

04.12.2024 – 12:05 Uhr

The Future of Nutrition: Dr. Clemens Röhl on Regional Plant Research and Its Importance for Health and the Environment



Freising (ots) -

Why is the cultivation of regional foods crucial for reducing carbon dioxide emissions? How can innovative research on apple varieties help combat allergies? Dr. Clemens Röhl, project leader of the Interreg-funded Regio-Plants project, provides insights in this interview into the world of regional food research and its impact on our health. He also explains how a strong network of research institutions, fostered by Interreg funding, can shape the future of nutrition.

Interview with Clemens Röhl, PhD

Priv.-Doz. Mag. Clemens Röhl, PhD, Head of Research Center Wels, is the project leader at the lead partner, University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria - Campus Wels, Centre of Excellence for Food Technology and Nutrition for the Interreg-funded project Regio-Plants.

Dr. Röhl, what is the focus of the Interreg-funded project Regio-Plants?

"Well, the Regio-Plants project primarily focuses on bringing regional raw materials and plant-based foods into the spotlight of research. And this can be achieved very effectively through the Interreg project."

What makes Interreg so special?

"The funding provided through the Interreg scheme is special because it supports specific geographical regions. It enables close cross-border collaborations, for example, between Bavaria and Upper Austria. In Innsbruck, we have the Austrian Drug Screening Institute as a partner; in Upper Austria, the Food Competence Centre FFoQSI is also on board; and at the Weihenstephan-Triesdorf University of Applied Sciences, we have fruit cultivation expertise. At the Technical University of Munich, we have methods that we don't have at the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria, and it all complements each other wonderfully."

Do you believe the network created through this project will also be beneficial for future projects?

"We've seen through this project that our cooperation partners share extremely similar interests but have different approaches. We're confident that there will definitely be future collaborations."

Why is regional food production so important?

"Regionality in food is a key aspect because global food transportation accounts for approximately 3 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide emissions. That's almost 10% of total global carbon dioxide emissions. This means that food transportation plays a significant role. That's why it makes sense to focus on regional food and bring it into the spotlight of both science and the public."

Which types of food are you currently focusing on?

"A major focus of this project is the apple. The apple has widely documented positive effects. There are numerous scientific studies that prove the saying, 'An apple a day keeps the doctor away,' is grounded in science. At the same time, around 10% of Germans are allergic to apples. This is because the apple allergen is recognised by the body as being very similar to the birch pollen allergen, which is why

many people have allergic reactions to apples. This project aims to identify apple varieties, as well as cultivation and storage methods, that ultimately result in a healthy apple that consumers can tolerate."

Are there already any initial findings?

"Optimisation primarily comes through variety selection. At the HSWT's (Weihenstephan-Triesdorf University of Applied Sciences) cultivation site in Schlachters, over 150 old apple varieties are available for research into their allergenic potential and health-promoting properties. Even just by selecting apple varieties, a lot can be achieved. Our initial data shows that there's a significant difference between various apple varieties. However, we can't yet say that older apple varieties are automatically superior to commercially available varieties in terms of allergen content compared. There's still a lot of research to be done."

What else do you hope to achieve with Regio-Plants in the future?

"Firstly, we want to further expand this network. In terms of the project's focus on apple varieties, it's naturally interesting to select varieties with low allergenic potential and crossbreed them with varieties that offer good yield and storability. Such projects require a long timeframe. Another project goal is to explore how plant-based compounds from regional crops work. Plants and plant-based compounds are the foundation of many of the medicines we use today. Understanding how these plants affect the human body can help us discover new plants that can be commercially utilised with similar effects. This could even lead to the development of medications based on these plant-derived compounds. The future potential here is enormous."

About EU4Regions:

Cohesion policy has defined clear objectives for the 2021-2027 funding period: A smart Europe through innovation, a greener, low-carbon Europe, a more connected Europe, a more social Europe and a Europe that is closer to its citizens. Sustainable challenges are becoming the focus of society, particularly in Germany and its neighbouring countries. The "EU4regions" project will produce high-quality multimedia and journalistic information on cohesion policy and then disseminate it widely. Within 12 months, Interreg projects from western and eastern Germany and neighbouring countries/regions will be presented to highlight local challenges. The countries concerned are Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and Denmark. Our thematic focus is on sustainability, whereby we understand sustainability as a whole. Although climate issues are at the centre of attention, they are complemented by economic and social aspects. The aim is to show how EU cohesion policy affects regions and people.

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