

COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS**of 17 December 2003****Strategy for a European action plan for organic food and farming**

(2004/C 34/03)

In May 2001 a conference entitled 'Organic Food and Farming — Towards Partnership and Action in Europe', organised by the Danish Ministry of Agriculture, was held in Denmark. That conference followed on from one held in Austria in 1999 and was aimed at introducing an action plan for further development of organic farming in Europe. The matter was placed on the agenda for the Agriculture Council meeting on 19 June 2001.

The European Commission prepared a paper containing an analysis of the possibility of a European action plan for organic food and farming (15619/02 of 20 December 2002).

At meetings held in Brussels in 2003, Member States unanimously welcomed the Commission's initiative and called for work to be set in hand on drawing up the action plan.

At its meeting in Salzburg in November 2003, the European Conference on Rural Development stressed the key aim of strengthening the competitiveness of the farming sector through diversification, innovation and value added products, taking into account the diversity of agricultural potential in different rural areas.

Whereas:

there is a need to standardise the wide variety of definitions of 'organic farming' used by bodies such as the European Union, the United Nations (FAO and Codex Alimentarius), individual countries and international organisations (the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)). This makes it necessary to try and agree on a single definition;

there is a need to make organic farming one of the key components of the European food supply chain, along with typical products and high-quality products, as a forward-looking factor for sustainability of the entire farming and agri-foodstuffs sector. Organic farming therefore needs to be supported by a suitable integrated European research and innovation system;

organic farming has been seen to play a vital role in protecting biodiversity and conserving non-renewable resources used in agriculture, as well as for the implementation of rural development policy and for food safety and quality, thereby acting as a driving force for the entire European farming and agri-foodstuffs sector;

the new CAP has a crucial part to play in ensuring that it is actually possible to maintain and develop the sector's production base, for which purpose it is essential that the action plan also evaluates the impact of the different instruments for implementation of the reform on organic farming and thus gives additional guidance to Member States on their choices regarding these instruments;

organic farming has been shown to serve an important purpose in environmental policies, particularly in reducing harmful emissions into the atmosphere, in combating desertification and in protecting and conserving water resources and natural habitats;

in the light of the decisions taken by the Union concerning GMO production, marketing and labelling and of the guidelines for coexistence of genetically modified crops with conventional and organic farming, the question of compatibility between GMO production and organic production needs to be considered, in particular regarding avoidance of adventitious presence of GMO;

the expansion of organic farming should be placed on a permanent basis by an increase in demand for organic products. Therefore initiatives to improve the marketing conditions and to ensure better consumer information play a key role.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION THEREFORE:

- calls on the Commission to update the objectives set in the preparatory paper, so as to tailor measures under the European action plan to the strategic role to be played by organic farming under the Union's environmental policies and to background developments as a result of CAP reform;
- calls on the Commission, in the light of the decisions taken by the Union concerning GMO production, marketing and labelling and of the guidelines for coexistence of genetically modified crops with conventional and organic farming, to include among the action plan's strategic objectives the protection and enhancement of organic products by means of appropriate measures for organic production, *inter alia* control of adventitious presence of GMO;

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- calls on the Commission to promote, not least internationally, moves to arrive at a definition of 'organic farming' and of 'organic product'. The Commission should accordingly evaluate the costs and benefits of using the European logo for all organic products irrespective of their origin without excluding the use of other logos, and introduce effective campaigns, targeting all European consumers, to promote consumption and trade with third countries of such products and improve their free movement;
 - calls on the Commission to include among the action plan's strategic objectives the evaluation of possibilities for Member States to encourage voluntary initiatives to establish rural areas for the advancement of value-added production, such as that of organic, typical and traditional products, in a drive for local development of quality products. In the aim of thus increasing the competitiveness of the farming sector as well as the organisation between the various operators of the organic production chain, the diversity of agricultural potential in different rural areas shall be taken into account;
 - calls on the Commission to further examine the need of setting up, at European level:
 - (a) an independent Committee to provide scientific and technical advice, guide research and innovation in organic farming and promote synergy in the framework of a network between centres of excellence in individual Member States;
 - (b) an economic observatory to evaluate the evolution of the supply and demand of organic produce;
 - calls on the Commission to continue work on adapting basic inspection rules, with the aim of further bringing the entire organic supply chain within the inspection system following a risk-based approach, of enhancing product traceability and of streamlining bureaucratic procedures. In doing so due regard shall also be given to imports of organic products from third countries;
 - calls on the Commission, lastly, to inform the Council on the progress of the European action plan by the end of February 2004, with a view to final submission of the plan by the end of May 2004.
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