

The 8th World Congress on Conservation Agriculture

The Future of Farming: Profitable and Sustainable Farming with Conservation Agriculture

DECLARATION

The 8th World Congress on Conservation Agriculture (8WCCA) was held virtually on 21-23 June 2021 in Bern, Switzerland and attended by 783 participants from farmer associations, international organisations, scientific institutions, private sector, non-governmental and civil society organizations, from more than 108 countries, from the developed and developing world. The main objective of the 8WCCA was to celebrate the Conservation Agriculture Community's success as the driver of the biggest farming revolution to have occurred in our lifetimes, and to build on this and boost the quality and speed of this transformation globally towards sustainable agriculture in support of the Sustainable Development and the international climate goals.

Naturally grown soil is a limited, scarce, non-renewable resource. It is the base for the production of healthy food and native wood, a buffer element for the global hydrological cycle, filter substrate for clean drinking water, global carbon store, habitat of a huge biodiversity and element of attractive landscapes. At the interface of atmosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere, the soil fulfills indispensable ecological, economic and social functions. The future of the world's food security requires soils which are unpolluted, of stable structure and productive, in short – a sustainable soil use.

Conservation Agriculture (CA) and its many locally adapted variants offer the best means of using soils for productive farming while enhancing their ability to fulfil their vital societal and planetary functions.

Accumulated positive experiences and scientific knowledge about Conservation Agriculture (CA) are leading to its rapid adoption world-wide. Farmers now apply CA on over 200 million hectares (15% of the world's annual cropland area) in over 100 countries across a diverse range of agro-ecological zones and farm sizes, in all continents but particularly in Africa, Asia and Europe. It has enhanced farm production and reduced costs while conserving and enhancing the natural resources of land, water, biodiversity and climate.

In contrast, conventional tillage practices are not ecologically sustainable since they degrade land by destroying soil structure and biodiversity, reduce soil organic matter content, cause soil compaction, increase run-off and erosion and contaminate water bodies with pollutants and sediments, threatening land productivity, environment and human health. In addition, they produce unacceptable levels of greenhouse gas emissions, speeding up climate change. World-wide, they have accelerated degradation of many natural ecosystems, decreased biodiversity and increased risks of desertification.

CA avoids many of the negative consequences of conventional tillage agriculture by replicating natural processes through the continuous avoidance of soil tillage, permanent maintenance of a soil mulch cover through which diverse crops are directly seeded or planted and rainfall can enter the soil and be retained, cutting erosion. CA enhances the crop root environment (soil structure, carbon, nutrients and moisture) and cuts the build-up of pests and diseases.

In these ways, CA results in a productive agriculture for food security and improved rural livelihoods, especially women's welfare since they provide a high proportion of agricultural labour. Its many economic, social and environmental benefits justify a fundamental re-appraisal of common farming methods.

This Congress has confirmed that CA is here to stay. It has shown that the CA Community is in very good health, full of energy and new ideas. It has confirmed the validity of the Community's way of operating, with farmers in the driving seat, innovating, sharing experiences, spreading the word and creating demands for supportive services from the public and private sectors. All of us who have participated feel proud of our Community's achievements and are determined to do everything within our power - and working with others who share our determination - to contribute to the emergence of a truly sustainable future of farming world-wide. We are confident that the millions of CA farmers whom we have sought to represent here will echo our commitment.

We call upon politicians, international institutions, environmentalists, farmers, private industry and society as a whole, to recognise that the conservation of natural resources is the co-responsibility, past, present and future, of all sectors of society in the proportion that they consume products resulting from the utilization of these resources, noting the increasing interest in plant-based diets to improve human and planetary health. Further, it calls on society, through these stakeholders, to conceive and enact appropriate long-term strategies and to support, further develop and embrace the concepts of CA as a fundamental element in achieving agricultural-related Sustainable Development Goals including those with a social and economic perspective, and those of ensuring the continuity of the land's ongoing capacities to yield food, other agricultural products, water and environmental services in perpetuity. It follows that the environmental services provided by farmers who nurture soil health should be recognised and recompensed by society.

ACTION PLAN

The Congress participants declare their commitment to engage the CA Community in achieving the following goal and to taking the actions needed for this.

GOAL

Given the urgent need to accelerate the global move to sustainable food systems, and in particular to respond to the global challenge to mitigate the advancing climate change, the Congress agreed that the CA Community should aim at bringing at least 50% of the global cropland area or 700 million hectares under good quality CA systems by 2050.

These holistic CA systems would involve CA farmers in engaging progressively in the full array of sustainable approaches to farming, adapted to their ecological and social conditions so as to maximise the sustainability benefits of growing crops without tillage.

PRACTICAL ACTIONS

To achieve the goal, a massive boost should be injected into the momentum of the CA Community's activities with a concentration on the following six themes:

1. Catalysing the formation of additional farmer-run CA groups in countries and regions in which they do not yet exist and enabling all groups to accelerate CA adoption and enhancement, maintaining high quality standards.

2. Greatly speeding up the invention and mainstreaming of a growing array of truly sustainable CA-based technologies, including through engaging with other movements committed to sustainable farming.
3. Embedding the CA Community in the main global efforts to shift to sustainable food management and governance systems and replicating the arrangements at local levels.
4. Assuring that CA farmers are justly rewarded for their generation of public goods and environmental services.
5. Mobilizing recognition, institutional support and additional funding from governments and international development institutions to support good quality CA programme expansion.
6. Building global public awareness of the steps being taken by our CA Community to make food production and consumption sustainable.

In order to facilitate the implementation of above thematic activities, the Congress endorses the need to: (a) operate the Global CA-CoP as an independent non-profit mechanism, with ongoing hosting support of ECAF and patronage by FAO, and with an advisory panel, and authorised to set up task forces and working groups to help implement the priority practical actions; (b) strengthen the CA-CoP Moderator capacity within the CA Community; and (c) create a CA Hall-of-Fame in time for the 9th Congress. It would also oversee and support future processes for convening CA World Congresses. The Global CA-CoP would require a permanent IT systems development and operating capacity, with sound financial management, programme monitoring and reporting capacities.

The Congress participants feel confident that much of the extended moderation function can continue to be provided by CA Community participants who are willing to provide their time, knowledge, expertise and energy on a voluntary basis.

This Congress has reinforced our conviction that it is entirely possible to meet the global goal of making our food systems sustainable in every sense of the word and that our Community has a vital role to play in this transformation. Our own experience shows that farming can quickly respond to new challenges when farmers see that these are in their own interests.

Our aim is to engage our whole Community as quickly as possible in creating and spreading optimal and profitable low-input, high-output CA-based farming systems that are dependent on biological forms of crop protection and plant nutrition management with maximum energy efficiency and minimal use of externally sourced inputs. This approach shows our commitment to making all we do together in future still better than what we now do!

We pledge to work at all levels with all who share this vision of farming for the future, seeking their guidance and sharing what we learn with them. And we will also partner with those who champion complementary changes in downstream elements of the food chain to bring to healthy nutrition for all people and the elimination of food waste.

Healthy soils are the very heart of healthy lives and a healthy planet!