

# Insects in animal feed: “Unknown makes unloved”

In the search for alternative proteins for animal feed, insects appear to be a good option. The techniques for insect production are already in place, resulting in huge opportunities for livestock farms to engage in insect production to feed their animals. Unfortunately, due to legislation issues in Brussels, the development of insect feed for livestock has been grinding to a halt. This raises questions regarding whether politicians are aware of the benefits of insects and whether there are reasons to be so precautionous. Furthermore, how can the regulatory process be accelerated? These are all questions asked by insect pioneer Marian Peters of NGN to Jan Huitema, VVD Parliamentarian for the EU.

Although the Dutch may occasionally try a crispy cricket or the odd fried grasshopper, insects as food are still very distant from food culture within the Netherlands and Europe in general. Instead, insects offer themselves as an excellent basis for animal feed. Insects are part of the natural diet of many livestock animals such as chickens, as well as providing reduced need for antibiotics as well as a potential home-grown feed source for farmers wanting to convert their empty barns and stables into insect rearing operations. Insects can even be raised on organic residue streams, reducing competition for food and vegetable crops. However, the feed industry thus far has not taken this opportunity seriously, as reflected in current European legislation. Nonetheless, pro-insect initiatives have sprung up throughout the Netherlands, one of them being New Generation Nutrition (NGN) in 's-Hertogenbosch that has continued developing insect-based animal feed products.

Marian Peters, director of NGN, has ten years of experience in the insect sector, explaining that insects as fish feed is a good though tentative start. For Marian and her work, the lack of attention to insects as an alternative feed source is a great frustration as without political support, it will be very difficult to get the concept off the ground. In a meeting at the NGN office in 's-Hertogenbosch, Marian invited VVD MP Jan Huitema to join the discussion about this major obstacle in insect production. Huitema is largely active in pushing for future-oriented, sustainable farming with good prospects for farmers, now being faced with a tray full of insect derived products, some more recognizable than others.

“-There are no rules for insects as feed sources. Therefore, we become a sector left in poverty under the current framework for animal husbandry...No rules have been thought about,” Marian explains, going on to question how the insect business can be scaled up, as brought up in the ABN AMRO report *A small sector with great opportunities*. This is partially reflected in the growing number of insect businesses in the Netherlands alone, growing from 16 businesses to 25 in the last ten years according to Marian's estimates. “But, we need more development and we need good rules” says Marian.

Continuing, Marian describes how various projects worldwide such as in Nigeria have been very successful with regards to introducing insects as food. However, Marian expects that insects as feed will be far more successful than food products will be, to which Huitema responds with surprise. “So, the opportunities mainly lie within the chicken and pig industries as a raw material?” Marian explains that the current issues in the animal feed industry are to do with soy and fishmeal, with insects offering a “huge sustainability chance for the Netherlands.”

Huitema, who has been engaging in agricultural issues since the commencement of his time involved in European Parliament, expresses his excitement for such opportunities, especially in terms of cost

and environmental impact. Continuing, Huitema explains that due to the current dependency of the European Union on animal feed (75%), that insects could be “-very interesting for self-sufficiency in protein sources and for the development of a circular economy.” Somewhat contradictory to Huitemas enthusiasm is the way in which a chapter on insects included in an agricultural innovation report that was presented at parliament was voted out, much to the disappointment of Marian. He explains that this is most likely due to a lack of communication; “Unknown makes unloved”. This, combined with the severity of current legislation, which is largely pushed by the British and the BSE crisis, has resulted in insect production being majorly limited, according to Huitema. This affects activities such as slaughter, for which the legislation is not designed for insects and is therefore inapplicable.

However, Marian also confirms that “safety must be a priority”, for example, with the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) independently confirming that insects are safe for use as fish feed and that that according to Huitema, this should become definitive in June. “Although this is the first step, the process must move faster and I am trying to push this further in Parliament.” However, the VVD politician also understands why the parliament is so precautious about introducing insects; they don’t want any more food crises and therefore are thoroughly investigating. According to insect pioneer Marian, there is a great need to pressure parliament and to develop new legislation, especially as at the current production scale, insects are too expensive for use as feed. Therefore, upscaling must be enabled with the help of legislation to make the insect-derived feed affordable and to make investments possible. Marian also explains that European legislation has a worldwide effect, for example, “-In countries such as Nigeria, they look up to Europe and make use of our legislation with local adaptations.”

The VVD believes that the introduction of insects as fish feed could stimulate further use of insects in animal feed. “That can indeed have a snowball effect” comments Marian. Huitema suggests that organizing a meeting during the publication of the Fisheries act would be a good idea and that this could establish better contact with the European Parliament. Marian agrees enthusiastically, suggesting that chicken and pigs would be the next step. Marian Peters expresses her appreciation toward Jan Huitema, continuing to discuss about future opportunities. Huitema is also handed a mango grasshopper cereal bar; “Mmmm”, taking a piece without hesitation. The first European MP is won over; now for the rest.

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