Towards farmer principles of health

10 key statements of farmers to improve health in organic agricultural systems

Statement 1 - Soil health

Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems

are aware that soil health is fundamental and the base for health in all other domains: plant, animal, human, ecosystem.

General clarification relating to all 10 statements in this document:
Both female and male farmers are considered equally in the following ten statements. The statements could apply to a single person or a group of people; but it is important for the farm that this awareness is there among the responsible people on the farm (different levels of awareness are expected at different levels of engagement/decision making impacts).

Statement 2 - Biodiversity

Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems

recognise and closely observe changes in biodiversity (particularly earthworms, farmland birds, bees and beneficial insects); and they aim for high and increasing biodiversity in their system, which contributes to the function of the agro-ecosystem.

Statement 3 - Systems thinking

Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems

are aware of working in and with nature's systems and feel that best health is achieved when all domains are included according to their being, as part of the agro-ecosystem: soil, plants, animals and humans.

Further information and background from the farmers:
Working in and with nature's systems also means recognition of the natural yield potential, and its acceptance as boundary of the system. The statement 'according to their being (needs)' also contains a call (assignment or task) for action, to first accept that the being has particular needs and then follow up with appropriate actions.

Statement 4 - Observation skills

Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems

develop the ability to closely observe key health-related processes on their farm and react appropriately; they have a good overview of the system.

Further information and background from the farmers:
Statement 10 provides indicators that can be used for such system observations.

Statement 5 – Intuition and self-observation

Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems

develop the intuition and ability for self-observation (e.g. (dare to listen to) inner voice, gut-feeling) as part of the observation process of the farm; and they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and know their own resources and those of the farm (e.g. social network, basic trust).

Further information and background from the farmers:
Important for this point is the ability to capture and comprehend the farm on a 'soul-level', including the ability for self-reflection and awareness of the needs of the farm (as 'individuality'). It is necessary to know that there is no standard or 'one-fits-all' recipe available. Also this statement could apply to a single person or a group of people, but it is important for the farm that this awareness is there.

Statement 6 – Overview

Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems

ensure the manageability and overview of land and processes (diversity, integrity and sustainability), their responsible organisation (design) and optimal organisation of capacities on the farm, so that the complexity and size of the farm does not negatively affect health (also social and societal health). Different scale farms require different processes and organisational structures to achieve health.

Further information and background from the farmers:
This statement captures two perspectives. On one hand that the complexity and size of the farm needs to be adapted/developed to ensure its manageability by the farmer to keep a good overview. On the other hand, to continuously develop and improve the ability of the farmer to face the complexity and size of the farm and match the needs of the system.

Statement 7 – Long-term thinking and acting

Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems

improve health by planning in an increasingly broad and long-term perspective of the system. For example through long rotations, perennials, habitats for wild animals, hedges or trees (generational structure and thinking).

Statement 8 – Shifting goals

The main goals of farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems shift away from mass production towards quality production.

In place of maximising productivity (e.g. with high performance breeds), optimal yields are aimed for. By selecting appropriate breeds and varieties suitable for the site and the farm, qualitative values and multiple outcomes can be achieved; such as quality, optimum yields, resilience, animal welfare, biodiversity, etc. Aiming for high productivity when it comes to achieving multiple outcomes.

Statement 9 – Impart health

Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems

are aware that they not only contribute to human health through their high quality food products, but that they also deliver highly valuable outputs in other areas (e.g. environment protection, public goods, cultural landscape, water quality, etc.). They get across the story and value of the product and the farm through close communication with, and involvement of customers, consumers, retailers, processors, etc.

Statement 10 - Indicators

The first and most apparent indicators of health on the farm are (in alphabetical order):

- **Biodiversity**
- **Economic sustainability (financial viability)**
- **External inputs**
- **Food quality**
- **Health of people on the farm**
- **Number of veterinarian visits and treatments, use of antibiotics/wormer/ medicine**
- **Plant vitality**
- **Soil fertility**
- **Soil workability**
- **Weeds, pests and diseases**
- **Yield**

The farmers' principles of organic agriculture as set out here are the results of the Health Networks project, conducted from 2015-2016 under the leadership of the Organic Research Centre (UK).

Over a period of two years, a group of sixteen example farmers from Germany, Austria and the UK have identified their own principles of health in organic agricultural systems. The farmers have established personal philosophies and strategies of best practice that make them successful in running healthy farms and producing healthy food.

On the basis of these ten health statements new and interdisciplinary approaches to health research and knowledge exchange in agriculture will be developed.

http://tinyurl.com/HealthNetworks

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