



PRESS RELEASE
VBT presents the third Responsibly Fresh sustainability report and proposes a new sustainability strategy



Putte, 14 June 2018

Over recent years, the Belgian fruit and vegetable cooperatives, better known as 'the auctions' and their growers, have been honouring their pledges to commit themselves to sustainable development.

In 2012, VBT, along with its member marketing cooperatives and the associated growers, launched the collective sustainability project and label Responsibly Fresh. VBT itself, the marketing cooperatives and the growers each made specific commitments. The sustainability challenges in the cooperatively organised fresh fruit and vegetable sector are to be tackled collectively. This makes the collective character of Responsibly Fresh unique.

Six years down the line, this third sustainability report gives a snapshot of what we have been doing. Since the project started in 2012, the participants have made definite progress in terms of sustainable development. There have been positive developments in economic, environmental and social terms alike. The sustainability report has been handed over today by VBT, with the Responsibly Fresh marketing cooperatives in attendance, to Flemish Agriculture Minister Joke Schauvliege.

In her reaction, Joke Schauvliege reports that she is satisfied that the fruit and vegetable sector has been making efforts in terms of sustainability for quite some time. This is important for the image of the sector, but on top of that, it helps to secure the future.

The outlines of the report were released to the press and stakeholders at the farm of tomato grower Kevin Pittoors (Primato) in Putte. The grower shared his own experiences regarding Responsibly Fresh.

Responsibly Fresh: a common commitment to sustainable development

The third sustainability report looks at the period from 2012-2018 and shows the progress made towards sustainability within the Responsibly Fresh project. Various chapters describe the specific commitments which the participants have been honouring over the years.

The Responsibly Fresh marketing cooperatives have secured certification every year for the Sustainable Business or Corporate Social Responsibility charter. By participating in the charter, the marketing cooperatives can demonstrate that they have made concrete achievements in ecological, social and economic terms. All the action points they have defined are included jointly in the sustainability report. The diversity of the action points indicates that the marketing cooperatives are firmly committed to sustainable business practices.

Through their periodic certification for the quality systems Vegaplan and GLOBALG.A.P., the Responsibly Fresh producers are driving home the point that they are consciously working towards sustainable development. VBT has supported the inclusion of sustainability criteria within these quality systems. The collective progress by the growers against a string of sustainability criteria is once again recorded within the collective dossier. The 2017 collective dossier includes 52 sustainability criteria and minor revisions have been made compared to the 2013 and 2015 editions. One change has been the scrapping, within the standards, of those requirements which have subsequently become mandatory or explicitly included. There is also more of a focus on innovations. The measures surveyed in the collective dossier include various sustainability topics ranging from energy- and water-saving techniques, integrated cultivation and packaging materials to specific provisions for employees and socio-cultural activities by growers.

The dossier relies on the input of 2,428 growers, all those with a turnover of more than €25,000. The report compares the results in the 2017 collective dossier against those from 2015 and 2013.

Lies Elsen, who is in charge of the sustainability report at the VBT: *"The collective dossier shows that progress has been achieved on almost all of the sustainability criteria since the previous years.*

The growers are more and more committed to sustainable farming techniques and applying new technologies. One reason for the progress has been the support that the marketing cooperatives offer their growers. A new feature in this year's report is the short speeches by various growers giving examples of the innovations they are making on their farms in their drive towards sustainable development."

The report has been collated on the basis of internal and external data from the marketing cooperatives, along with information from the collective dossier and from the Sustainable Business charter. The report has been drawn up in compliance with the directives of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the international reference for transparent communication about an organisation's environmental, social and economic performances.

Every ending is a fresh beginning

Over recent years, the cooperatives in the fresh fruit and vegetable sector have been making all these different efforts as part of shouldering their responsibility for making the agri-food chain more sustainable. These efforts have been communicated via the Responsibly Fresh quality label to the links further along the chain. In this way, Responsibly Fresh serves as a way for customers and stakeholders who are interested in sustainability to be able to see what our sector is doing to help achieve it. However, sustainable development is a dynamic affair. Changing social expectations and new perceptions are stimulating us to adapt the way we are approaching sustainability. As a sector, we also want to be sure that we carry on rising to the challenge of developing more sustainably in the years ahead.

The new strategy is due to be launched in early February 2019 at FruitLogistica in Berlin. We will continue to strive to collaborate with stakeholders and sign up to external sustainability initiatives, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Rita Demaré, VBT President: *"The SDGs form an international reference framework for the achievement of sustainable development. As a sector, we want to sign up to them. In addition, there is an explicit link between sustainability and the cooperative business model. The cooperative identity will thus be more and more of a focal point in the new strategy, along with the prominent role played by fresh fruit and vegetables in a sustainable diet."*

Participating marketing cooperatives:

BELORTA
redefining fruit & vegetables

BFV
BELGISCHE FRUITVEELING CVBA

HOOGSTRATEN
HOME OF QUALITY

LTV

REO VEILING

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

Quote

Joke Schauvliege, Flemish Agriculture Minister: *"The fruit and vegetable sector realised very early on that efforts towards sustainability are important not only for the sector's image, but also for the sake of securing the future. In my capacity as Agriculture Minister, I would like to thank all the growers who have helped to deliver the fantastic results from Responsibly Fresh, and I hope that your efforts will help to inspire the other sectors."*