



European Commission
Directorate-General for Agriculture

Newsletter

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Action plan for organic food and farming receives Council blessing

The Agriculture Council of 18 October 2004 adopted conclusions that kick-start the European Commission's proposed action plan for organic food and farming. This is a significant step in a process that began with the statement by the June 2001 European Council in Gothenburg that the CAP should 'contribute to achieving sustainable development by increasing its emphasis on encouraging healthy, high-quality products, environmentally sustainable production methods, including organic production, renewable raw materials and the protection of biodiversity'.

In 2001, the Council requested the Commission to translate the statement into action, for instance by developing the market for organic food and improving standards by increasing their efficacy, transparency and consumer confidence. Since 2001, this theme has been taken up by, *inter alia*, the EU's sixth environment action programme, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and the European Conference on Rural Development in Salzburg in November 2003.

With this impetus behind it, the Commission launched a detailed review of the potential of the organic production sector, and possible market opportunities for organic products. A draft action plan was tested with as many elements of civil society as possible. This consultation process included public hearings held by the European Parliament and the Commission and an online public dialogue.

The Commission then presented a communication on the European action plan for organic food and farming, accompanied by an explanatory Commission staff working paper, in June 2004.

The October Agriculture Council gave the action plan its unanimous approval. It includes a set of 21 actions whose rapid and consistent implementation should help remove existing barriers to growth, and thus lead to the strengthening and expansion of the organic sector. These actions are concentrated on the following main axes:

- developing the organic food market (increasing consumer awareness and providing more information and promotion for consumers and operators);
- optimising public policy towards organic farming (encouraging Member States to make optimum use

of rural development measures, and strengthening research on organic farming);

- improving and reinforcing the EU's organic farming standards, import and inspection requirements.

Several 'priority actions' were also endorsed by the Council. They may be divided between those best undertaken at EU level (for example, completing and further harmonising the standards for organic production) and those within Member States' competence (such as optimising integration of organic farming into the rural development programmes).

Full details of the action plan and the 21 actions can be found on the Commission's website at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/qual/organic/plan/index_en.htm

Outgoing Commissioner Fischler welcomed the Council's decision, stating: 'The fact that the Council shares our analysis of the situation illustrates that we have now a solid and workable platform on which to build organic farming policy. I have consistently maintained that organic farming, with its focus on care for the environment, high standards of animal welfare, and production of higher-value-added quality foods tailored to consumer demands, should occupy a central place in the new CAP'.

It should be noted that several Member States (Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Slovenia) issued a common declaration on the particular importance they attach to questions relating to genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and especially coexistence between organic and GMO crops. The Commission has already produced (in September 2003) a recommendation on 'Guidelines for the development of national strategies and best practices to ensure the coexistence of genetically modified crops with conventional and organic farming'. This is to be followed by a report on the experience gained in the Member States in the two years following the recommendation (accompanied by possible policy options, if appropriate).

In the meantime the action plan will get under way. The Council has invited the Commission to advance its implementation during 2005 with proposals aimed at simplifying existing measures covering organic production and ensuring overall coherence.

Reaching out to the EU's outermost regions

At the end of October, the Commission agreed a proposal that, if adopted, will reshape the way in which agricultural support measures are conceived and implemented in the EU's outermost regions. The proposed regulation gives much more say in decision-making to those regions themselves.

Under the new approach, decision-making will be decentralised, and the outermost regions (in practice, local authorities designated by the Member State concerned) will have a greater say at the annual programming stage. Simplified management arrangements will allow for speedier adaptation of support measures and aim at improving targeting so that measures will be better attuned to the specific needs of the outermost regions. The additional constraints faced by those regions include: remoteness, insularity, small size, difficult topography and climate, and economic dependence on a few products.

The programmes concerned involve:

- measures aimed at streamlining the management of the supply of essential products for human consumption, for processing or for use as agricultural inputs (e.g. animal feed, hops, rice, sugar, meat, butter, cheese and vegetable oils);

- measures intended to support local agricultural production and marketing. All agricultural products are eligible for support. Support under this scheme will be compatible with other support measures taken within the CAP.

The regulation, which is intended to come into effect in 2006, would not change the amount of EU funding (EUR 216 million per year ⁽¹⁾ shared among the regions concerned). Nor will the outermost regions lose the advantage of having 100 % funding of their measures by the EU.

Seven regions in the EU are classified as 'outermost' in this context:

- the Spanish autonomous community of the Canary Islands;
- the four French overseas departments (DOMs): Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique and Réunion;
- the Portuguese autonomous regions of the Azores and Madeira

The proposal now goes forward to the European Parliament and the Council.

⁽¹⁾ Support for animal produce not taken into account.

News in brief

Agricultural trade website

The Agriculture DG launched a new website in October which gathers in one place the Commission's statistics on the EU's agricultural trade with third countries with a strong emphasis on user-friendly presentation.

Putting these EU trade statistics online should help meet the consistent demand, both from within the Commission and from outside, for official, targeted and up-to-date EU agricultural trade data. Until now this information has either not been compiled or has not been made generally available. Now it can be found in one easy move, by going to:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/agrista/tradstats/index_en.htm

The data are presented in a number of ways: for example, by value, on a quantitative basis, by destination (for exports), by country of origin (for imports) and broken down into the main agricultural commodities. The data are, in many cases, displayed so as to show the development of trade over recent years, globally and with several regions of the world.

Furthermore, information is provided on Combined Nomenclature (CN) codes, on product definitions and on the geographic zones involved. This should help in a very practical way, by reducing research time, as the trade information most in demand can be found on one site.

The website's tables and graphs (of which there are more than 250) illustrate the EU's agricultural trade position in the world. The values and quantities are very up to date, covering the years 1995 to 2003 for the EU-15, and from 1999 onwards for the enlarged EU-25. Not only are the EU-15 and EU-25 data shown separately, there are also detailed figures for the 10 new Member States, and for Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and Croatia.

The figures are based on Eurostat data.

