

Letter from “Farmer Willi” to the consumers

Farmer Willi obtained German-wide attention this year by his letter to the consumers. It was originally published on January 19, 2015 by “Farmer Willi” at the website Ask the Farmer, <http://fragenlandwirt.com/lieber-verbraucher/>, and translated from German with the author’s permission mainly by Erin Covert. This letter is the starting point of the RAMIRAN2015 podium discussion, which is under the Motto: “Rural-urban Symbiosis – What can we do to bridge the gap between producers and consumers?”

Farmer Willi is participant at the RAMIRAN2015 podium discussion.

DEAR CONSUMER

I’m completely fed up today. This morning I caught a glimpse of my neighbor’s invoice for French-fry potatoes outside of his normal contract. 1 truckload = 25 tons = 250 euros [US \$282]. For those of you who can’t do math, that is 1 cent per kilogram [1.12 cents per 2.2 pounds]! And you all know what a kilo of frozen French fries costs. Someone’s stuffing his pockets with that. Then I saw the 2015 MATIF prices on the internet for wheat and rapeseed. And I read that the fertilizer producers have significantly raised their prices. Result: I’ll be missing 25% of my usual profit this year. If that’s enough! Well for me it’s enough. So I decided to write the Consumer this letter.

Cheap: You, dear Consumer, only want one thing: **cheapness**. And you also have demands! Your food should be GMO-free, gluten-free, lactose-free, cholesterol-free, low in calories (or why not calorie free?), preferable not fertilized and if fertilized, then organic. But it shouldn’t stink; and when the fields are organically fertilized, it shouldn’t be done near you. Of course it can’t be sprayed with pesticides, but it has to look tip-top, with no spots. If there are any little blemishes you won’t touch it. The landscape should be a checkerboard of little plots with bright flowers and butterflies. Most likely you’d prefer that we plow the fields with horses. It would look so nice, and horses are so cute! And then the tractors wouldn’t be in your way when you go jogging down our farm paths.

No idea: You have **no idea** and of this a lot. Do you actually realize that we farmers have to live from the work of our own hands? That we also like to take vacations (though we seldom get to), that we also have children that, just like yours, want a smartphone and designer clothes? And go to university? How can we afford that, when we’re forced to undersell our products?

Please explain to me how I can do anything else but implement more advanced technology to raise natural harvest? Of course I can go organic. Then I’ll have more income per product but less yield. And one can’t live from “good feelings” alone. It’s easy to talk about when you don’t have to raise a family.

Paperwork: And what else ticks me off extremely: for every little thing I do, I can **fill out a form**, be observed via satellite to make sure that every centimeter of my fields stays within their borders, I have to write down every kilo of fertilizer I use so that compliance officers can make their calculations afterward. My products have to be tested for contaminants, which I pay myself. Of course they never find anything, but that’s the law. Just like during the

BSE crisis. Today we're still spending 400 million Euros a year on that. Do you know how many people in Europe died of BSE? None, not a single one! How many were it from bird flu, how many from swine flu? But we inspect ourselves to death. What ever happened to the forest depletion issue? Only the catastrophes (often just purported) remain in our collective conscience. And supposedly we farmers were at it again. There's nobody there to set the record straight. We farmers get to sweep up the broken glass alone.

Value: And another thing: **food has no value** to you. Otherwise you wouldn't throw so much away. And: the "minimum shelf life" date means exactly that it's at least good up to this date. I'll still eat yogurt a week after that. And minimum shelf life date on rolled oats: what nonsense! People, it's smashed grain. In the graves of Egyptian pharaohs they found cereal grains that were three thousand years old. I'll probably have to start putting a stamp on my homemade marmalade pretty soon too...

Regional: You say you'd like to buy **regional**? **Not true!** Who buys right now, in January, grapes from Chile, asparagus from South Africa, mangos from Brazil and apples from China? You do! Otherwise REWE, a grocery retailer, would have stopped offering it a long time ago. But our carrots remain. Ever heard of savoy cabbage, or white cabbage? No, you have to have artichoke hearts. In the case that you actually prepare your own food! In the freezer section there are so many delicious ready-to-eat dishes with so many delicious ingredients like E 222, which is sodium bisulfate and E 310, which is propyl gallate. The names already sound disgusting.

Quality: You also make a lot of other claims: that you pay attention to quality, that you always read the ingredients label, are conscientious of sustainability, and mostly buy fair trade. That's nonsense: what you read are the discounter's promotions: 10 eggs for 1 euro. Now go, hurry up, before they're all gone. Free-range eggs are more expensive? Whatever, the cheap ones are only for baking.

Feelings: Why am I writing all this? To give you a sense of how it **feels** to be in my situation. Feelings are not concrete; they're not right or wrong. One just has them. But perhaps you can understand why sometimes the pleasure of my work escapes me. I also know that we farmers are no saints, that there are also black sheep's. But also not all doctors are quacks, not all handicraftsmen are swindlers, not all politicians are corrupt and not all policemen are beaters. Farmers operate sustainably in their **own interests**. We don't need to be told to do so by clever politicians, smart journalists or clueless bureaucrats. They get their paychecks every month without taking on any entrepreneurial risk.

Governor: I see myself as the current governor, as the custodian of our farm, which I received from my father and will give to my son. So I take it upon myself to keep everything in good condition — the buildings, the fields, the soil — for the generations to follow. Yes, we are **running a business**. But we are not grasshoppers; we can't and don't want just move somewhere else after it's all been grazed. We can and want to keep our production site from being relocated to Asia. We're staying here. And we'll keep producing as well as we can; and as we're allowed.

That just needed to be said.

Yours, Farmer Willi