

2010 IFAJ Annual congress

Dear presidents, dear chairman, dear intendant, dear congress participants, ladies and gentlemen,

Your organisation, the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists was founded in 1956.

In 1958 already a congress was organized in Belgium, in Brussels which was also hosting the 1958 World Exhibition. In 1977 your congress took place for the second time in Brussels.

When we heard that the 2010 congress would take place in Belgium again, we immediately applied to be one of your gold partners.

Being the market leader as a supplier of the Belgian agriculture and horticulture, the AVEVE Group had to be one of your major sponsors.

I also want to thank you for providing the opportunity to address the international community of agricultural journalists here tonight. For, you are specialists in agriculture and horticulture which are the core business of the AVEVE Group.

During your stay you had the opportunity to familiarize with our agriculture and horticulture. I saw the marvelous congress schedule and the focus on all aspects of Belgian agriculture and horticulture: production, supply of raw materials and machinery, research and last but not least the marketing and processing of the produce.

I am convinced that you will leave this congress with a very good overall image of our dynamic Belgian agriculture and horticulture.

The previous congress in Belgium dates back to 1977. At that time, as a fresh agricultural engineer, I was following a complementary masters training in Economics. One of the professors was a director of the Bekaert Group. A man who had spent more than 40 years of his career with this successful multinational company. After the examination, he gave me the following advice: "As a fresh agricultural engineer, you should emigrate, go to countries where agriculture has a future which is not the case in Belgium". This was a damper on my enthusiasm. Imagine me hearing this as a farmer's son, belonging to a farmers family, as a fresh graduate dreaming of working in the agricultural sector.

I did not emigrate and I was lucky to be able to work with the AVEVE Group, Belgium's market leader in agricultural and horticultural supplies.

33 years have elapsed since that piece of advice, years in which our agriculture and horticulture had to face several major challenges. Farmers became subject to milk and sugar beet quota. When southern European countries joined the European Union, we worried about our greenhouse farming businesses which need fossile fuels for heating whereas the southern European countries enjoy solar energy for free. When the European Union was extended to Central and Eastern Europe, our crop farmers worried about their ability to compete with big farms operating extensive acreage in crops. In the meantime, agriculture and horticulture had to cope with increasingly stringent environmental standards, and so on.

Despite this difficult context, over the last few days you have been able to see that Belgium's agriculture and horticulture are more dynamic and future-oriented as ever. We must admit that 2008 and 2009 were two very difficult years due to the very low prices for nearly all the products of agriculture and horticulture. So both these sectors need a quick recovery of the general economic growth which would again increase the prices to be paid for agricultural and horticultural products.

Besides these challenges, our agriculture and horticulture have a lot of assets.

The very first and most important asset is the fact that our farmers and market gardeners are passionate about their trade and super motivated. This attitude allows them to face the many challenges.

They also achieve top yields in every field : wheat, sugar beet and potato yield per ha, milk yield per cow, improved feed conversion for pigs and layers, yields of tomatoes per m² of glass, yield of fruit per ha, and so on.

As you have seen, Belgium's agriculture and horticulture can rely on a well-developed marketing and processing structure. Belgium is located in the centre of Europe, in the middle of a wealthy consumer market of 300 million people and has taken advantage of this asset to become an very important exporting country of agricultural and horticultural products.

You will find the same unshakeable belief in the future of Belgium's agriculture and horticulture in the strategy of our group, the AVEVE group.

Nearly 5 years ago the AVEVE Group reset its strategy for the years to come. At that time the decision was made to disinvest in sectors that were not directly linked with our core business which is supplies for agriculture and horticulture, but also to invest in supply companies operating in sectors where the AVEVE Group has only a small market share.

So there were a few take-overs. Of Sanac for instance, the market leader in supplies for market gardening and potato farming. The Dumoulin Group, a market leader in the supply of feed in Wallonia.

Currently the AVEVE Group is the ideal partner of any agricultural and horticultural business in Belgium. As a market leader we enjoy economies of scale which allows us to invest in innovation! And innovation is indispensable to safeguard the top position of our agriculture and horticulture.

Innovation within the AVEVE Group has led to developing major supply activities in different parts of the world. Hortiplan, the AVEVE Group company dealing in greenhouse equipment and automation, exports its high-tech mobile gully system worldwide. This investment allows to increase the yield of a same surface in greenhouse farming by 100% and to reduce lighting and heating energy bills enormously.

The Dumoulin Group is market leader as far as Omega 3 fatty acids are concerned. The Campina Omega 3 milk from the Friesland Campina dairy cooperative is produced on the basis of Nutex, extruded linseed, manufactured in one of Dumoulin's production sites.

AVEVE Biochem, a specialist in innovative additives for the international animal feed market, realizes more than 50% of its turnover in Asia, especially with enzymes! Hermoo, the plant protection market leader, also has its own registrations. Its sales are not restricted to the Belgian market. Hermoo exports plant protection products to a lot of growers throughout Europe.

Agriculture and horticulture remain an important economic sector in Belgium. Not only in terms of employment within the sector itself, but also for employment in all related sectors.

Within the AVEVE Group for instance, this involves more than 1600 people plus the number of people involved directly in AVEVE's activities such as the AVEVE franchisees who signed a franchise contract with AVEVE, and the John Deere dealers - AVEVE is also exclusive importer of John Deere machinery - both represent more than 1200 jobs. So, employment in the AVEVE Group amounts to more than 2800 jobs.

You have become more familiar with the dynamic, future-oriented agriculture and horticulture of our country. The mission of the AVEVE Group aims at being the partner of this sector, today, tomorrow and on the long term. If the IFAJ would again organise a congress in Belgium in 2040, with an opportunity to visit the Ghent Floralties again, I am convinced that the AVEVE Group will still be the partner of the Belgian agriculture and horticulture and that its general manager will unreservedly accept to be your gold partner.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a very pleasant evening.