

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Future outlook for agriculture in areas with special handicaps (upland, island and outlying areas)'

(2008/C 120/11)

On 27 September 2007, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(a) of the Implementing Provisions of the Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the

Future outlook for agriculture in areas with specific natural handicaps (upland, island and outlying areas).

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 27 November 2007. The rapporteur was Mr Bros.

At its 440th plenary session, held on 12 and 13 December (meeting of 12 December), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 127 votes to one, with six abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 On 13 September 2006, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted an own-initiative opinion on the *Future outlook for agriculture in areas with specific natural handicaps (upland, island and outlying areas)* ⁽¹⁾.

1.1.1 In this opinion, the EESC devoted the whole of chapter 4 to the problems faced by upland areas, and among other things emphasised the need for:

- a specific EU policy for upland areas;
- a harmonised EU definition;
- priority for upland areas when allocating appropriations under the second pillar;
- consolidation of compensation measures for upland farmers;
- integration of agricultural and regional policies to ensure they have a greater impact on upland areas.

1.2 On 7 December 2006, during the policy dialogue concluding the Committee of the Regions' plenary session, Commission president José Manuel Barroso spoke out in favour of drawing up a **Green Paper on the future of policies for upland areas**.

1.3 The EESC therefore feels it appropriate to draw up an additional opinion, in order to express its views on the principles which could underlie such a Green Paper.

1.4 Upland areas provide all European citizens with numerous services as well as public and economic benefits, for example:

- reduced natural risks, to the benefit of people living in both upland areas and elsewhere, e.g. as a result of protecting transport corridors;

- landscapes which can be used for leisure and tourism (essential for citizens of an urbanised continent and for European competitiveness);

- significant biodiversity;

- unique water reserves;

- high-quality products, especially foodstuffs.

1.5 Unless upland areas are appropriately managed by people who live there, the production of such goods and services will be jeopardised.

1.6 Today, we have to face up to major new challenges, both present and future, such as intensifying economic competition, demographic change, climate change, etc. Although these challenges concern all regions, they have a much stronger impact on mountainous areas and a specific approach is therefore needed.

1.7 However, most existing policies which apply to upland areas are sectoral and are often adopted outside these areas without paying sufficient attention to their specific features. Policies on upland areas tend to be unimaginative, they often cover other areas, and fail to take the specific features of upland areas sufficiently into account. At the same time, European and national policies are increasingly focusing on the comparative strengths of regions requiring promotion or development.

1.8 Despite their importance at European level, upland areas are to some extent neglected by European policies, and there is a serious failure to acknowledge their considerable potential in terms of contributing to European growth and diversity, particularly in view of their innovative approaches.

1.9 The EESC is therefore in favour of a much more consistent and integrated policy approach. Upland areas require a cross-sectoral and territorial approach to their sustainable development.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 318, 23.12.2006, p. 93.

1.10 A **Green Paper on the future of policies for upland areas** would help to rationalise and consolidate existing policies and initiatives at European level in order to make them more effective in the specific context of upland areas. This particularly applies to agriculture in upland areas, as mentioned in this opinion. In most European upland areas, farming is the foundation on which other socio-economic, agro-industrial and tourism-related activities are built, and it determines the attractiveness of such regions. The Common Agricultural Policy therefore has a key role to play and must be included in the review of European policies in upland areas envisaged by the Green Paper.

1.11 The EESC therefore calls for the Green Paper on the future of policies for upland areas to be added as soon as possible to the European Commission's work programme in order to define the issues of strategic importance for upland areas in the Member States of the European Union, to clarify the respective tasks of the various levels of authority and economic sectors and coordination between them, to consolidate specific statistical data used as a basis for policies in such areas, to study ancillary and support measures to be put in place in such areas in the light of the strategic objectives defined

by the European Union, and to promote the development of European and national policies.

1.12 By making it easier to tap into the comparative strengths of upland areas, the Green Paper on the future of policies for upland areas will also tie in with the re-launched Lisbon strategy and the Gothenburg strategy. It will therefore contribute to the objectives of growth and employment, and will help the European Union to become a more internationally competitive knowledge-based economy in the years to come. Upland areas have a major contribution to make to Europe as a whole, and it is important to make the best possible use of their potential for innovation and growth.

1.12.1 At the EESC's plenary session of 11 and 12 July 2007, Ms Danuta Hübner, Commissioner for regional policy, referred to the EU's territorial agenda and announced that in 2008 a report on territorial cohesion would study the impact of major future challenges on the regions and means of dealing with them. The EESC urges that the specific features of upland, island and outermost regions be taken sufficiently into account in the current discussions on the EU's cohesion policy and in the preparation of the Territorial Agenda.

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The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS
