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Ecublens, the 19 August 2024

Subject: Petition for the future of the Bassenges farm at EPFL

Dear members of the ETH board,

We address you this message as the members of the Bassenges Farm ([detailed info here](#)) to transmit you the signatures of the petition that we initiated to save the agricultural future of the farm. A copy of this letter was also sent via email. As you know, EPFL is planning to re-affect the 300 years old farm buildings to the new Bernoulli Center ([details from EPFL here](#)). Our petition obtained **8069 signatures** ([see petition here](#)) and was handed to EPFL on June, 28th.

After a meeting with EPFL's vice presidency on June, 22nd ([summary here](#)), we understand that EPFL is currently going forward with its project of annexing the farm buildings entirely, which compromises our project. EPFL explained that the farm buildings cannot be maintained for their agricultural purpose as the Confederation is now pressing EPFL to justify the land occupation. If land occupation is tense around the campus, we are surprised by the lack of a detailed study on potential alternative sites for this center, which also does not offer any additional space for students. We also regret that we were kept in the dark for more than one year (without any response to our mails from EPFL) and that we were not consulted at all to understand our needs to maintain the farm and to discuss if sharing some spaces could be an option.

EPFL also claimed that the farm does not fulfil the missions of EPFL (research, innovation, education). We argue here that the farm may well fit with EPFL's missions. We host school classes about once a week as well as many student's projects. We are now proposing to integrate the farm activities in some of EPFL's courses, such as, for example, the new sustainability course that will be mandatory to all 1st year students next year. While we do not propose high-tech innovations, we believe that our low-tech, community-based model is also innovative and may inspire students and research on many topics. We supervise each semester some students projects from bachelor, master or even PhD level at the farm already and would be happy to discuss future collaboration with EPFL.

Despite EPFL's vow for a more sustainable campus, there is nothing sustainable to lunch an agricultural project for only 6 years. Economically, it is a difficult situation for us as it took time to renovate the farm to our needs and to grow the fields while improving their diversity and fertility ; socially, we left our previous life and invested all our time in this project; ecologically, it seems difficult to maintain all the additional ecological structures that we installed during those few years if we leave.

We do not doubt that a mathematic center may be needed at EPFL. We however question the necessity of stopping the farm activities. We believe that other locations may be proposed for the Bernoulli Center. Many architecture students are working with us to think about alternatives. For instance, would the castle of Bassenges alone not suffice? Is the planned surface of 2000 m² for the Bernoulli Center justified? And what about the cost when most departments of EPFL are subject to budget cuts? As an alternative site, would the EPFL Garage (which lies in front of a beautiful garden) next to the castle of Bassenges not be adequate? Are there no other sites negotiable with the nearby communes? It seems that such alternatives were mostly discarded as it appeared "easier" to simply dismiss a few farmers and thank them for their nice work.

With the petition and this message, we ask you to seriously consider our demands. We would be happy to think of solutions which are beneficial for all parties too. We will continue to encourage people on the campus, around the farm and from architecture offices to support us by thinking out of the box and propose alternatives for a really sustainable future around the campus of EPFL. With the hope that we can find a suitable solution for all, we ask you to address us an official response to the petition and this message by end of October 2024. The response will be shared with the people who signed the petition.

A copy of this mail was also shared publicly on the petition page and our website.

We address you our sincere greetings,
The farmers of Bassenges

Additional information

Below, you will find a quick presentation that we showed to EPFL in June 2024 as well as some more details about the farm.

Summary presentation about the farm

Download here: <https://fermedebassengescloud.ch/index.php/s/agmL3AFsJciQBkE>

Additional details

The text below adds some details about the farm and the collaboration with EPFL so far.

Four years ago, our group of 6 persons was selected by UNIL and EPFL to take over the farm located just next to the campus of EPFL and the fields around UNIL. This farm which belongs to EPFL and the fields which belong to UNIL are a historical legacy of the location of the current campus which was still covered by agricultural lands in the early 70s (have a look here : <https://s.geo.admin.ch/rvu9t4qivabi>).

Since four years, we have invested all our time and passion to create a new organic farm close to the campus where we produce mainly organic vegetables and sheep cheese. We attempt to work in a closed loop system, showing how we can grow local products without external inputs, while taking care of our biodiversity, limiting greenhouse emissions and promoting the dialogue between producers, neighbours and students.

After four years, our project starts to thrive, with currently 6 employed persons and 3 apprentices living in the farm and two children born there. As well as 25 milk sheep (+40 lambs), 3 horses, 1 cow, 3 pigs and some chicken.

Recently, EPFL has announced their will to take back the entire farm buildings in 2026 to install the [new Bernoulli Center](#). This decision greatly impacts us, as a farm cannot exist without buildings. We need them to host the animals, to store the machines, the hay and the vegetables. Without buildings, we would not even be recognised as an agricultural enterprise from a legal point of view.

Although our lease has a fixed term of 6 years, it is tacitly renewable. Before signing the lease, we were assured that except for minor changes, the project should be continued for a longer period, as it was a requirement to plant trees for example. As EPFL highlights, our lease is only 1 CHF. To our understanding, the counterpart was that we renovated the buildings (apartments, cheese factory, sheepfold, cold rooms, etc.) and diversified the fields by providing the manual labor for free and that we engage in different research projects with the campus as well as by providing healthy food. This seemed as a win-win solution and everyone seemed satisfied with this partnership so far.

You have to understand that without buildings, our project will die. We will have to relocate everything which we worked for and we will need to find a new farm (which remains very difficult in Switzerland for our type of small community-based project, hence our initial motivation to work with the campus). Even if EPFL do not plan to change the agricultural lands, no farmers will be able to maintain the type of diversity which we have installed here and the land will inevitably be leased to an established farmer who owns a farm nearby. He/she will very likely go back to one large vegetable/cereal plot as it is the only economically viable option for a large farmer. We want to stress that currently, 3 agricultural enterprises disappear each day in Switzerland, healthy local quality products remain marginal and biodiversity/environmental issues become gradually more serious. After initialising such

a project, we do not understand the message that EPFL wants to send to the citizens of Switzerland. We are also surprised by the lack of interest of EPFL to our project as we had very limited contact with EPFL's mediacom except at the start.

In that sense, we understand that our humble "low-tech" project shows some contrast with the "high-tech" EPFL. However, we believe it also provides many services to EPFL. Among others, we would like to highlight a few of them here :

- We experiment and promote sustainable farming which provides new ideas at a moment where our agricultural system undergoes a social, economical and environmental crisis, as highlighted by the recent farmer movements across Europe and Switzerland. We host almost every week classes from the campus or elsewhere to tackle those issues. Finally, we collaborate on many students projects from EPFL every semester for free ([see list here](#)).
- We produce healthy organic products available for the students and inhabitants.
- In addition to providing material products, our farm offers an environment that encourages research topics with students ([some of our projects are highlighted here](#)), but also provides a welcoming site, where people from different communities (students, neighbours) can meet. To our understanding, this also responds to a goal of the "[Schéma directeur des Hautes Ecoles](#)" to better integrate the campus with its surroundings (a city within the city).
- We maintain the historical farm buildings (classified in the historic monuments list of the Vaud canton) and increase the ecological value of the fields around the farm by planting fruits trees and hedges and by maintaining pasture land and diversified vegetable fields.

Newspaper articles :

<https://www.24heures.ch/manifestation-sur-le-campus-la-ferme-de-lepfl-dechiree-entre-maths-et-agriculture-473689392227>

<https://www.rts.ch/info/regions/vald/2024/article/l-epfl-veut-transformer-sa-ferme-ecologique-en-centre-de-sciences-fondamentales-28552337.html>

<https://www.evenement.ch/articles/menace-sur-une-ferme-et-son-ecosysteme>

<https://lecourrier.ch/2024/03/21/sauver-la-ferme-de-bassenges/>

<https://www.24heures.ch/epfl-letat-ne-peut-rien-pour-la-ferme-de-bassenges-500914123078>

<https://latele.ch/emissions/info-vaud/info-vaud-s-2024-e-43?s=1>

<https://www.24heures.ch/agroecologie-lepfl-songe-a-sacrifier-sa-ferme-modele-689195894360>