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Europe's re-discovery of the soybean

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Europe is re-discovering grain legumes to diversity cropping systems. This is supported by growing consumer interest in locally-resourced food, enterprising farmers, and innovative plant breeders. European soybean production (incl. countries outside the European Union) increased from approximately 2.2M to 4.4M ha between 2011 and 2017. This contribution addresses this development, provides an overview of soybean production and the supporting scientific and technical capabilities, and sets out the prospects for sustained change in how Europe's plant-protein needs are met.

The soybean was introduced from China to Europe in 19th century. It grows well in most of the main European cropping regions. The Danube river catchment stretching from southern Germany, across Austria and along a basin with highly fertile Chernozem soils is particularly relevant. Production is commonly linked to dedicated soy-based value chains where there is a premium for crop produce of known origin grown to European Union production standards. Corporate social responsibility in the food and feed sector is an important driver for the development of soybean cropping.

The Donau Soja Association, founded in 2012, combines diverse agricultural, commercial, scientific and policy resources and focuses them on the locally-tailored development of soybean cropping and its value chains. This experience shows that high seed quality, especially protein content, color and size will improve use for food, and further development of day length insensitivity (early maturity), and cold tolerance at flowering will improve crop adaptation. Other development targets are efficient small-scale local processing, precision farming technology, and improved crop protection schemes.

There is growing consensus in Europe that re-balancing of Europe crop production and plant-protein sourcing will further the sustainable development of farming and food systems. Expanding soy production is an important part of this and the future.