

COMPETING WITH A BALL AND CHAIN AROUND YOUR FEET

SUGAR: A EUROPEAN RICHNESS WE MUST PROTECT. BY: MARIE-CHRISTINE RIBERA

The European Association of Sugar Manufacturers (or CEFS, its French acronym standing for Comité Européen des Fabricants de Sucre) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1953 to represent the interests of the European sugar industry, vis-à-vis international institutions with a view to creating a positive regulatory climate for our sector in all its dimensions: production, competitiveness, nutrition and food legislation. In addition, we are an interlocutor recognized by the European Commission and we participate, along with others, in the civil dialogue groups. We are also the European branch of Sugarmark, the quality brand for real sugar, known as sucrose.

THE CHALLENGES

Our sector, part of a chain that includes sugar beet growers, faces many challenges. The first is agricultural. The Common Agricultural Policy does not get good press. Farmers are confronted with consistent reductions in subsidies and major constraints on the use of inputs: new restrictions on seed varieties, limitations on plant protection products, obstacles to irrigation, etc. As an industry, we have to deal with abolition of quotas, opening of the EU market to third country imports and decreased world market prices. Prices recently began to increase again, but disturbances linked to Coronavirus crisis are creating the conditions for another fall, perhaps long-lasting. At CEFS, our bottom line is preserving and even improving our global competitiveness in a very challenging environment.

SUSTAINABLE SUGAR PRODUCTION

In close co-operation with beet growers, we have always been working towards making our production sustainable. With EFFAT, which represents trade union workers in the food sector, and CIBE, representing beet growers, we have set up a platform called the EU Beet Sugar Sustainability Partnership (EUBSSP), which disseminates and promotes good behavioural and industrial practices. In our view, sustainability is vital – as the European Green Deal strongly affirms – but we are for modern sustainability, a new-generation sustainability involving new technologies, research on new varieties and innovation in general.

PRESERVING COATED SEEDS

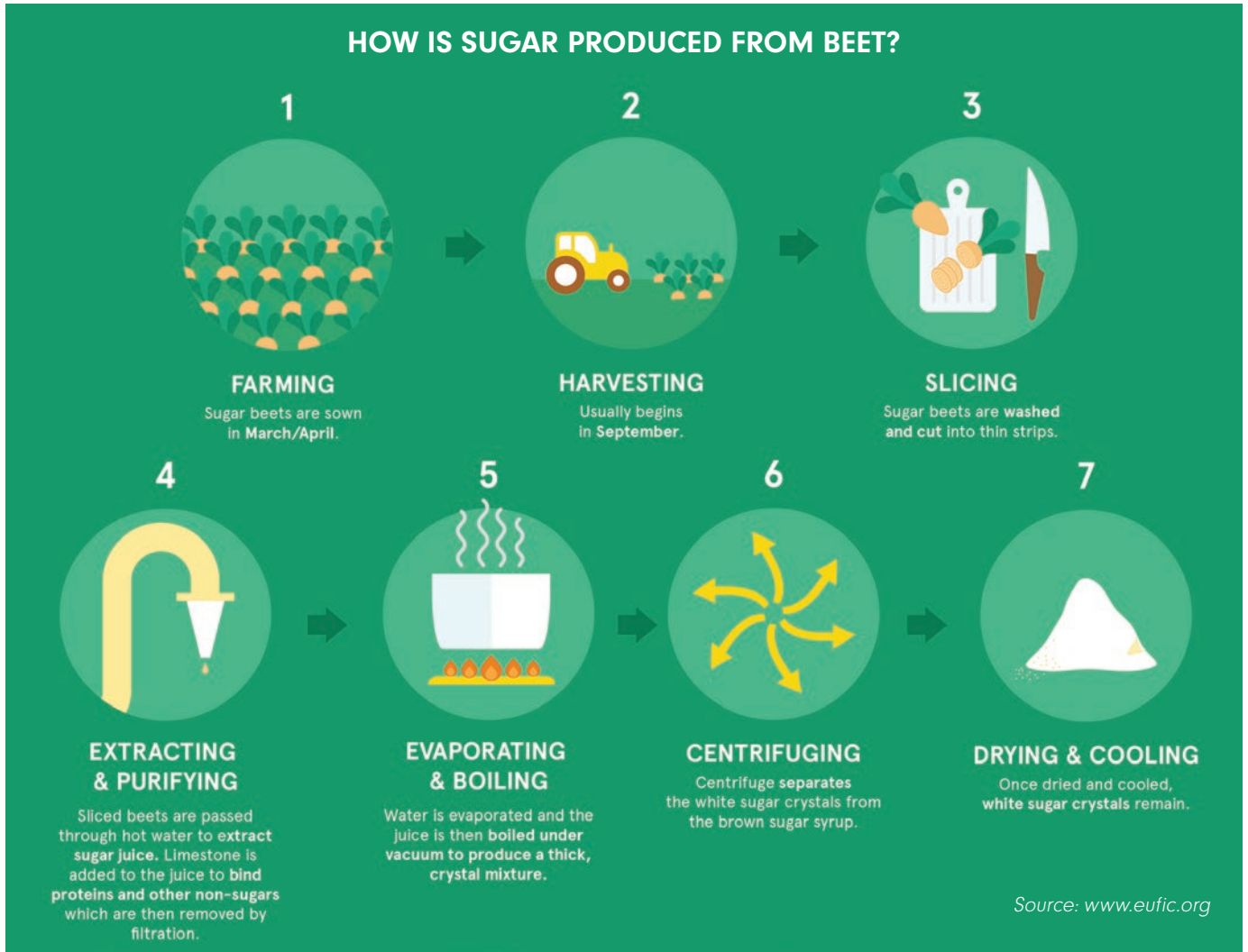
Research by the sugar beet sector is constant, in particular via our 11 research institutes based in various EU countries, but also via our sugar enterprises and co-operatives, and in our partnership agreements with input and seed producers. Increasing the sugar content of beets is certainly a priority, but it is not the only one. Resistance to water stress is another one. So is the quality of coated seeds.



Marie-Christine Ribera

It is important to note that coated seeds are potentially under threat from future EU legislation and we believe that the seed sector has neither assessed nor anticipated this risk sufficiently. Drastic limitations on coated seeds would be a catastrophe for our sector.

As of now, the constraints I have mentioned are bearing a high price for beet growers who estimate it at €100 per hectare. This is a significant amount that endangers beet growing in certain regions. These constraints translate to both a decrease in revenue (as they damage yields) and an increase in costs, since the substitute treatments (if they exist) are either more expensive, more demanding in terms of time spent, or even both.



NEW BREEDING TECHNIQUES

The issue of new breeding techniques is crucial. To deal with it more effectively, we have decided to create an Agriculture & Progress Platform whose founding members are European maize producers and European beet growers. The mission of this platform is to expand, in particular to cereals, oilseed, wine, fruits and vegetables, potatoes, and more – because our problems are mutual. The platform’s objective is to re-establish a balance between the precautionary and innovation principles. Right now, the relationship between the two is completely unbalanced. But an agriculture that does not evolve technologically is an agriculture that goes backwards and gives up its international ambitions.

A DISTORTED VIEW OF AGRICULTURE

The other goal of the platform is to ensure a collective and structured response to the action of certain NGOs who hold a distorted view of agriculture – a romantic, urbanite view, one could say. Faced with approximations, excesses, caricatures and fake news, we must bring a reliable and credible response. We also need to equip ourselves with the means to respond via media and social

networks to the agri-bashing flourishing in our society against all reason.

As I said before, the system of sugar quotas has disappeared, and this disappearance is irreversible. The absence of quotas exposes sugar to global competition. But it is not a fair fight, and professionals in the sugar beet industry are competing with a ball and chain around their feet. First, they are faced with increasing imports due to free trade agreements signed by the European Union with several countries, in particular with countries that are least advanced. Second, our competitors benefit from rules unequalled in Europe: they can use GMOs and plant protection products prohibited here.

As a product, sugar is vital and by nature international. The European sector has in the past demonstrated its capacity for adaptation, innovation and investment. But to be fully competitive we must fight, if not with equal weapons (which seems unrealistic), then at least with those weapons that are not wholly unfavourable. ▼

Editor’s Note: Marie-Christine Ribera is Director General of the European Association of Sugar Manufacturers (CEFS).