

Lobbying watchdogs raise 'serious concern' over food policy group

-- By Eddy Wax

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As Brussels hammers out its plans to green the way Europe eats and farms, transparency watchdogs are sounding the alarm over an exclusive new club of MEPs and interest groups that they say raises "serious concern" about industry influence.

Launched in [December](#) last year by five MEPs, the [European Food Forum](#) (EFF) is a self-described "non-partisan" platform for debating EU agri-food policy. Under the EFF's banner, 29 cross-party MEPs meet a handful of NGOs and 23 major businesses such as Coca-Cola and the pesticides industry, with all groups paying to be members.

But Transparency International and Corporate Europe Observatory have criticized the forum's private events connecting businesses with public officials working on the Green Deal's Farm to Fork sustainable food strategy behind closed doors.

The EFF [charges](#) an annual fee of up to €10,000 for businesses to join, depending on the size and type of company. It costs €500 for NGOs or organizations from civil society. If all 23 businesses paid a middle-rate joining fee of €5,000 it would mean they have contributed at least €115,000 to the platform, while other bodies have paid around €4,000. The EFF does not make public on its website which companies pay what. The Committee of the Regions, an EU advisory body, joined as a "special member" this week, meaning it can observe meetings without paying.

Eight civil society organizations, such as Vrije Universiteit Brussel and consumer group BEUC, are EFF members, although just one of the eight — a Belgian educational and tech platform called [Aktina](#) — is an environmental NGO.

Though the forum's events often include participants from environmental groups and others with perspectives opposing those of industry, these groups say they feel sidelined in discussions.

Last week, for example, the EFF held a [webinar](#) on pesticides, inviting environmental NGO Pesticide Action Network (PAN) to speak. One of the major mooted goals of the EU's Farm to Fork sustainable food strategy under the Green Deal is to halve the use and risk of pesticides by 2030 — which would naturally deal a blow to the agrichemical industry.

PAN's Henriette Christensen said she left the event early, and that she felt as if she was only there as a token dissenting voice.

"It was not a real exchange. I was only there to be able to contradict, to show to the MEPs that I was not right," she said. Christensen was the only representative of an environmental group giving a presentation at the webinar, according to its [program](#).

"I was completely surprised that it was so industry-based," Christensen added. "All the people in the room have the direct possibility to lobby the people there. It feels wrong."

The EFF's events take place without access for journalists and under [Chatham House rules](#), meaning that comments made in the room must remain anonymous. Campaigners say this could mean there are no checks on the lobbying activities of powerful companies that have a financial interest in lowering the stringent new standards proposed in the European Commission's Farm to Fork plans.

"It is a classical example of privileged access for industry," said Nina Holland from the Corporate Europe Observatory, which challenges business lobbying. "These meetings give them a platform to push a narrative that is finally aimed at delaying and derailing the Farm to Fork ambitions."

The EFF [presents](#) itself as a neutral debating arena that exists to "closely interact and get to know all the key stakeholders in an open and trustful environment." According to its entry on the EU's [transparency register](#), it aims to "inform" MEPs' policymaking decisions. "EFF does not itself take any position and does not represent specific interests," it says.

All the EFF's events this year are being held under the umbrella theme of the Farm to Fork strategy. The [website](#) of Euro-Toques, the EU chefs' lobby and one of the EFF's members published a draft program of events in May, including a possible "exchange of views" with EU Food Safety Commissioner Stella Kyriakides and Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton. A European Commission spokesperson said Kyriakides had declined the invitation but did not say how Breton had responded by the time of publication.

Though the EFF was founded by MEPs, Vitor Teixeira from Transparency International pointed out that it is not registered as an official [intergroup](#) of the European Parliament, and is therefore not bound by the same tight rules on financial transparency.

"Of course MEPs are free to meet whoever they want, but I think it's a serious concern in terms of integrity, the funding sources and the fact that these are not actually public," Teixeira said.

He also said it might allow MEPs in positions of authority in the Parliament to dodge transparency rules requiring them to publish details of their meetings with lobbyists.

"This is an excellent way to circumvent the rules so suddenly you can just meet MEPs [behind] closed doors say, try to influence them towards your point of view and they don't have to publish because it's not a meeting, it's an event," Teixeira said.

"It feels odd that the official intergroups of the European Parliament have to follow certain rules, while others that fall outside of this have to follow no rules."

The Corporate Europe Observatory [says](#) that so-called MEP-industry forums are "not subject to any rules at all, and can keep their members, funding, and even existence hidden from public view."

EFF Director Luisella Ciani wrote in an email: "Concerning the financial declarations, EFF is under much more stringent rules (statutes, general assemblies, board of management, minutes, accountant ...) than intergroups since it operates under Belgian law and all is published."

She added: “Money which comes from the annual membership fees is the only funding the European Food Forum receives and covers all running costs, including staff, events and outreach activities. EFF’s activities are not sponsored by any of its members individually.”

Irène Tolleret, who joined the Parliament last year for the Renew Europe group and co-founded the EFF, said the forum hosts a diverse range of opinions from different kinds of stakeholders. She pointed to speaking invitations for the likes of human rights NGO Public Eye and anti-Monsanto farmer [Paul François](#) at previous events.

“We really need the NGOs to come on board and discuss, and tell us what they want and explain, and listen,” Tolleret said. “It’s not privileged access to MEPs; it’s work, it’s a forum for discussion.”

The French lawmaker said the EFF is the brainchild of her fellow MEPs. “When we arrived in the European Parliament, there were a few of us that had had the same feeling that we really wanted the Commission to listen to reality,” she said.

However, the platform has deeper links to the world of food business.

Its full-time director, Ciani, is married to Francesco Tramontin, the director of global public affairs at major food-maker Mondelēz International, which is a paying member of the forum.

In an email, Ciani described her role as “purely administrative,” adding “the real engine of EFF are its founders and members.” She wrote: “Mondelēz is an EFF member and my husband has contributed to EFF work and events in its capacity. Our relationship has been disclosed to both organizations to prevent any conflict of interest.”

Recruitment drive

Michèle Rivasi, a Green MEP and EFF vice-president, was brought in to attract NGOs to the forum. “She wants to bring other voices than the world of agribusiness,” her assistant said, adding: “If her participation does not bring results or change, and it is ‘business as usual,’ [Rivasi] will just leave.”

Others in Parliament are concerned about the influence the platform could have. Emmanuel Foulon, the assistant to the Socialist MEP Marc Tarabella who was initially touted as a chair of the EFF but did not become a member, said: “One can say that even if the majority of MEPs treat lobbyists equally, certain lobbies carry a lot more weight than others and this bears down on certain policy decisions, which I find harmful.”

Euro Coop, which represents retailer cooperatives, said it had decided against joining. “If we’re going to be outgunned, out-paid and outspoken by the bigger players, then there’s no point, because then we become a part of the theater — because it’s a façade,” its Secretary General Todor Ivanov said.

PAN’s Christensen, who was speaking as a guest at last week’s event on pesticides, said: “I would never, ever consider to join.”

The assistant to a third MEP on the EFF’s steering committee said that even though there were currently more businesses than NGOs involved in the platform, there is still “clear parity” in the

amount of voting rights each side has. “This is a genuine way to be able to talk with each other in a more expanded scope than the [parliamentary] committees,” the assistant said.

A spokesperson for the European Crop Protection Association — an EFF member that represents crop chemical giants such as Bayer, Syngenta and Corteva — said: “We should all focus on finding solutions to produce enough food sustainably. To that end, we are happy to see that PAN was speaking at the last event organized by EFF. We would like to see as many members of EFF as possible.”

A spokesperson for soft drinks lobby UNESDA, another member, said: “The EFF steering committee of MEPs encourages a broad membership across the food ecosystem — from MEPs, farmers and food and beverage companies through to national federations, academic institutions and civil society — and has ensured that they are equally represented.”

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