



ANNUAL REPORT 2023

Need for more dialogue and less polarization

Association of Belgian Horticultural Cooperatives

Foreword

Dear reader,

Last year in this foreword we wrote about the **resilience of the fruit and vegetable sector**. How we needed resilience to cope with a global pandemic that shook the entire food chain. And then also to the war in Ukraine, which, together with climatic changes, instantly shattered all the certainties we had built on for years.

Even in 2023, these challenges continued to demand the necessary vigilance from our sector. Only the speech by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen during the 'State of the Union Address' in September marked an **important turning point**. Unlike in past years, the talk was not merely about the cost of the Common Agricultural Policy – the president expressed her explicit appreciation for producers and the entire sector. Thus, for the first time, she put food sovereignty on the European agenda.

'I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to our farmers, to thank them for providing us with food day after day. For us in Europe, this task of agriculture – producing healthy food – is the foundation of our agricultural policy.'

Ursula von der Leyen,
President of the European Commission

Our members realized a **very good turnover of €1.15 billion** in 2023. The reasonable prices of fruits and vegetables boosted sales by 4% compared to last year, despite a lower quantity supplied (-2%). The turnover of vegetables for processing even increased by 17% compared to last year.

We strongly believe in a general European approach with a Common Agricultural Policy. In 2023, we were **one of the first European member states** to switch to **the new CMO system**. We could only do that thanks to the exceptional effort of our members and an excellent cooperation with the Flemish agricultural administration.

On the one hand, the high political climate and environmental ambitions create opportunities for the fruit and vegetable sector, which is considered a leading sector in the new CAP. On the other hand, the European Union also challenges us to become **more sustainable**, for example by reducing the use of plant protection products and plastic packaging. We gladly accept that challenge provided the transition is fair, affordable and achievable. The renewed interest in the concept of 'food sovereignty' has noticeably changed the tenor of the European discussion around those themes in 2023.



2023 was another **turbulent year**. A year with great doubts and uncertainties about the evolution of the cost price, the availability of raw materials and the commercialization of our products due to the disruption of world trade, geopolitical tensions, the reignited conflict in the Middle East and the faltering political decision-making process. The protracted discussion and lack of clarity regarding the new MAP7 fertilizer action plan make those involved uncertain and discouraged. It is and remains our task, as an umbrella organization and chain partner, to **continue to collectively defend the interests of our members and the horticultural sector**.

The central characteristics of our members-producers' organization are:

- They organize growers to do business together, making horticultural producers stronger in the chain.
- They stand strong to adequately meet the challenges facing growers and the entire agriculture and horticulture sector.
- They care for growers and their environment.
- They guarantee quality, food safety, market transparency and reliability.
- They want impact on policy.

That is why we are and will remain actively present on the national and international stage, helping to build an **agricultural policy in which the producer is central**, with attention to the broader framework. After all, we firmly believe that sustainable development can only succeed if there is a good balance between economic, ecological and social sustainability.

For this, as the President of the European Commission stated in her speech to the European Parliament in September 2023, we **'need more dialogue and less polarization'**.



Rita Demaré
Chair



Luc Vanoirbeek
General Secretary





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VBT

What we do

The Association of Belgian Horticultural Cooperatives, abbreviated as VBT, is a non-profit organization that represents the interests of Belgian producers' cooperatives in the fruit and vegetable sector.

A STRONG ALLIANCE

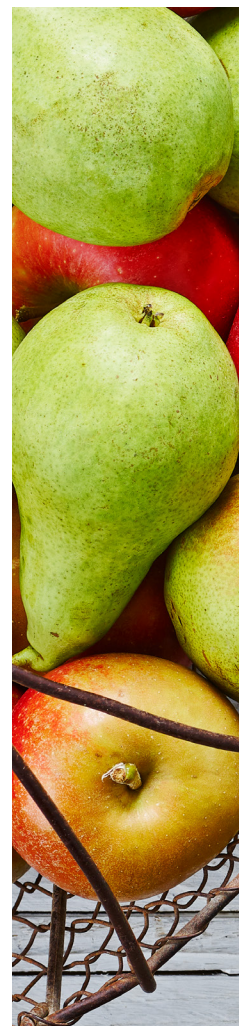
VBT aims to be a strong alliance for producers' organizations and their members- cooperators in the fruit and vegetable sector. **Cooperation** is central to this, both within VBT as a sector organization and within the individual producers' cooperatives. VBT in turn cooperates with other organizations, federations and concerned stakeholders. In this way, we always find a way to meet every challenge for the sector.

One of our key challenges? **Turning threats to our members into opportunities, anytime.** In doing so, it is crucial to have the right knowledge and to contribute to the development of societal support.

Knowledge and insight are indispensable in our rapidly changing society. VBT can draw on its years of experience and insights to help the cooperative fruit and vegetable sector to function optimally and to support both the national and international societal and political debate. On the other hand, we continue to closely follow both political, scientific and societal developments. We engage in the debate with

diverse and often new players in society. In this way, we give them insight into our working methods and command respect for what we do.

We are always honest and correct in our representations and trustworthy in our political contacts. In this way, we build **bridges every day.** Both to our members, the producers' organizations, and to the broader society. In doing so we constantly strive to move forward as efficiently as possible. We look at the world with an open mind, in which we do not isolate ourselves. Together the strength is greater, together we can handle more.





VBT



Represents and looks after, both nationally and internationally, the interests of Belgian producers' cooperatives in the fruit and vegetable sector;



Works with other organizations, federations and concerned stakeholders as appropriate;



Provides its members with a platform for consultation and exchange;



Provides sector-relevant information to its members and acts as a service provider in well-defined areas.



REPRESENTATION AT HOME AND ABROAD

As a sector organization, **VBT represents its members in numerous organizations at home and abroad.** We engage with relevant parties, indicate common positions and defend the interests of our members at:

European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI)

- Civil Dialogue Group (CDG) on Horticulture, Olives and Spirits
- Market Observatory Tomatoes
- Market Observatory Pipfruit

Federal public services

- Advisory Committee of the Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (FASFC)
- Taskforce Export Agrifood led by the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs
- Advisory Council and Plant Fund of the Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment (FPS Public Health)

Promotion

- Flanders' Agricultural Marketing Board (VLAM)



Agriculture and Marine Fisheries Agency of the Flemish government

- Strategic Advisory Council for Agriculture and Fisheries (SALV)
- Working Groups Harvest Forecasts
- Working Groups on Crop Protection for Minor Crops
- Sector Groups Integrated Pest Management (IPM)
- Council of the Flemish Fund for Agriculture and Fisheries

Research

- Flanders Centre for Postharvest Technologies (VCBT)
- Optiflux

Quality Systems

- GLOBALG.A.P.
- Qualität und Sicherheit (QS)
- Vegaplan

Agri-food chain

- Assemblée des Régions Européennes Fruitières, Légumières et Horticoles (AREFLH)
- Comeos
- Concertation Platform for the Processing of arable Crops and horticultural products (CPPC)

Other national

- GS1 Belgilux
- National Cooperative Council (NRC)

International

- Copa-Cogeca – Working Group Fruit & Vegetables
- Freshfel Europe
- World Apple and Pear Association (WAPA)



SERVICES

As a sector organization, we work on behalf of our affiliated members. Our services include a wide range of activities.

Data management

With our database we **inform various parties** about **market developments** in the fruit and vegetable sector. The VBT database is updated daily by members with sales volumes and market prices. In the working groups Fruit and Vegetable Harvest Forecasts of the Flemish government, VBT provides an annual overview of production acreage and volumes and a monthly overview of some fruit stocks. International data are exchanged within the World Apple and Pear Association (WAPA). VBT makes the information available primarily to members- producers' organizations and their affiliated producers. Regular submissions are also made to the Flemish government and in the press – in the trade magazines Boer&Tuinder, Fruit and Proeftuinnieuws. In 2023, in collaboration with LAVA, VBT built a dashboard for international trade and production in Power BI, based on publicly available data from among others Eurostat and FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). This allows us to quickly provide our members with a detailed picture of evolutions in the international market.

Administrative management sales

VBT is responsible for the **administrative management of simultaneous sales circuit and the remote purchasing system**. The simultaneous sales circuit allows the same products to be sold simultaneously at electronically linked auctions, and the remote purchasing system allows buyers to buy products remotely. VBT manages a database of buyers who are uniquely identified at all affiliated auctions and is responsible for communicating those numbers to Euro Pool System for an automatic follow-up of reusable green folding boxes. VBT is a member of GS1 Belgilux and manages GTIN codes for packaged fruits and vegetables for its members, compiled according to GS1 standards. Through GS1's My Product Manager tool, packaging information is made available to retailers and consumers electronically.





Crop protection

VBT **coordinates the sectoral monitoring plan** for residues of plant protection products, contaminants-heavy metals and microbiological contamination. Members implement the monitoring plan within the framework of externally audited quality management systems. Together with relevant members and research institutions, VBT participates in a committee for the follow-up of Tomato Brown Rugose Fruit Virus (ToBRFV).

Crop protection challenges continue to increase. VBT, as a third-party organization (organization that is not a producer of plant protection products), consults with members, research institutes, Boerenbond, phytopharmaceutical companies and (federal and regional) authorities to **identify bottlenecks and possible solutions**. From VBT, applications for third-party extension for both chemical and biological agents are submitted for various crops and diseases/pests. If relevant, we submit an application for emergency authorization.

Our organization is responsible for drawing up the **advisory cards** containing an overview of **approved plant protection products for each crop**. We make these advisory cards available primarily to members-producers' organizations and affiliated producers.

We are also responsible for the crop protection section on **Care4Growing**, a platform for producers and partners.

We provide the necessary input and keep the legal information of crop protection up-to-date: chemical and biological applications, and biological control agents.

Sustainability

In 2023, VBT continued to work on two parallel tracks around sustainable development. On the one hand, we work together on **specific themes** at the request of and in consultation with our members, taking into account among others **societal and legal developments**. We evaluate opportunities to respond to market requirements for producers' quantitative data on sustainability. And we are also members of the Freshfel Environmental Footprint Coalition. On the other hand, through representation in the quality systems Vegaplan, GLOBALG.A.P. and QS, we work on **achievable sustainability criteria** within those standards.

Packaging and waste prevention

Finally, for our members, we also coordinate the **legal obligations for packaging waste prevention**. We are member of Fost Plus and Valipac, and every three years we draw up a sectoral packaging waste prevention plan. In 2022, in consultation with our members, we developed the 2022-2025 plan, which was approved by the Interregional Packaging Commission (IVC) in 2023.

The sector is more and more, and at different levels (regional, federal, European), confronted with increasing provisions around packaging for fruits and vegetables. In general, plastic packaging is under pressure and provisions are moving towards bulk sales. VBT closely follows new developments and consults with various organizations on these issues. Our focal points are food safety, product quality, food economy, logistics and information for market partners and consumers. We also call attention to a level playing field in Europe.

In 2023, we continued to participate as a supporting party in the initiative of the Flemish government Green Deal Anders Verpakt and the Werkagenda Voedselketen coordinated by the Flemish government (Agentschap Landbouw en Zeevisserij and OVAM).



Organizational structure

As a non-profit organization, we give our **members a voice and say** through **representatives in the General Assembly, Board of Directors and various working groups**.

In 2023, the General Assembly took place on May 24th and there were seven board meetings, prepared within the Management Committee and coordinated by the Chair and General Secretary.

Specific dossiers are discussed with the members in various working groups and/or ad hoc consultation moments: working group Simultaneous Sales, working group Production and Sales (P&A), working group Sustainability, working group Logistics and Packaging, sounding board group MAP, Growers Advisory Council Crop Protection. The secretariat, headed by the General Secretary, is responsible for day-to-day operations.



Chair

- Rita Demaré

Vice Chair

- Dirk Bertels
- Ludo Lousbergh
- Dirk Van den Plas

General Secretary

- Luc Vanoirbeek

Board of Directors

- Philippe Appeltans
- Guy Callebaut
- Maarten De Moor
- Chris Devroe
- Koen De Wit
- Hilde Dhuyvetter
- Marc Grauwels
- Patrick Groven
- Ilse Hayen
- Dirk Jans
- Jan Mertens
- Danny Raskin
- Filip Vanaken
- Hans Vanderhallen

Members

Status on 31/12/2023

1 BelOrta

Dirk Bertels | Chair
Philippe Appeltans | Director

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T 015 55 11 11 | info@belorta.be

2 Coöperatie Hoogstraten

Dirk Van den Plas | Chair
Hans Vanderhallen | Director

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3 European Fruit Co-operation (EFC)

Sjors Kruiper | Chair
Ilse Hayen | Director

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4 Groupement des Producteurs Horticoles Namurois

Pascal Bolle | Chair and Managing Director

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T 071 50 50 02 | info@crieedewepion.be

5 Ingro

Johan Vanneste | Chair
Hilde Dhuyvetter | Director

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6 Limburgse Tuinbouwveiling (LTV)

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Michael Marx | Director

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7 Logistieke en Administratieve Veilingassociatie (Lava)

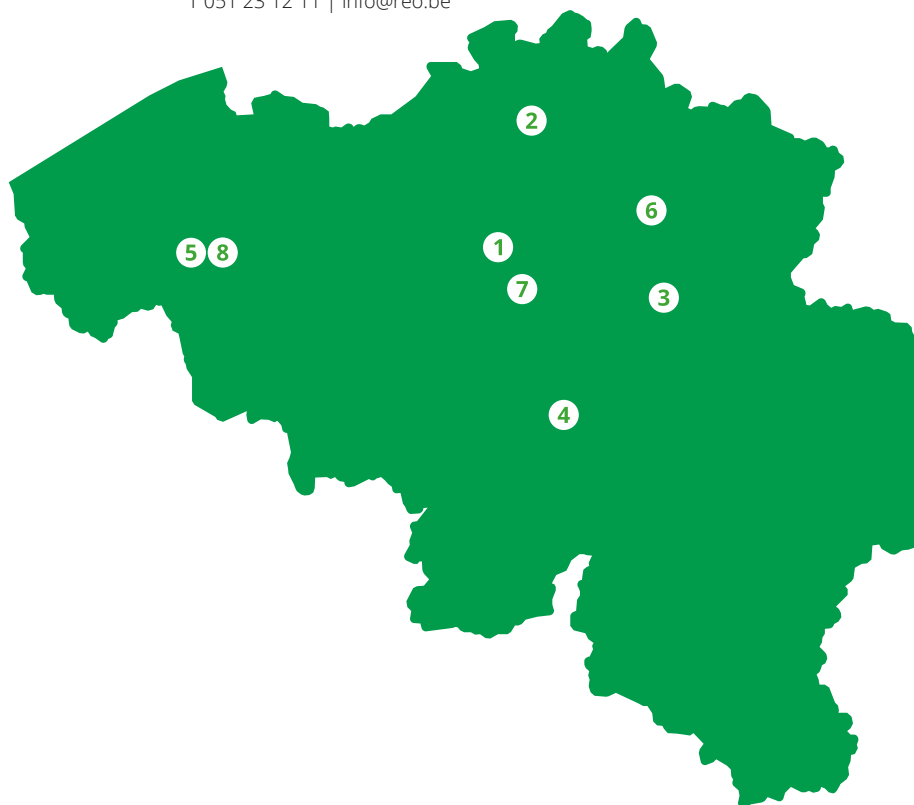
Didier Algoet | Chair
Maarten De Moor | Director

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T 016 20 00 80 | lava@lava.be

8 REO Veiling

Rita Demaré | Chair
Filip Vanaken | Director

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Supply & turnover

Our producers' organizations closed 2023 with a **combined product sales of 1.15 billion euros** - 3% more than in 2021 and 4% more than in 2022.

In 2023, producers' organizations' supplies decreased 2% compared to 2022. The increase for vegetables (+8%) was mainly due to higher supplies of cucumbers (+35% or +58 million units) and zucchini (+18% or +5.5 million units). Fruit supplies were 19% lower. Strawberries (-8% or -4 million kg), pears (-18% or -33 million kg) and apples (-27% or -31 million kg) were supplied less in 2023.

The turnover of vegetables was 777 million euros, that of fruits 376 million euros. For vegetables, this is an increase of 4% compared to 2022. Fruit's turnover increased by 3%. The ratio between the two in the total turnover of VBT producers' organizations remains almost constant, i.e. 67% vegetables and 33% fruits.

The turnover increase for vegetables in 2023 was mainly influenced by leeks (+86% or +18.5 million

euros). Chicory (+34%), head lettuce (+15%), bell peppers (+11%) and cauliflower (+18%) also experienced strong turnover increases. For fruits, strawberries (+4%), pears (+3%) and apples (+6%) experienced higher turnovers in 2023 compared to 2022.

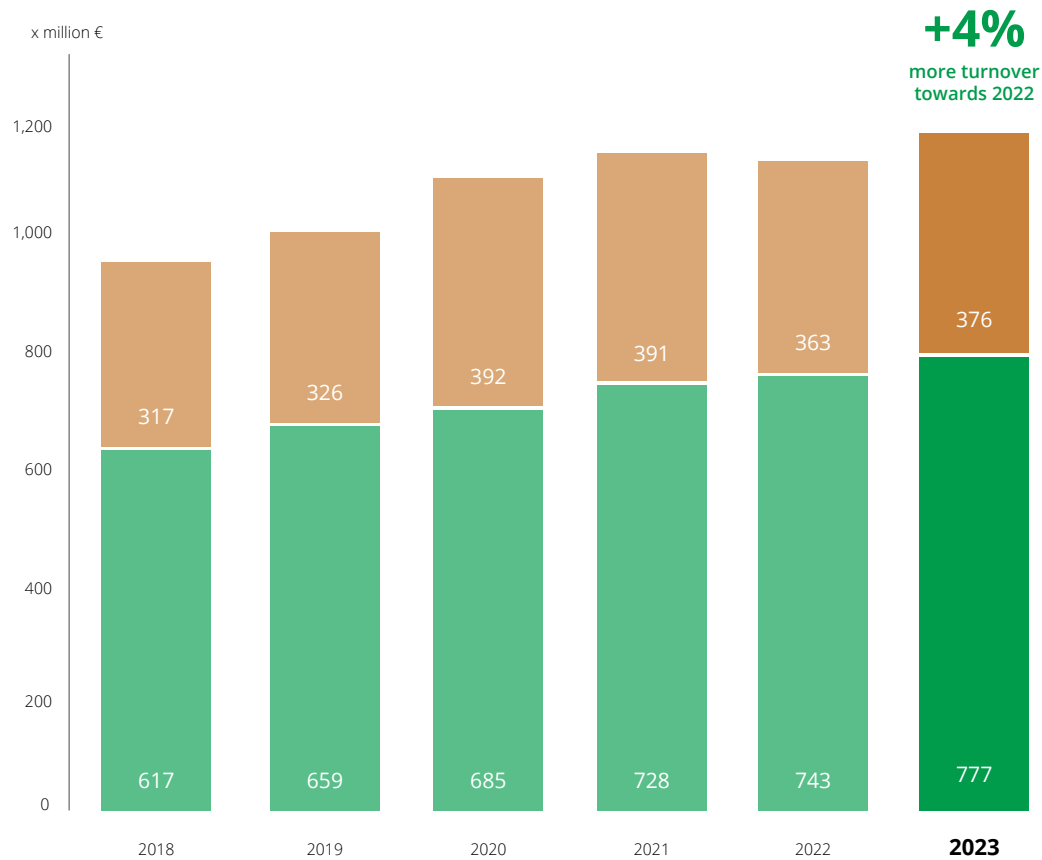
It remains important to point out that all common statistics and assessments do not take into account differences between production systems and producers.

Ingro, the producers' association for vegetables for processing, realized a turnover of 120 million euros in 2023, 17% more than in 2022.



Belgian fruit and vegetable growers make up a lot of ground since the slight decline in 2022

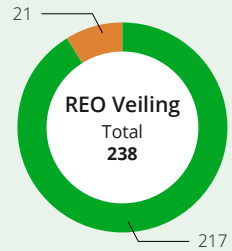
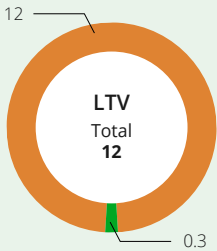
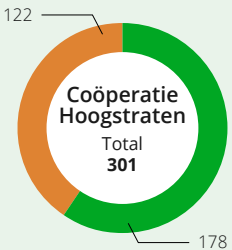
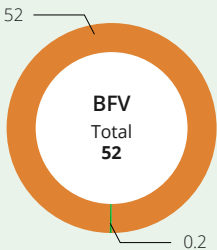
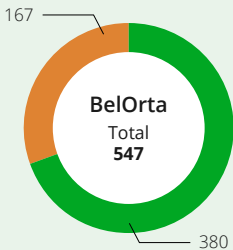
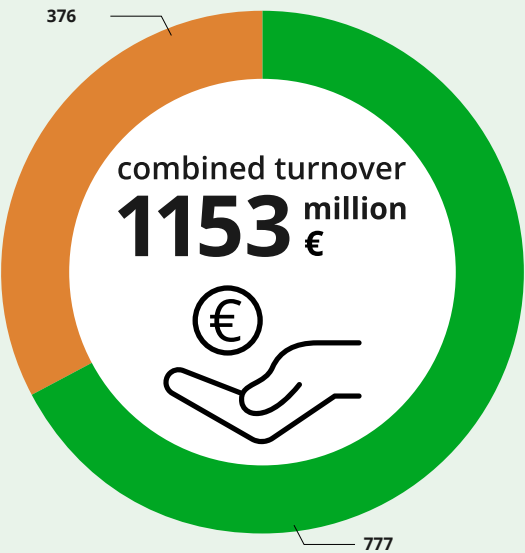
Turnover VBT members by subsector (in million €)



Vegetables Fruit

Our producers' organizations record
a combined turnover of as much as
1.15 billion euros in 2023

Turnover VBT members by subsector in 2023 (in million €)













Vegetables Fruit

Producers' organization supplies decline 2% in 2023; turnover of fruit and vegetable increases 4% and 3% respectively











Supply, price and turnover of most important products of VBT- members

2023

										
Strawberries	Apples	Mushrooms	Cucumbers	Head lettuce	Bell pepper	Pears	Leek	Tomatoes	Chicory	
44,949	85,069	6,438	226,200	50,931	51,425	152,903	44,056	214,066	33,577	Supply
ton	ton	ton	1.000 pc	1.000 pc	ton	ton	ton	ton	ton	
4.028	0.439	2.558	0.302	0.554	1.398	0.757	0.865	0.924	1.707	Price
€/kg	€/kg	€/kg	€/pc	€/pc	€/kg	€/kg	€/kg	€/kg	€/kg	
181,052	37,345	16,467	68,227	28,216	71,883	115,748	38,110	197,741	57,315	Turnover (x €1,000)

Total top 10 products € 812,104

2022







										
Strawberries	Apples	Mushrooms	Cucumbers	Head lettuce	Bell pepper	Pears	Leek	Tomatoes	Chicory	
48,899	116,006	6,754	167,511	56,773	52,098	186,195	52,665	214,136	37,794	Supply
ton	ton	ton	1.000 pc	1.000 pc	ton	ton	ton	ton	ton	
3.577	0.305	2.328	0.448	0.432	1.248	0.605	0.473	0.942	1.124	Price
€/kg	€/kg	€/kg	€/pc	€/pc	€/kg	€/kg	€/kg	€/kg	€/kg	
174,912	35,382	15,723	75,045	24,526	65,019	112,648	24,911	201,783	42,480	Turnover (x €1,000)

Total top 10 products € 772,428









Vegetable supplies rise sharply in 2023, by as much as 8%

Supply of main vegetables of VBT- members

 Cucumbers x 1,000 pc	 Bell peppers ton	 Leek ton	 Tomatoes ton	 Chicory ton	 Year Supply
226,200	51,425	44,056	214,066	33,577	2023
167,511	52,098	52,665	214,136	37,794	2022
185,704	48,562	55,903	224,699	38,154	2021
183,415	47,658	61,582	265,859	38,406	2020
163,655	44,692	56,537	227,046	39,749	2019






Leek, chicory and bell peppers are main drivers of the vegetables’ turnover increase

Turnover most important vegetables of VBT- members (x €1,000)

 Cucumbers x € 1,000	 Bell peppers x € 1,000	 Leek x € 1,000	 Tomatoes x € 1,000	 Chicory x € 1,000	 Year Turnover
68,227	71,883	38,110	197,741	57,315	2023
75,045	65,019	24,911	201,783	42,480	2022
54,783	58,032	47,853	195,937	46,929	2021
51,723	58,190	33,131	173,406	59,298	2020
47,951	53,183	34,940	170,205	46,784	2019






Fruit supply drops 19% in 2023

Supplies of main fruits of VBT-members (in tons)

 Strawberries ton	 Year Supply	 Apples * ton	 Pears * ton	 Season Supply
44,948	2023	108,415	165,588	2022-2023
48,899	2022	105,227	183,211	2021-2022
49,954	2021	79,374	214,987	2020-2021
48,433	2020	146,897	188,088	2019-2020
51,284	2019	132,371	201,075	2018-2019

Fruit turnover reaches 376 million euros in 2023

Turnover most important fruits of VBT-members
(x € 1,000)

 Strawberries x € 1,000	 Year Turnover	 Apples * x € 1,000	 Pears * x € 1,000	 Season Turnover
181,052	2023	33,826	102,333	2022-2023
174,912	2022	36,724	127,332	2021-2022
193,972	2021	43,814	101,904	2020-2021
192,473	2020	53,324	107,774	2019-2020
156,108	2019	39,579	71,784	2018-2019

* The pome fruit season runs from August 1st through July 31st.



STILL

STILL
RX60-30

Highlights 2023

More dialogue on the future of agriculture in the EU

FROM OBVIOUS TO FUNDAMENTAL

In recent years, agriculture and horticulture only featured in the European debate when it came to the **financing** of the - in many people's view too expensive - Common Agricultural Policy or the threat to **nature and biodiversity**. The fact that farmers and horticulturists provided quality food had become so self-evident that it had disappeared completely into the background.

The war in Ukraine and the resulting energy shortage confronted the European Union and its member states with harsh realities. We had clearly become too dependent on unpredictable foreign partners and **insufficiently self-sufficient** in energy.

Very quickly the necessary measures were taken to tap other sources of energy supply, but a general feeling emerged that we had relied too gullibly on unreliable partners in recent decades. The word sovereignty reappeared in the debate, and not just when it came to energy. Sovereignty in food supply also became a crucial issue.

EUROPEAN ATTENTION AND RECOGNITION

Suddenly, the discourse of European policy makers changed in favor of agriculture and horticulture as producers of food. Notable was the speech of the **President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen** in September 2023, in which she said:



At the same time, food security, in harmony with nature, remains an essential task. I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to our farmers, to thank them for providing us with food day after day. For us in Europe, this task of agriculture – producing healthy food – is the foundation of our agricultural policy. And self-sufficiency in food is also important for us. We need more dialogue and less polarization.

Ursula von der Leyen,
President of the European Commission



The tenor of the European debate changed noticeably. The measures announced within the Farm to Fork strategy as part of the Green Deal were viewed from a different perspective. Whereas previously the focus was mainly on the environmental aspect, food sovereignty suddenly returned to the fore. The European Union recognized the question of the feasibility of certain policy decisions, leading to a historic vote in the European Parliament in November 2023 on the **regulation of sustainable use of plant protection products**. The draft law was referred to the drawing board because it did not sufficiently take into account the crucial principles of agriculture and horticulture, namely that sustainable development can only succeed if there is a proper balance between economic, ecological and social sustainability. Only then can we secure our own food supply.

DEMAND FOR UNIFORM AND FOOD-SAFE PACKAGING RULES

Other important dossiers, such as those concerning packaging and packaging waste, reached a final stage due to the expiring mandate of the European institutions. Everyone is convinced that we need to be more conscious of packaging in order to avoid unnecessary waste. Unfortunately, in 2023 we found that several European member states (France, Spain, Luxembourg and Italy) and even regions (Flanders) were starting to make their own legislation in **the absence of uniform European rules**.

The European Commission's proposal met with **little approval** because it did not take into account the importance of packaging in preventing food loss and quality. Despite frantic efforts, we only succeeded in convincing MEPs to look at the issue again and from different perspectives.

European decision-making is slow. This is not illogical with 27 member states of unprecedented diversity. Yet things are moving forward and we see the democratic game being played. Let us hope that we can continue to work toward **'more dialogue and less polarization'**.

Importance of independent research & development

Research and development in fruit and vegetable production has contributed to the innovations that allow the Flemish fruit and vegetable sector to distinguish itself from foreign colleagues. And even now, we continue to believe in the **power of innovation and the importance of research institutions**. In any case, one thing is certain: there are many changes ahead in our sector.

ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY PLANT PROTECTION PRODUCTS

The first priority for our research institutions is to develop alternative crop protection strategies to **effectively control diseases and pests with the least possible environmental impact**. Because although the Farm to Fork strategy is on hold for now, farmers and horticulturists, like all other sectors, will be expected to produce at least as much and as well, in an environmentally friendly way. The search for less harmful crop protection products from organic sources is crucial in that regard. After all, the pressure of diseases and pests is not diminishing. Well on the contrary, warming, globalization and climate change are further increasing the vulnerability of our crops.

DROUGHT AND FLOODING

Another important factor we need to find solutions to is water issues. Due to climate change, summers are getting drier and hotter, while winters are getting wetter. We must learn to deal with this **unpredictability and variability**. Therefore, research into water buffering, more deliberate use and reuse of water is crucial. More than that, we urgently need to proactively research crops, breeds and varieties that are better adapted to more extreme weather conditions.



RENEWABLE ENERGY

The energy issue is also on the table. Belgian greenhouse growers score incredibly well when it comes to the use of crop protection products and fertilizers. Moreover, they excel in economic water use, through rainwater collection and reuse. And they are at the top of Europe in terms of efficient energy use: they not only heat their greenhouses energy efficiently, but also manage to supply 650,000 families with electricity. Only, they remain dependent on fossil fuels to do so. The search for alternatives is a societal challenge in which answers will also have to be found for greenhouse horticulture.

It is clear that research and development are important pillars for the fruit and vegetable sector. In Flanders, we have a very strong tradition of well-developed research institutions and excellent universities. However, we cannot complacently wait and see; from within the producers' organizations we want to **enter into dialogue with all stakeholders** in order to find an answer to the key question:

“**How can we ensure that research can continue to be funded in a way that ensures its independence and neutrality?**”



Quality systems steer toward sustainability

After product quality and food safety, sustainable development is the most current topic in various fruit and vegetable quality systems.

Producers' organizations and their cooperants-producers operate one or more quality systems to prove the quality, safety and sustainability of their products. They do this by strictly applying procedures and measures and providing evidence through extensive records. They are regularly audited by external institutions. If an audit passes favorably, they are awarded a certificate or an extension of an existing certificate, which **gives them access to the market or specific market segments.**

SUSTAINABILITY BECOMES DECISIVE

Originally, constant and high product quality in the strict sense of the word was an important objective of quality systems. Fruit and vegetables were granted market access if they met certain external characteristics such as size, shape and color. After several crises, the focus shifted to food safety. Fruits and vegetables were then granted market access on the condition that producers controlled contamination and closely monitored their products. For several decades, the complex issue of sustainable development has been integrated into quality systems, with the **addition of ecological and social requirements.** The bar is constantly being raised in this regard. Together with our members, however, we also call **attention to economic sustainability**, especially for producers. They are willing to evolve towards sustainability at the right fee.

Certification at producers' organizations includes the private quality systems of IFS (International Featured Standards) and QS (Qualität und Sicherheit), quality assurance through HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points), ISO (International Organization for Standardization) and FSSC 22000 (Food Safety Management System) standards, and cooperative-specific quality systems. For producers, these include the standards of GLOBALG.A.P. and Vegaplan (including QS). Both producers' organizations and producers also apply the Self-Checking Sector Guides driven by legislation.



MOVING TOWARD RELEVANT AND AFFORDABLE SYSTEMS

As an umbrella organization, VBT is administratively and technically **involved in various quality systems**. Thus, we want to contribute to on the one hand relevant, and on the other hand feasible and affordable systems for our members-producers' organizations and their producers-cooperators.

- We are members of the Concertation Platform for the Processing of arable Crops and horticultural products (CPPC). Since 2021, our General Secretary has even chaired it. Together with Agrofront, the advocate of agricultural organizations, and Landbouw-Service, the organization of contractors, CPPC is responsible for the content and development of the **Vegaplan standards for primary crop production and for contractors**.

VBT is also one of the founding members of the non-profit organization Vegaplan, which is responsible for the administrative management of the Vegaplan standards. We are members of the governing body and, together with representatives of the individual producers' organizations, of the statutory working groups. Within the technical working group we worked, among other things, on a thorough revision of the standard for primary crop production – Vegaplan Standard Primary Crop Production version 5, which came into force on July 3rd, 2023. We also developed the Sustainability Monitor, which we will launch in early 2024. Furthermore, the **Sector Guide G-040** (self-checking guide for the food safety requirements of the FASFC) and the **IPM checklists** (requirements for Integrated Pest Management) have been an integral part of the standard for crop production for many years. Since 2007, there has also been mutual recognition between Vegaplan and QS. Under certain conditions, Vegaplan certified producers of fruits and vegetables are eligible for delivery within the QS system.

- Because Germany is an important market for Belgian fruit and vegetables, we have a continuing focus on the **German QS system**, short for **Qualität und Sicherheit**. We are shareholders in the Fachgesellschaft Obst-Gemüse-Kartoffeln (OGK), which is involved in political decisions in the QS organization, and are part of the Fachbeirat OGK. This technical advisory group, with representatives from production and trade, provides content and control of the QS system. In addition, VBT is represented through Lava in the Wissenschaftlichen Beirat Rückstandsmonitoring. This is a working group on residue monitoring for QS system partners. Furthermore, VBT actively participates in the Arbeitsgruppe Nachhaltigkeit, which formulates proposals for the elaboration of sustainability within QS standards.



- Through our members, we have also been members of the governing bodies of **GLOBALG.A.P., the international standard for safe and sustainable agriculture**, for several decades. Our members are represented on the Advisory Board and in the Technical Committees (TC). In 2021, the VBT representative was reconfirmed as a member of the Advisory Board until 2024 and reappointed as chair of this group. VBT is represented in the TC GRASP, TC Fruit & Vegetables and TC Systems & Rules. In this way, the sector is involved in discussions around quality system requirements and control. VBT actively participated in the consultation moments around the new IFA standard version 6 (Integrated Farm Assurance) and GRASP version 2 (GLOBALG.A.P. Risk Assessment on Social Practice), which are mandatory as of 2024. Both the certification rules within the TC Systems & Rules and the control points within the TC Fruit & Vegetables and TC GRASP were thoroughly reviewed and adapted. Furthermore, VBT coordinates the BNTWG (Belgian National Technical Working Group), which acts as a link between GLOBALG.A.P. and the nationally involved producers and their organizations. The activities of the BNTWG are aimed, on the one hand, at evaluating proposals to adapt the standards and, on the other hand, at drafting a Belgian interpretation to the standards. Specifically in 2023, the BNTWG continued working on a Belgian interpretation to the IFA version 6 and GRASP version 2, and the package of guidance documents for producers. These give producers concrete guidelines for complying with the standards.

VBT continues to participate in various consultations with quality systems' stakeholders. Our goal?

We continue to push for and cooperate on relevant and concrete standards and certification rules that are feasible and affordable for the producers' organizations and producers involved



Market access to third countries as a basis for sustainable trade relations

TO DIVERSIFY IN PRODUCT-COUNTRY COMBINATIONS

Belgium is an important exporting country, including of fruit and vegetables. Besides the nearby EU member states, there is interest from the sector in more distant markets. VBT is actively working on existing and tapping new export markets. The **diversity of product-country combinations** is an important condition for a sustainable economic development of the fruit and vegetable sector.

We therefore continue to pay attention to the **export of fruit and vegetables to third countries**. We strive for a sectoral approach aimed at specific product-country combinations. Through internal consultation with members and external consultation within various associations, we closely monitor developments and gain insights into product-technical, logistical and trade conditions to promote sales in third countries.

SECTORAL DOSSIERS AND PROCEDURES

When exporting fruit and vegetables to third countries, our members-producers' organizations must comply with specific legislation in the countries of destination, such as specific limits for residues of plant protection products and specific management measures for harmful organisms. At the request of our members and the Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (FASFC), we develop **sectoral dossiers** and draw up **sectoral procedures** where necessary and possible. If approved by the countries concerned, this allows our members to obtain and/or maintain market access.

Sectoral technical dossiers are the impetus for opening new export markets. They are prepared in collaboration with the research institutes involved and based on the content required by third countries. After approval of the dossier by the FASFC and possible translation, it is transmitted by the FASFC to the National Plant Protection Organization (NPPO) of the third country. The latter uses the dossier to draw up a Pest Risk Analysis (PRA). This analysis often leads to a list of regulated pests, for which the third country wants accurate control measures, by and in the country of production. Depending on the third country, that analysis is followed by a shorter or longer period of negotiations between the NPPO and the FASFC, until finally an agreement is reached on pest mitigation measures. The agreement is included in an official protocol between the two countries.

In some cases, before its official approval, the third country requires an inspection visit - online and/or physical - in the country of production. In 2023, China for apples and chicory, the Philippines for apples and pears and Thailand for pears conducted inspection visits in Belgium.



HOW DOES SUCH AN INSPECTION VISIT TAKE PLACE?

Traditionally, the inspections are prepared in close consultation between the FASFC (International Affairs of the Directorate General Control Policy), VBT and the producers' organizations and their affiliated producers. During an opening meeting, the relevant European legislation and the organization and tasks of the FASFC are explained. VBT then explains the management and mitigation measures that the sector will apply to meet the third country's requirements. In the following days, inspection visits are made to operators – producers' organizations, producers, storage locations and packing stations. This is followed by a closing meeting at which remaining questions from the third country can be answered, and at which the third country gives a preliminary evaluation of the inspection visit.

This is often followed by extensive communication between the NPPO and the FASFC, with input from VBT, and an administrative process to officially approve the protocol in the third country.

The **sectoral procedures**, after approval by the FASFC, allow producers' organizations to effectively export fruits and vegetables. They are concrete policies and measures that the operators concerned - producers, producers' organizations, storage locations, packing stations, exporters - must follow and take in order to export their products to the third country. If necessary, VBT also prepares a set of documents that operators can use to meet certain registration requirements of the procedure.



AN EXAMPLE

The procedure for export of chicory to China stipulates that all operators involved must have received a training, recognized by the FASFC. On the one hand about the content and implementation of the sector procedure, and on the other hand for the recognition and control of regulated pests. At the beginning of October 2023, we were responsible for the coordination and organization of a first training, in collaboration with Praktijkpunt Landbouw Vlaams-Brabant.

IMPORTANCE OF COOPERATION AND CONSULTATION

Market access for new product-country combinations is clearly the result of significant efforts by various organizations and operators, both financially and with manpower. Cooperation and consultation are of exceptional importance here. As an umbrella organization, VBT consults with members-producers' organizations, the FASFC, the FPS Foreign Affairs, Fresh Trade Belgium (FTB), Freshfel Europe and other relevant organizations, to develop sectoral technical dossiers and procedures. The research institutes (Inagro, Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research, Praktijkpunt Landbouw Vlaams-Brabant, Proefcentrum Fruitteelt, Proefcentrum Hoogstraten, Proefcentrum voor de Groenteteelt, Proefstation voor de Groenteteelt) provide indispensable input in the preparation of technical dossiers and the proposal and/or evaluation of management measures. Princely economic missions provide valuable opportunities to highlight the products involved.

Technical consultations between the FASFC and the local NPPO are valuable to try to make progress in market access dossiers.

“**By working closely with all stakeholders, we hope to turn market access for new product-country combinations into commercial market launches and sustainable trade relations.**”



AN EXAMPLE

In early July 2023, the VBT General Secretary participated in the EU mission to Japan. That mission was led by the European Commissioner for Agriculture Wojciechowski. During high-level consultations it was decided that the Belgian pear dossier would be expedited by the Japanese authorities.



ASSOCIATION OF BELGIAN HORTICULTURAL COOPERATIVES

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