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Belgian fruit and vegetable auctions make a collective commitment to sustainable development with Responsibly Fresh



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The Belgian fruit and vegetable auctions are joining forces to promote sustainable development. Two years ago, in February 2012, they launched the collective sustainability label Responsibly Fresh. Since then, the auctions involved in the initiative – Belgische Fruitveiling, BelOrta, Limburgse Tuinbouwveiling, REO Veiling en Veiling Hoogstraten – along with the associated producers, have been continuing to work tirelessly. The certificates have been obtained and renewed for sustainable business charters and for specific quality systems; collective work has been conducted on a range of sustainability criteria. Veiling Haspengouw has also recently signed up to participate in Responsibly Fresh. The details of the efforts being made are being collated in the first Responsibly Fresh sustainability report. The report has been presented today by the VBT, in the presence of the participating auctions, to the Members of the Flemish Provincial Executives with responsibility for Agriculture. The key points have been reported to the press and stakeholders at the farm of hard fruit grower Piet Porreye in Sint-Truiden. The producer shared his own experiences with Responsibly Fresh. The attendees also heard the initial reactions from Boerenbond president Piet Vanthemsche. The strength of the collective approach was the main thrust of his reflection.

The Association of Belgian Horticultural Cooperatives (VBT) has been working for a number of years with the associated auctions on a sustainability project. Companies' concern for sustainability on the one hand and the range of labels highlighting specific subsidiary aspects of sustainability on the other, underpin the process. The auctions have striven from the outset to adopt a proactive, individual and collective approach. After all, the associated growers are just as diverse in their business situations as the varied crops of fruit and vegetables that they produce and collectively market. This diversity means that sustainable development cannot be accommodated within a limited set of criteria, but it is the objective of a whole spread of activities. Responsibly Fresh stresses the efforts made by the collective of the producers involved. The auctions add their own touches too, and it is this diversity that Responsibly Fresh also seeks to take into account while at the same time concentrating on the collective results.

Auctions can use the Responsibly Fresh sustainability label if three conditions are met. First, the individual producer is expected to be in possession of a valid certificate from a quality system, namely Vegaplan or GLOBALG.A.P. Second, the individual auction is expected to hold a certificate for a sustainable business charter, such as those offered by the provincial governments and/or VOKA (Flanders' Chamber of Commerce and Industry). The commitments for external initiatives and the regular, independent audits make Responsibly Fresh transparent and credible. The third condition is that the auctions must regularly demonstrate progress for the collective of their producers on a set of sustainability criteria, collated in a collective dossier.

From the outset, Responsibly Fresh has been focusing on four themes – low impact, biodiversity, proximity and food thrift. These are topics on which the producers and auctions have already made huge efforts, and on which there is room for progress.

- Low impact: Be frugal with means of production and apply integrated cultivation principles,
- Biodiversity: Opt for varied cultivation and support scientific research into new varieties and growing techniques,
- Proximity: The structure of the marketing cooperatives ensures a short, integrated chain, resulting in transparent pricing for producers, one-stop shopping for distributors and affordable quality for consumers,
- Food thrift: Implement tried en tested storage techniques, customer-oriented portions and continuous anticipation of market demand.

The status regarding the collective dossier and the action points worked out within the charters, supplemented by the relevant business information from the participants, forms the content of the sustainability report. For the sake of transparency and clarity, the sustainability report is structured around the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, ecological and social impact. This follows the guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). Given the strong export focus of the Belgian fruit and vegetable sector, it is naturally important for this internationally known standard to be applied in order to be able to communicate on the basis of acceptable principles with foreign customers about the efforts being deployed in terms of sustainable development within the Responsibly Fresh project.

In the 2012-2013 cycle, the five initial Responsibly Fresh auctions earned the certificate for the sustainable business charter. Overall, they set up 114 action points, of which 65% have already been successfully implemented. A further 7% of the action points are in progress and 28% have been evaluated, but ultimately deemed not achievable for implementation in the short term. The action points run from the incorporation of sustainable business in the organisation's policy, to the monitoring of energy scans with appropriate low-energy lighting and water-saving grading and cooling, to the extension of appropriate mobility, to good neighbourliness through consultation with those living nearby. In the meantime, all participants also completed the 2013-2014 cycle and have committed to the 2014-2015 cycle. A future sustainability report will talk about these last two cycles. The collective dossier for the producers includes 49 sustainability criteria. The 2013 update is drawn up by reference to the input of 2,848 producers – some 80% of the active producers from the participating auctions. The measures achieved and planned here also address the different themes of Responsibly Fresh and range from energy- and water-saving growing techniques to Integrated Pest Management (IPM) for crop protection to specific provisions for the staff, to professional training courses and participation in the socio-cultural life of the surrounding area by the producers themselves.

Rita Demaré, VBT President, says in the foreword to the report: *'We want to move forward on the chartered path. The participating auctions will have to introduce new, challenging action points in order to attain the sustainable business charter anew. In addition, they will use the information of the collective dossier to attend better to their producers as sustainable development advances.'* Philippe Appeltans, VBT General Secretary, refers to the detailed explanation of the results and the following conclusion from the report: *'To keep the Responsibly Fresh sustainability project relevant and credible, and to keep driving it forwards, communication with internal and external stakeholders is very important. This report is the next step in our communication. On the one hand, it clearly shows where the project stands at this time, and it provides a means for looking at the future. It is a challenge to drive forward the communication on the collective sustainability label Responsibly Fresh and also to make consumers aware of the commitment to sustainable development motivating the Belgian auctions and their growers.'* Laurien Danckaerts, the person at VBT responsible for the sustainability report, adds: *'To monitor the progress of all participants in terms of sustainable development, there will be a report every two years.'*

The course of sustainable development is further promoted by:



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More information: Responsibly Fresh – www.responsibly-fresh.com and VBT – www.vbt.eu