raising awareness among consumers about the impacts of their food choices. Crucially, they bring the consumer perspective to the debate for well-designed policies which benefit consumers and society at large. Additional resources would make it possible for consumer groups, especially in less affluent Member States, to step up their activities related to sustainable food consumption and food systems.