

Transcription of “Potting Soils and Professionals” Workshop Moderators: George Padelopoulos and Francis Muller.

M. Miquel (Aquiland Co., France)

Market gardening techniques are becoming more and more specialized; however, this should not lead to further difficulties in replacing certain products. Technology should not become the enemy of the environment. The use of peat-free products is not what influences all the productions either. When replacement products are either waste material or by-products, the problem arises when we run out of them, because the volumes involved are quite substantial. Technically speaking, there are limits to using roughly 50% or more of peat-free product. More research and development is necessary to fine-tune things.

H. Cubizolle (University of St-Etienne, France)

Certainly, the use of composts is still limited but the same holds true for peat.

M. Miquel :

That’s quite interesting. But isn’t there some other option to not using peatlands altogether or destroying them all? A parallel could be drawn with the forests we renew. Couldn’t we have some kind of labeling or certification scheme?

B. Mounier (Federation of Natural Habitat Conservatories, France)

What is your opinion on the growing of sphagnum? What can you tell us about the big retailers: how do we get them more involved?

G. Padelopoulos (B&Q Co., Great Britain)

B&Q is a large retailer and part of the Kingfisher Group, with 330 stores in the U.K. The mixing or replacement of peat applies to all markets, no matter what. We could take things further, but at least we’ve started.

A. Grünig (Art Agroscope, Reckenholz-Tänikon, Switzerland)

There is a big difference between peatlands and forests. The former have been created over several millennia; the latter over a few centuries. Moreover, we extract the catotelm of peatlands, so we’ll be missing the acrotelm. The peat industry should look out for its future.

H. Joosten (IMCG and University of Greifswald, Germany)

Sphagnum contained in peat is hardly different from sphagnum. There is no real problem with sphagnum replacing peat. The issue of speed is not linked to technology but rather to politics. Durability, fossil-fuel resources, employment in rural areas, etc. – all of these should be properly assessed considering the advantages and disadvantages.

L. Rochefort (Laval University, Quebec, Canada)

Mr. H. Verhagen’s presentation included lifecycle analysis. I didn’t quite understand why it was a problem to have the coconut bark sent by boat.

H. Verhagen (RHP Foundation, Holland)

A lifecycle analysis was carried out for all products. It is difficult to include everything: ecotoxicological elements, energy use, etc. Two factors are important: CO₂ change and toxicity to man. That of coconut coir is very negative. By replacing peat, do we really improve things or

simply put off the problem? You see, for the peat industry, rather large quantities are needed, not “niche products”. Anything under 250,000 m³ is not a very big amount.

M. Miquel

Will we ever obtain valid figures? Are we really limited because of peat? In the works of Joosten and Clarke, we note that peat volumes are very high and the portion used in horticulture is rather low. Now peat for horticultural use, isn't it really a false problem? At the congress held in Nottingham, it was reported that testing on green waste doesn't work. What are the risks? There appears to be no durable solution, and the British are at a standstill.

G. Padelopoulos

There is a huge difference between production for small retailers and production for big retailers. Small-sized producers are having a hard time. Some users are satisfied with replacement products.

H. Joosten

Most of the material used by producers comes from a very small part of the planet (specificity). Thus, non-modified peatlands no longer exist in Ireland. Some countries are watching their reserves decline rapidly. In other countries, instead, only a small portion of peatland is being exploited, for reasons of accessibility. If these factors change, more investments will follow. I'm willing to bet that future developments in the peat industry will not be hampered by availability but rather by other factors. This is where gross profit analysis comes into play.

P. Alexander (Royal Horticultural Society, Great Britain)

In Great Britain, horticultural farmers and environmentalists are doing their best to cooperate. They make good products. Policy control over producers is difficult, in order to keep out unscrupulous producers.

G. Schmilewski (Klasmann-Deilmann Co., Germany)

When will the British government realize that it will never reach its goal of 90% peat-free products? That's ridiculous.

G. Padelopoulos

We don't know if we'll ever reach that goal. Yet once a target is set, it is difficult for the government to change.

H. Joosten

The policies set objectives. Often, though, these objectives turn out to be unreachable. But even if that's the case here, you have to keep them. When there are fines at stake, behaviours change more quickly.

Ph. Grosvernier (Technical Research Dept. of Lin'Eco, Switzerland)

I would like to come back to the issue of peat quantities. It is believed that the amateur gardening market accounts for 60%, but it can easily survive without peat (it's a question of marketing). The remaining 40% cannot do without peat yet the rate of peat use could be reduced by 50%. This means that there's another 20% without a full-fledged replacement solution. That's not far from the 90% goal for replacement set by Great Britain! Within a

couple of decades, we should make it. What needs to be clarified is what can be achieved over the short term and what cannot.

H. Verhagen

That's too simple. Yes, it is possible but future energy needs will dictate which processes continue. All green waste will soon be used for producing energy. We'll have to decide what to do with these wastes. Currently, they're being burned. We might consider giving waste a second chance as a peat replacement product. But the trends aren't moving in that direction!

H. Joosten

I can confirm this. Competition from biofuels and bioethanol is going to rise considerably. Everyone's pushing for the use of liquid fuels in cars while gaseous fuels are better. Energy production from biomass could be managed by an intermediary producing peat replacements, where energy combustion comes into play only at the end of the process. High-quality products should not be used for low-level purposes.

F. Muller (Pôle-relais Tourbières, France)

Peat is too inexpensive; hence there are so many uses for peat today.

B Mounier

I would like to reiterate Ph Grosvernier's comment: is it not true that 60% of peat sold to private individuals could be modified? An important element is marketing. What about the standards? We could arrive at something realistic, with a business outlook. It's also up to the producers to integrate these factors.

L. Rochefort

As far as strategy is concerned, we'll have to continue to use peat. However, I'd like to share with you something about the North American market. In Canada, the transportation scenario could change rapidly. The southern peatlands have been fully exploited. Peat-based products are viewed as "good citizens" from an environmental standpoint. Currently, bituminous sands are extracted on a large scale. The peat forms a layer just above these bituminous sands and it's virtually a waste product!

Producers have decided to restore the peatlands. Given our large quantities of peat, we can make some choices. We can restore the eco-systems after peat extraction. In Europe as well, things could be started up again. Presently, you're exporting your problems to the Baltic States, where not enough means are available. What is missing is the responsibility of peat producers. What we do in Canada could apply there. What we need is a transfer of technology.

M. Ilomets (Institute of Ecology, Tallinn University, Estonia)

In Estonia, there are 35 peat-producing companies, two of which are Estonian. These producers, except for the Dutch companies, have little if no interest in restoration because it is too costly. Why waste money on the Baltic States? The governments of these countries aren't interested either. According to a recent report, the Estonian government should be stricter.

F. Muller

How can we help to change the situation?

P. Ilomets

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) should put more pressure on them.

L. Rochefort

Governments cannot do much about the situation, otherwise peat producers will go elsewhere. So who needs the peat? Peat-producing companies should include restoration into their philosophy.

C. Farrell (Bord na Monà Co., Ireland)

What we need is a single European policy. In Ireland, Bord na Monà is the only company that is obliged to restore its sites.

A. Miquel

If purchasing criteria and good practices were more objectively defined, peat producers could highlight their efforts better.

M. Ecobichon (Faliénor Co., France)

Faliénor produces peat but does not own any peatlands. It imports from the Baltic States as well as Ireland. Do retailers and public authorities take into account such problems? Currently, I can confirm that retailing groups are eager to integrate respect for the environment and use less peat, more green compost – provided that these products are certified for quality.

It is also worth noting that our planet has placed an important constraint on this discussion: natural resources and energy resources are limited. In the next few years things are going to change dramatically with regard to peat. I can feel a major change is underway whereby related products, such as compost and bark, will soon be used for energy production. We had taken to heart matters relating to peat by producing coconut coir in Ivory Coast, but the ship still runs on oil!

L. Rochefort

I'd like to recall the comments made by C. Farrell. This is the case of a responsible company in Ireland, while the others are not. The major peat producers should serve as models. In Canada, only the larger companies were with us at the beginning. Now, even the smaller, family-run businesses are joining the ranks.

G. Schmilewski

The European Peat and Growing Media Association is conducting a study and looking for information regarding the different European countries. This association, in fact, would like to inform the public and Brussels on these issues, with the aim of harmonizing legislation on peatlands.

C. Farrell

In Ireland, such legislation should apply to the entire country and also in the case of companies importing products. This should be negotiated among the companies, retailers and governments.

H. Cubizolle

Peat is sourced in Northern Europe; however, the amount of extractable peat there is declining rapidly and will soon be finished. Then where do we go? To Russia or Canada? The costs will go up, thus replacement products will become indispensable.

L Rochefort

Don't we already pay a high price for peat, having factored in all these extra costs? In New Brunswick, for every peat bale sold 12 cents goes to a special fund for restoring peatlands. The idea here is that every user of peat should contribute to helping restore the peatlands destroyed in the past.

G. Schmilewski

Relating to Mr. H. Cubizolle's question, during the 1960s Germany exported peat to the United States. This trend might be reversed. The demand would be satisfied, maybe with peat coming from even farther away. Otherwise horticulture would no longer exist. Why not urge a total ban on peat in Europe? You'll see what that brings!

H. Joosten

Now that's an interesting proposal. It would surely stimulate research into peat alternatives! However, examples like these are not good because they are extreme cases. We mustn't use this argument to prove that peat is used ill-advisedly.

C Farrell

I agree with H. Joosten. The approach should be viewed over the long term. It is out of the question to stop producing peat right now. We have to work together and try to make the most of the situation.