

JOINT POSITION PAPER ON THE INCLUSION OF PLANT-BASED MILK ALTERNATIVES IN THE EU SCHOOL SCHEME

Brussels, 3 May 2023

The [Farm to Fork Strategy](#) and the [European Commission Report on Drivers of Food Security](#) have both highlighted the need for a transition towards more sustainable consumption patterns and the fact that a shift to a more plant-based diet will not only improve public health but also reduce the environmental burden on the current food system. We – an alliance of NGOs and businesses working in the plant-based sector – welcome the review of the EU School Scheme in order to align with these goals and improve the resilience of our food system.

The [EU School fruit, vegetables and milk scheme](#) supports the supply of fruit, vegetables, milk, and certain milk products to children, together with educational activities on agriculture and healthy eating habits. The European Parliament is voting on the possibility of adding plant-based milk alternatives to the Scheme. This voting will inform the Commission's proposal, which is scheduled to be published by the end of this year.

We – an alliance of businesses and NGOs – support widening the scope of eligible products in the EU School Scheme to recognise the needs of all school children by catering for children who cannot or do not want to drink cow's milk for medical, ethical, taste, or environmental reasons. Including fortified plant-based milk alternatives is essential in terms of inclusion, availability, sustainability and affordability.

Schools are powerful agents of change and have an important educational role to play in educating young generations about the impact of their food choices on their health and the environment, and in forming dietary habits. Therefore, widening the choices available in the Scheme will support creating more healthy and sustainable food habits in later years.

The architecture and rationale of the current EU School Milk Scheme should be aligned with today's global challenges and objectives of the Farm to Fork Strategy of promoting sustainable production and consumption patterns. In addition, the upcoming proposal for a [legislative framework for sustainable food systems](#) (FSFS) already hinted at the importance of public procurement for food systems change. We believe that the EU School Scheme should be brought in line and be coherent with the FSFS objectives. Given that 70%¹ of the EU's agricultural emissions are attributed to livestock farming, we believe that the EU has the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability that benefits both the people and the planet by widening the scope to also include plant-based milk alternatives in the Scheme.

¹ European Court of Auditors (2021). Common Agricultural Policy and climate. Half of EU climate spending but farm emissions are not decreasing. https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR21_16/SR_CAP-and-Climate_EN.pdf

Against this background, we therefore call on the European Parliament to support the inclusion of fortified plant-based alternatives to milk as eligible products within the upcoming review of the EU School Scheme.

We particularly encourage the EU to promote the following areas:

1. Fortified plant-based milk alternatives are healthy and nutritious alternatives to cow's milk

It is essential that the Scheme considers school children's nutrition. Fortified plant-based alternatives to milk can be healthy and play a role in a nutritionally varied and well-planned diet, providing an excellent alternative to cow's milk.

Plant-based milk alternatives can be used as an adequate alternative to cow's milk through fortification, which can provide several vitamins and minerals found in milk, and at the same time have a lower environmental impact.²³ A Swedish study shows that the nutrient density in fortified plant-based alternatives, such as oat, soya, and almond drink, are equivalent to cow's milk.⁴

The natural fibre content of plant-based drinks is also an added value. Additionally, most plant-based milk alternatives are low in unhealthy saturated fats and rich in healthy unsaturated fats. Soya drinks naturally contain a similar amount of protein to cow's milk and a high protein quality that is comparable to animal-based proteins.⁵

The healthiness of foods is linked to their nutritional make-up, including a high presence of vitamins, minerals, fibre, unsaturated fats, and a limited amount of added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium, which is the case for plant-based milk alternatives.

Fortified plant-based milk alternatives such as unsweetened/low in sugar plant-based drinks are a healthy and nutritious alternative to milk for those children who cannot or do not want to drink cow's milk.

² Carlsson Kanyama, A.; Hedin, B.; Katzeff, C. Differences in Environmental Impact between Plant-Based Alternatives to Dairy and Dairy Products: A Systematic Literature Review. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 12599. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132212599>

³ Poore, J., & Nemecek, T. (2018). Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. *Science*, 360(6392), 987-992. <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/360/6392/987>

⁴ Jacobsen M., Bryngelsson S., Bianchi M., (2022). Näringsstämhet i mjölk och växtbaserade drycker, RISE Research Institutes of Sweden, SLU Future Food Report 20.

⁵ Rizzo G, Baroni L. (2018). Soy, Soy Foods and Their Role in Vegetarian Diets. *Nutrients*;10(1):43. doi: 10.3390/nu10010043. PMID: 29304010; PMCID: PMC5793271.

2. Plant-based milk alternatives can help reduce the climate footprint of our diets, given their lower environmental impact

We are in a climate crisis in which agriculture in the EU accounts for 10.3% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions, with almost 70% of these emissions coming from the animal-agriculture sector.⁶ The IPCC is clear about the environmental benefits of plant-based foods in its report, *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change: "Diets high in plant protein and low in meat and dairy are associated with lower greenhouse gas emissions."*⁷ Against this background, a shift to more plant-based diets is also recognised as a key driver for food security, while presenting large benefits for climate mitigation and human health, this is also in line with the Farm to Fork Strategy objectives.⁸

To this end, most plant-based alternatives have a lower impact in terms of land use, greenhouse gas emissions, freshwater use, and eutrophication than cow's milk.^{9 10 11} In addition, the crops used for most EU plant-based alternatives to milk are mainly grown in the EU¹². This not only reduces the carbon footprint associated with transportation, but presents opportunities to help to sustain local EU farmers.

In the quest for a swift transition to a low-carbon economy there is already enough evidence to proceed with a dietary change involving the inclusion of plant-based dairy and meat alternatives.¹³ This transition should be supported by the EU School Scheme. School meals have great potential to promote sustainable and healthy eating habits among children. Research shows that it is essential to focus on increasing plant-based options in public-sector catering.

Plant-based foods, including plant-based drinks, have an important role to play and are highly compatible with existing food habits. The explosive growth of plant-based foods and growing consumer demand indicate that those foods are essential in the transition towards more plant-centric dietary patterns.¹⁴

⁶ European Court of Auditors (2021). Common Agricultural Policy and climate. Half of EU climate spending but farm emissions are not decreasing. https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR21_16/SR_CAP-and-Climate_EN.pdf

⁷ IPCC (2023). Synthesis Report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6). https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6wg3/pdf/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_FinalDraft_FullReport.pdf

⁸ Commission Staff Working Document. Drivers of food security. SWD(2023) 4 final.

https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-01/SWD_2023_4_1_EN_document_travail_service_part1_v2.pdf

⁹ Rööds, E., T. Garnett, V. Watz, et al. (2018): The role of dairy and plant based dairy alternatives in sustainable diets. Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala. Food Climate Research Network (FCRN), London.

¹⁰ Carlsson Kanyama, A.; Hedin, B.; Katzeff, C. (2021). Differences in Environmental Impact between Plant-Based Alternatives to Dairy and Dairy Products: A Systematic Literature Review. *Sustainability*, 13, 12599. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132212599>

¹¹ Poore, J., & Nemecek, T. (2018). Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. *op. cit.*

¹² *According to the Federal Statistical Office of Germany, in 2021, Germany imported about 296 million litres of plant-based milk alternatives. 93% of these came from Belgium (35%), Sweden (23%), Italy (13%), Austria (11%), and France (10%), with most of the remaining 7% coming from other European countries. Less than 1% came from outside the European Continent*

¹³ Carlsson Kanyama, A.; Hedin, B.; Katzeff, C. (2021). Differences in Environmental Impact between Plant-Based Alternatives to Dairy and Dairy Products: A Systematic Literature Review. *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Carmichael, R. (2019) Behaviour change, public engagement and Net Zero. A report for the Committee on Climate Change <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/behaviour-change-public-engagement-and-net-zero-imperial-college-london/>

3. Plant-based foods and drinks provide market opportunities

While relatively young, the plant-based-food sector has shown steep growth in recent years. The European plant-based-food sector grew 49% between 2018-2020¹⁵ and is expected to reach €7.5 billion by 2025 and €16.7 billion by 2029.¹⁶ The value of plant-based milk sales grew by 19% between 2020 and 2022, almost twice as much as conventional milk¹⁷.

Of all plant-based products, plant-based alternatives to milk have the highest acceptance rates. They are not only consumed by vegetarians and vegans but also by lactose-intolerant and cow's milk allergic people and flexitarians.¹⁸ In addition, in terms of average price per unit, the plant-based milk category has been less impacted by inflation and price increases in 2022. Plant-based milk prices increased by 1%, whereas conventional milk prices increased by 17%¹⁹.

A combination of increasing environmental awareness, rising consumer demand, and growing pressure to adhere to the Paris Agreement have accelerated this transformation and prompted the EU to take the lead in the sustainable food transition, while providing employment opportunities for an environmentally and socially just economic transition.

This transformation has untapped potential for farmers in the European Union as increasing environmental constraints are becoming a major threat to traditional farming livelihoods. Farmers have an important role to play in the just transition towards alternative protein and crop production – and the broadening of EU School Scheme products could play a key role in this transition.

To conclude, the EU School Scheme, which benefits over 20 million children across Europe, has huge potential to be a flagship initiative for promoting sustainable food consumption in schools and beyond. Incorporating fortified plant-based alternatives to milk into the Scheme will show that the EU is committed to offering greater choice to children who are unable, or unwilling, to consume cow's milk and are seeking out healthy, climate-friendly, and ethical alternatives.

¹⁵ The Smart Protein project. (2021). Plant-based foods in Europe: How big is the market?, the Smart Protein project.

¹⁶ Europe Plant-Based Food Market Worth \$16.7 Billion by 2029, Meticulous Research, March 2022.

¹⁷ GFI Europe: Plant-Based Foods Retail Market Report (2020-2022), page 13, March 2023.

<https://gfieurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2020-2022-Europe-retail-market-insights.pdf>

¹⁸ The Smart Protein project (2021). What consumers want: a survey on European consumer attitudes towards plant-based foods, with a focus on flexitarians'. European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.

¹⁹ GFI Europe: Plant-Based Foods Retail Market Report (2020-2022), page 13, March 2023.

<https://gfieurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2020-2022-Europe-retail-market-insights.pdf>

