

## A pesticide-free future: Switzerland to lead the way?

### A Swiss popular initiative sets out to ban all synthetic agrichemicals

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Today, the popular initiative *Sauberes Wasser für All* (“For Clean Drinking Water and a Healthy Diet – Stop Subsidies allocated for Pesticides and Antibiotics for Prophylactic use”) was officially submitted to the Swiss Federal Chancellery in Bern. It proposes a total ban on synthetic agrichemicals such as pesticides in order to protect public health and the environment.

An apolitical citizens’ initiative, it obtained 110.000 validated signatures in a record time (9 months instead of 18, as required by the official procedure for popular initiatives). In Switzerland, 100.000 validated signatures are required for a popular initiative to be considered ‘successful’; once a successful popular initiative has been relayed to authorities, it is followed by a national referendum and can propose changes to the Swiss Federal Constitution. Although the initiative has been met with scorn by farmers’ unions and the industrial agricultural sector, it might well succeed - as the Swiss have a history of protecting what ends up on their plates through the electoral urn (such as the [2005 vote banning GMO crop cultivation](#)).

As the text of the initiative states, since 1996 Swiss citizens have invested billions in direct payments to farmers in order to guarantee the production of natural and healthy and environmentally-safe food, as well as the respect for animal welfare in cattle production. However, as the [Bertschy postulate](#) showed in 2016, more than twenty years later ‘none of the environmental objectives for agriculture adopted by Swiss Federal Office for the Environmental and Office for Agriculture have been fully achieved’.

“Swiss citizens are tired of paying billions in taxes which end up underpinning a toxic agricultural model that contaminates the environment, therefore posing a serious threat to public health and our unique ecosystems”, says **co-initiator and member of the *Sauberes Wasser für All* committee, Madeleine Vakkuri**. “As such, the petition demands that taxpayer money for agricultural subsidies should only be allocated to those farming practices that do not pollute the environment and that are dedicated to the production of healthy food”.

2017 has been an extremely contentious year regarding agrichemicals generally, and pesticides in particular. At EU-level, the big debate threatening to divide the Union revolved around glyphosate, the most-used herbicide worldwide, whose commercial license was re-approved for another five years (instead of fifteen) after intense competition between the civil society campaign (carried out through the [European Citizens’ Initiative](#)) and lobbying efforts by the pesticides industry.

“The Swiss popular initiative could teach the EU a lesson in true commitment to direct democracy, and could set an example by leading the way toward a pesticide-free future”, says **PAN Europe President François Veillerette**. “Many Europeans do not want these substances in their food or in the environment, and feel betrayed by [EU institutions’ handling of the glyphosate case](#): not only did the re-approval pass by a hair, but it only managed to do so thanks to a [last-minute U-turn by Germany](#), which appeared undemocratic to many. In fact, the decision remains so contested that, in December 2017, environment and agriculture ministers from 6 EU Member States [wrote to the Commission](#) demanding it ‘limit the risks’ (i.e. enforcing bans on non-agricultural uses) of glyphosate and ‘prepare an exit plan’ (i.e. a transition to alternative options), recalling this is what the EU Parliament [had called for](#) in a plenary vote in October 2017”.

If both the National Council and Council of States approve the initiative, a date for popular vote will be set. If the initiative is approved by popular vote, the Government will have to amend the articles concerned in the Constitution. Although the result remains to be seen due to the long procedure, Switzerland should be commended for its commitment to direct democracy, and the EU should take a leaf out of the Swiss book.