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FIRST FLEMISH SOYA SOON TO BE HARVESTED

Alpro, AVEVE, the Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (ILVO) and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries have combined forces to cultivate Flemish soya for the food sector. Five farmers are among those pioneering the professional cultivation of soya in Flanders. Their combined soya harvest for this year is estimated to be 100 tonnes.

Successful collaboration

The partners are ecstatic about the successful test fields providing their first commercial harvest of soya for human consumption. Dieter Peeters, Sales Manager AVEVE Agriculture and Horticulture: "At Groep AVEVE we are proud to be involved with this new cultivation in Flanders, and expansion in Belgium, right from the very start."

"We are really happy to announce that we are able to successfully process the Flemish soya with high-quality proteins into plant-based food thanks to the great partnerships with ILVO, AVEVE, the minister and, not to forget, the farmers themselves", Bernard Deryckere, General Manager Alpro, adds. "The research phase and discussions in this new chain ran very efficiently."

Flemish Minister for Environment, Nature and Agriculture, Joke Schauvliege, supports the project wholeheartedly. "The past 4 years, with resources from the Flemish government through IWT and in collaboration with the KULeuven and Inagro, ILVO carried out a large-scale research project into the possibilities for cultivating soya in our climate. The results are even better than expected. The time for rolling out soya as a new crop in Flanders has arrived."

Flemish soya, a strategic choice

Dieter Peeters, Sales Manager AVEVE Agriculture and Horticulture: "This soya cultivation creates new chances for the local farmers as an interesting crop in the cultivation plans, with the added value of both a financial yield and improved soil quality. Furthermore, local soya cultivation leads to a short distance from field to table, which has an enormous positive effect on the food miles."

Greet Vanderheyden, Sustainable Development Manager at Alpro, also completely agrees. "We want to decrease the ecological footprint of our soya-based food products and drinks even further. This Flemish soya fits in perfectly with our strategic choice of not using any genetically modified soya beans."

In France, Alpro has come so far that its factory there only uses French soya beans. In Alpro, 50% of the conventional beans and 100% of the organic beans are currently purchased in Europe, mainly France as well as in Italy, Austria and the Netherlands.

Joke Schauvliege, Flemish Minister for Environment, Nature and Agriculture: “This project is an important step in carrying out the Second Action Plan for Alternative Protein Sources that was proposed last year: a local, shorter and integrated chain for soya, supported and led by scientists and experts, with a focus on sustainability and fair added-value distribution.”

Added value for each partner

Johan Van Waes, ILVO: “Between 2012 and 2017, ILVO has created several test fields with soya. A great deal of the focus was on refining the cultivation technique. Soya is a subtropical plant that, in principle, does not get enough sun in Belgium to ripen and, as a crop, does not bring nearly the yield of, for example, grain or corn. Via research, we can optimise some things in order to make cultivating soya possible, both in the technical and financial sense.” Only very early ripening varieties are suitable for the soya cultivation in Flanders. In addition to screening the already existing varieties from the list of European soya varieties, ILVO also started its own breeding programme.

Groep AVEVE is the essential link between farmer and food factory. The group translates ILVO's first-line research of variety selection and cultivation technique into practice. With the advice from ILVO and AVEVE, a method for cultivating soya that would yield a profit was found. Furthermore, Groep AVEVE is responsible for delivering the seeds, fertilisers and crop protection products as well as integral cultivation follow up, with advice from sowing to harvesting. Afterwards, AVEVE receives the harvested soya beans in silos. They are then cleaned, stored and transported to the food factories. “The geographical distribution, the infrastructure and the know-how at Groep AVEVE are essential to the success of the local, large-scale soya cultivation”, says Dieter Peeters, Sales Manager AVEVE Agriculture and Horticulture.

Alpro has been interested in sourcing sustainable and local ingredients for many years. In this way, they are building up short and resilient chains for close, long-term collaborations.

Impact on the farmers

In 2017, there are five farmers who have sowed 25 ha of soya. The intention is to increase that number to 50 ha in Flanders in 2018. Financial agreements have been made within the starting-out soya chain to limit the risk for the farmers. The Groep AVEVE spokespeople provide the farmers with a very clear framework. This is the case for, among others, Flemish farmer Jimmy De Prins, who receives intensive support from Sanac, a subsidiary of Groep AVEVE.

Jimmy Prins: “My soil is sandy loam and the soya thrives in it. The plant can fixate nitrogen from the

air, which means I don't need as much fertiliser. And the next crop profits from that. So there is a positive effect on the quality of my soil. The sale of my harvest is included in the chain agreement, so that's also a bonus for me. With this approach I'm very positive about the soya cultivation in Belgium."

About the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries of the Flemish government

The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries of the Flemish government, together with the Flanders' Agricultural Marketing Board (VLAM), the Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (ILVO) and the Strategic Advice Commission for Agriculture and Fisheries (SALV) forms the policy domain Agriculture and Fisheries. (As of 01.01.16, SALV will be administratively embedded in SERV). The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries is authorised for policy development, execution, inspection and evaluation regarding agriculture, horticulture, offshore fishing and rural areas. From the European and global Flemish framework, it helps to build a future-oriented agriculture and fisheries policy. It provides high-quality services to the Flemish agrofood chain with the primary producer as priority.

About AVEVE

Groep AVEVE, with its head office in Leuven, is the no. 1 full-service provider to the agricultural and horticultural sector in Belgium. We are also present in the Netherlands, Northern France and Southern Germany. Groep AVEVE is active in the various segments of the agricultural and horticultural sector, such as animal feed, plant food, plant protection, seeds, seed grains, seed potatoes and agricultural and horticultural machines. Groep AVEVE is well known by the general public for its 250 AVEVE shops where the consumer can find everything for 'tuin, dier en bakplezier®' (in English : 'garden, animals and home baking fun'). Groep AVEVE wishes to further expand its position as market leader with investments and innovation in the agricultural sector. Groep AVEVE's more than 1,800 enthusiastic employees contribute to a turnover in excess of 1.3 billion euros. www.aveve.be

About ILVO

ILVO is the Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with accredited analysis and detection laboratories in Merelbeke, Melle and Ostend for plants, animal feed, spraying technology, food and GMOs, test benches, test installations, a pilot factory, seed processing units and more than 200 ha of test fields, test stables and greenhouses. Approx. 550 employees work on policy-supporting and innovative scientific research. The scope includes all aspects of sustainable agriculture, marine environment and food. The focus is on improving products and production methods, quality assurance and safety of the end products, optimising the policy instruments and information to sectors and the public in general.

About ALPRO

Alpro is the European pioneer and market leader of drinks and food products (margarines, desserts, plant-based alternatives to yoghurt and cream) based on soya with an extended assortment of drinks made from almonds, hazelnuts, rice, oats and coconut. Alpro's products are well known under the brand names Alpro® and Provamel®.

Alpro, with its head office in Ghent, Belgium currently has 1,200 employees in Europe and three production plants in Belgium, France and the United Kingdom. Alpro commercialises its products throughout the whole of Europe and realised a turnover of 555 million euros - IFRS in 2016, and continues to grow.

More info at www.alpro.com

Press contacts

Alpro – Greet Vanderheyden, Sustainable Development Manager – 0473 80 06 55 – greet_vanderheyden@alpro.com

ILVO – Greet Riebbels, communication – 0486 260014 – 09 272 25 05 Greet.Riebbels@ilvo.vlaanderen.be

Department of Agriculture and Fisheries – Nele Vanslebrouck – 0498 94 58 71 – nele.vanslebrouck@lv.vlaanderen.be

Groep AVEVE – Tina Vandenbosch – 0476 96 04 97 – tina.vandenbosch@aveve.be