

# The

# Forthright

*Willi Kremer-Schillings*, better known as Farmer Willi, provides food for thought on being provocative, the self-deception of the do-gooder, and how society and agriculture can understand each other better.

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**Photography by** Silvia Reimann, AK, unsplash/Zoe Schaeffer

# Farmer

**1** Much has changed in agriculture over the past decades. Willi Kremer-Schillings is convinced the message isn't getting across to the consumer.

**2** The 66-year-old farmer from Rommerskirchen near Cologne doesn't mince his words. In fact sometimes he's downright provocative – but just to kick-start debate, he says.

**Mr. Kremer-Schillings, five years ago you published an angry open letter to consumers which pulls no punches. It starts with the words: “I’ve had it up to here today...”**

You're right, I didn't exactly mince my words and I was pretty tough on consumers in some paragraphs. But I think sometimes you have to be a bit provocative to get your point across. I wanted to kick-start a dialogue, a new understanding between agriculture and society. And to do that I had to be direct – and tell the truth.

#### **What truth?**

Over the past few decades, so much has changed in all areas of agriculture. But we haven't been very good at getting that message across to consumers, so the changes have largely gone unnoticed. After the Second World War, people only got to eat meat once a week on Sundays. Agriculture has swept aside these kinds of shortages, with farmers falling over themselves to produce more and more.



## “A lot of people mean well, but they tend to prefer bargain-hunting to changing the world.”

Willi Kremer-Schillings, *farmer*

And farms have changed too. When I was young, our family farm had 17 cows, a few pigs, and a few chickens. Then farmers started specializing because they realized they could produce more that way. We concentrated on chickens, for example: 4,000 birds, cage-reared, lots of automation.

### **Cage-rearing was banned in 2010, though.**

Yes, and that was what society wanted. But even then, the message was: look at what awful things those farmers have done. No one stopped to think that they were doing it to meet demand. People are often very quick to jump to conclusions and condemnations on agricultural practices without understanding the context at all. Take apples, for example...

### **By all means.**

Some growers spray their apples 30 times a season. When I tell people that, they immediately say: what, 30 times, that's crazy – I'm not eating those! And yet this number on its own is meaningless. These farmers might be using a natural product that has to be applied multiple times. That's often the case in organic farming. As far as chickens are concerned, a lot of people think the animals spend their lives in green meadows. But without intensive or “factory” farming you could never produce the number of eggs that consumers and industry want, and at the prices they are prepared to pay.

### **That sounds like you're justifying avoiding organic farming on a grand scale.**

Not at all. I'm very much in favor of organic farming. I only ever buy organic pasture-raised milk myself, even though it's more expensive, because I believe in it and because it tastes better too. With apples, prices are a lot higher for organic – anything up to 70 or 80 percent more. But fortunately, plenty of people are willing to buy them. Consumers are also happy

to pay a higher price for organic eggs. Although it has to be said that a large proportion of eggs are still produced by chickens that never see the light of day, and the industry is maintaining its price pressure in this segment. But in other areas such as meat, higher prices won't wash with the consumer. People want organic and cheap – but that's just not possible.

### **Aren't a lot of consumers willing to pay higher prices for organic apples, meat, and eggs these days?**

Organic is gaining ground, for sure, but only very gradually. In absolute terms, organic farming only accounts for a tiny proportion of agriculture so far. I know of farms that have converted to organic but have struggled to find buyers. Organic is a popular subject with the media, but it figures much less in consumers' buying decisions. Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences did an interesting study on this. They went and stood outside a supermarket and asked people going inside how they normally shop. Organic and regional, a lot of them said. When they came back out, the researchers asked if they could look in their shopping carts. Only 16 percent had actually bought what they said they were going to buy.

### **So the consumers were lying to themselves.**

Yes, but not on purpose. A lot of people mean well, but when push comes to shove, they tend to prefer bargain-hunting to changing the world. And with meat, the price differential is enormous: a conventional chicken costs EUR 2.79, whereas an organic one can cost as much as EUR 24.99. The fact that you can buy a whole chicken for less than three euros means that even people on low incomes can eat meat regularly. So even a pensioner on a basic state pension can afford to cook up a pot of chicken soup – it's social justice, really. On the other hand, it has to be said clearly that anyone who buys a whole chicken for 2.79 forfeits the right to complain about factory farming at the supermarket checkout.

### **So it's consumer demand that determines which types of food are produced?**

That's a crucial point: the biggest ballot box in the world is the scanner at the supermarket checkout. Consumers are the voters, and they get what they vote for. It started back in the 1950s when people wanted to eat meat more often than just their Sunday roast, once a week. And these days, not many people are prepared to spend a lot of money on food. When I buy a jar of pickles from India at Lidl, Lidl orders them again. Every purchase we make is an instruction to make the same product in exactly the same way again. I don't want to pass



on all the blame to the consumer, but then the consumer can't shift all the responsibility onto agriculture either. What we need to do is to find a good avenue to go down together in the future. And for this to happen, we need to have a dialogue.

#### **What form could that take?**

Agriculture is an essential service, there's no question. It produces what we put into our bodies. So it needs care and attention, and that's something people need to become more aware of. And we – the farmers – also need to play a part in that. In Cologne dialogue we say: *Arsch huh, Zäng ussenander* [backside up, teeth apart], which basically means we need to stand up and speak out. We farmers must shine the spotlight on the issues confronting us at all levels.

#### **Can you be a little more specific?**

Sometimes a group of kindergarten children passes by my farm. Once I said to them, come on in and I'll show you our machines and tell you what wheat is made into. After

fifteen minutes they were exhausted, but now they have that knowledge.

#### **That's all very well, but does it really have any effect?**

It represents the beginning of a dialogue – even among very young children. It starts forging connections in a very subtle way. There should be much more of this going on, so that we can promote a new, more realistic understanding of agriculture. I always say to my colleagues: Get involved! Go into

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## “If you care about the climate, don’t buy apples from the other side of the world.”

Willi Kremer-Schillings, *author*

local politics, say yes to research requests from universities, play an active role in your region. Initiate new projects, including on your own farm; get creative.

### **What can society do to better understand farmers, to see things from their perspective?**

First off, have the patience to listen. That goes for everyone, by the way. The Austrian philosopher Paul Watzlawick once said, “The dissenter is not stupid, he has just constructed a different reality.” And people need to get to know that reality. If someone is shocked to hear that some apples are sprayed 30 times per season, then as a farmer I should be saying: I understand why your initial reaction is to criticize my production methods, but please let me explain the contexts.

### **What role should the retail trade be playing?**

Supermarkets have a lot of leeway in their dealings with farmers. But that also means they bear responsibility. They can put pressure on a farmer to lower his prices, but they can also make a conscious decision to support local farmers, take that pressure off them, and build up solid, long-term relationships with them. An acquaintance of mine keeps his pigs in a conventional but animal-welfare-friendly way. His pork doesn’t cost the usual EUR 1.60 per kilogram but EUR 1.85. His local supermarket only stocks his meat and the customers buy it. If there was cheaper meat on offer in the freezer section right next to his, the more animal-welfare-friendly version probably wouldn’t sell so well. But the local supermarket believes in supporting regional producers, and it works. Local is better in many ways. And that’s something consumers who buy organic often underestimate. Some supermarkets source their organic carrots from Israel in winter. And as for apples – there are plenty growing in Central Europe! So I say: if you care about the climate, don’t buy carrots and apples from the other side of the world!

### **What about policymakers? How can they help to bring society and agriculture together?**

Policymakers can and should exercise a certain degree of control, but they should also make sure no one suffers in the process. Take environmental protection, for example. If we expect farmers to do more to protect nature and diversity, they can do that, of course. But they need to be paid for it.

### **So the government needs to come up with the money to intervene in a regulatory capacity.**

#### **Assuming it did, wouldn’t it be a good idea to ban factory farming while they’re at it?**

That’s a possibility, of course – once the matter of what factory farming actually means has been cleared up. But it’s not that simple. That pensioner may not be able to afford her chicken any more, and we would end up with a two-tier society in which meat eating is the preserve of the better-off. And as long as intensive farming is not banned worldwide, cheap meat would simply be imported from Spain, Denmark or the Netherlands. I don’t think all-out bans are the way to go. The consumer must lead the way. Because ultimately consumers are the ones who will decide the future of agriculture. **CH**

*Willi Kremer-Schillings (66), keynote speaker at the 2020 Interpoma Congress, is a farmer from Rommerskirchen near Cologne, Germany. He obtained a PhD on crop production in 1981 and subsequently worked in industry. Now retired, Kremer-Schillings spends his time writing and doing PR work. He rose to prominence in Germany in 2015 with his “Letter to Consumers”, in which he complained about the lack of appreciation of farmers. The letter caused a media stir around the world. His book on the same subject, *Sauerei! Bauer Willi über billige Lebensmittel und unsere Macht als Verbraucher* [Disgraceful! Farmer Willi on cheap food and our power as consumers] was published in 2016. You can read his “Letter to Consumers” and other musings (in German) on his website: [www.bauerwilli.com](http://www.bauerwilli.com)*