



**17.-19.2.2021**

INTERVIEW

December 2020

## **BIOFACH / VIVANESS 2021 eSPECIAL: Shaping transformation. Stronger. Together. Kick-off of an interview series**

- **A joint interview with Prince Felix of Löwenstein, Chairman of the Federation of the Organic Food Producers (BÖLW) and Julia Thöring, of Fridays For Future (FFF)**
- **A 5-part interview series in the BIOFACH Newsroom illuminates aspects of the main theme of the 2021 conference**

**BIOFACH / VIVANESS 2021 eSPECIAL will be held from 17 – 19 February. In addition to exhibitor presentations and diverse opportunities for networking and virtual meet-ups, the eSPECIAL will offer all participants the comprehensive, deeply knowledgeable programme of the BIOFACH and VIVANESS Conference. The main theme for 2021: Shaping Transformation. Stronger. Together. The main focus: how diverse social movements – and the organic food industry – can achieve their goals better by acting together.**

To kick off the series of interviews that will appear regularly in the BIOFACH Newsroom ([www.biofach.de/en/news](http://www.biofach.de/en/news)) until February, we spoke with Prince Felix of Löwenstein, Dr.-Ing. agr. organic farmer and Chairman of the BÖLW (Federation of the Organic Food Production), and with Fridays For Future (FFF) activist Julia Thöring, a student in organic farming and marketing at the Eberswalde College of Sustainable Development. As the head of Germany's umbrella association of organic food growers, processors and dealers, Löwenstein is a nationwide representative of the organic products industry. Thöring is part of an FFF group working on the connection between agriculture and climate change.

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To go with the convention's in-depth topic, **“I say: animal welfare, you say: climate change, Do we all say: organic? Why we have more in common than that which divides us and how we can support one another more effectively.”** you'll find an interview about animal welfare and the organic movement in part 2 of this series.

*The interviewer was Karin Heinze, BIO Reporter International*

**Dr Löwenstein, the climate crisis and its management have been overshadowed somewhat over the past few months by the pandemic – but the fact is that there's no let-up in climate change. How does the topic rank among your association's activities, and what specifically is the association doing to advocate protecting the climate?**

Dr Löwenstein: My impression is that right now many people are taking the coronavirus crisis as an occasion to look at things much more closely and think about how we deal with our resources. It may be that government's limited capacity is being absorbed by managing the pandemic. But even there, I'm seeing that it's becoming clearer and clearer to policy makers in many countries that the climate is not something that can wait. As for the BÖLW, practically every aspect we're concerned about is directly linked to climate change. Two examples: when our association's member businesses advocate preserving and maintaining biodiversity, that has a direct influence on soil maintenance and humus formation, and thus on the soil's ability to store CO<sub>2</sub>. An important contribution toward handling the climate crisis. The same thing goes another example: our natural organic livestock farming is not only good for the animals, but also results in higher prices to the end consumer – and consequently a change in consumer awareness and behaviour, and thus less meat consumption. Organic animal husbandry has a positive effect on the climate in that way. So when we think about how agriculture can A, become more climate-resilient, and B, generate less greenhouse gas, and C, bind more CO<sub>2</sub>, all of that has always been a part of the organic farming package right from the start.

**Beyond that, does the BÖLW support the FFF movement?**

Dr Löwenstein: Wherever our association is politically active or can influence public opinion in the form of something like an FFF demonstration, we do support it. Climate as a topic is right at the top of our agenda. Of course we're in contact with a wide range of initiatives, and we investigate where we can get stronger. That is especially possible through the networking of people in these movements among each other. Our member companies, some of which are very active, network with local groups at their own locations and make sure the responsible politicians there do their jobs. Some have also joined "Entrepreneurs for Future", as well as "Farmers for Future" or "Scientists for Future".

As a sector with the mission of producing organic food, we're well aware of what a threat climate change poses to the entire value chain of the businesses we represent. This in itself makes one thing indispensable: we need to get going!

**Ms Thöring, you're involved in FFF and especially concerned with the connections between agriculture and the climate crisis – could you please explain briefly what activities FFF organises beyond climate strikes, and what form your own activity takes?**

Ms Thöring: Fridays for Future is back. It's very interesting to find that it's apparently a major challenge for people to conceive of multiple crises at once, and especially to see them in context. Government is having an especially hard time of it there. A nationwide FFF task force on agriculture was organised in Berlin following the "We've Had Enough" demonstration last January. Our goal is to highlight the connection between climate change and agriculture, because that aspect lags far behind other issues like the energy or transportation sector in the awareness of the climate justice movement. One thing that our group deals with is the upcoming national and European political decisions like the CAP reform (the EU's common agricultural policy). And we maintain contact with other initiatives, like BUND – Friends of the Earth Germany.

**What's the status of your activities?**

Ms Thöring: Just last May we joined groups from 11 other EU countries to send an open letter to EU Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans, and appealed to him in a virtual meeting to introduce immediate measures to make the agricultural sector climate-neutral by 2035. We believe that the CAP is a pretty big lever – after all, nearly 40% of the EU budget goes to the agricultural sector.

**Dr Löwenstein, do think that with FFF you've gained a new ally to handle tough tasks?**

Dr Löwenstein: We're delighted about any interest group that we can join forces with to propagate and advance our aims. But we also need to apply our resources wisely – it's easy to overload them when you're networking. FFF has proved to be such a powerfully effective force that it doesn't need our support.

In other connections – in that case it was genetic engineering – we've seen how effective it is to address an issue from as many different directions of society as possible, and to confront policy makers with it, to always keep one another updated, and to discuss further strategy. I'm also very glad about FFF's initiative in agriculture, because the connections between food production and consumption, the necessary change in agriculture and what we eat, and climate justice are simply too important not to have a place in the FFF movement.

**Can the FFF movement – which overall is very young and “fresh” – achieve more with its very specific demands than established organic product associations?**

Dr Löwenstein: That's certainly the case. Especially because when it comes to our association, the BÖLW, people assume first of all that we're concerned with advocating our members' economic interests. Whereas people assume – rightly – that the climate justice movement is acting in the interest of the general public and the coming generations.

The BÖLW is indeed a national business association – but at the same time, we're also an active part of the worldwide organic and environmental movement.

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Ms Thöring: From FFF's perspective, what counts most of all is to keep within the 1.5°C limit for global warming established in the Paris Agreement, and to achieve climate neutrality by 2035. We break that down among the various sectors, and there it's not primarily about organic or non-organic, but rather about how much emissions come from agriculture, and what measures need to be taken to reduce them. After all, 100% organic doesn't automatically mean 100% climate-neutral.

### **Isn't organic automatically easier on the climate?**

Dr Löwenstein: It is. But even in ecological agriculture a lot still needs to happen. For instance, agriculture has to design its energy consumption to be emission-free. As soon as the right technical solutions are available, organic agriculture needs to use them. I hope organic farmers will soon be able to run their tractors on hydrogen, equip every suitable roof surface with photovoltaic cells, and store CO<sub>2</sub> with intensive soil maintenance and humus formation so as to achieve climate neutrality. As a system and on average, organic farming is measurably better on all the parameters that have an impact on the climate. But individually, good conventional operations are better than poor organic ones. Yet even though organic farming isn't perfect, anybody who concludes on that basis that organic farming is a dead letter and something else entirely new needs to be developed, with its guidelines, labels and a market – they're arguing for a step backwards. We need to encourage the better options that we have, rather than relying on some non-existent perfect alternative. So, what we need to do is apply science and promote advanced practices to improve organic operations. That's also why it's so important to remain in dialogue with every possible group, so as to make clear to them how much potential there is in a systematic organic farming approach, and what we can do to develop those possibilities further.

**Talking about dialogue – what’s the attitude within the climate movement about the organic movement? Where do you see common ground, and where are the barriers?**

Ms Thöring: That really is a very complex topic. We talk quite a lot about our individual behaviour as consumers, but we often ignore food production. Since my studies have been leading me deep into that question in particular, I can personally only say that organic farming is certainly better for biodiversity, for the soil, for people. FFF has realised that the organic concept plays an important role here, and we’re very open to it. But not all FFF members automatically buy organic. Aside from production, other issues are also involved like regional sourcing and logistics.

Dr Löwenstein: I completely agree with you on that, Julia. On top of that, policy makers can’t be allowed to dump the responsibility for climate-friendly behaviour entirely on the consumer. But I’m also convinced that transformation takes multiple paths. It’s not as though somebody can flip a switch today and tomorrow we’ll be living in a different world. Consumers and their individual responsibility do play an especially important role in the development of radical changes. Their consumption behaviour encourages and demands change – and all of us are consumers.

**Do you have the impression that the pressure on our political system in Germany, Europe and worldwide will be enough to bring about legislative changes in managing the climate crisis?**

Ms Thöring: No party, no government and no country has even the beginnings of a strategy for dealing with the climate crisis and keeping within the 1.5°C target. There’s still no specific road map, even though somewhat bigger steps are being ventured just now in the EU with climate neutrality by 2050. From our vantage point, though, these changes are far from enough. Reducing emissions, after all, is just one component. A narrative for genuine climate justice, for industrialised nations to acknowledge a responsibility to countries in the global south, is entirely lacking so far. We’re still miles away from even debating the issue.

Dr Löwenstein: Yes, I completely agree. We’re lagging far behind what we should already have taken care of long ago. My impression is that citizens, or voters, are far ahead of politicians. And here I’d like to appeal to those



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politicians: you need to trust yourselves much more to take bold steps, because the majority of civil society has understood that a hesitant climate policy will lead to ruination.

**What do you see as specific points to begin bringing organic production and the climate protection movement together for a sustainable transformation – meaning a transformation in policies on farming, food and climate? What would you like from each other?**

Ms Thöring: It's clear that there's no future in keeping on as we've been going, and that the methods and strategies we've applied so far are no longer enough to manage the crises. As a climate activist in agriculture, I wish farmers in this country, but also the millions of small farmers around the world, could enjoy greater respect. For one thing, they're very often more severely affected by climate change, and for another, we really need to view them as the bearers of hope and an important component for solving the climate crisis. They need support in setting up their operations to be viable for the future and climate-neutral. The organic production associations can be a good interface for the dialogue between groups and for sensitising people to the problems and importance of agriculture. It's so important to build bridges.

Dr Löwenstein: I'm aware that policy makers more and more just seize on labels and then leave it to the consumer to decide. That's shirking their duty to structure matters. Which is why it's important when you approach the EU, as you [at the FFF] have done with your letter to Timmermans. Because the tune we dance to is composed in Brussels. It does seem to me, though, that the EU Commission is more inclined to make reforms. The Member States, on the other hand, are the ones putting on the brakes. So my big wish from FFF would be to focus very sharply on our Minister Julia Klöckner and apply pressure there.

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