Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on ‘The situation of nature and nature conservation in Europe’

(2001/C 221/22)

On 3 July 2000 the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on: The situation of nature and nature conservation in Europe.

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 11 May 2001. The rapporteur was Mr Ribbe.

At its 382nd plenary session, held on 30 and 31 May 2001 (meeting of 30 May), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by a unanimous vote.

1. **Aim and structure of the opinion**

1.1. In drawing up this opinion, the Committee wishes to represent a remarkable natural heritage. The continent of Europe owes its appeal and fascination to its great variety of different types of landscape and animal and plant species. The preservation of this natural heritage has become a key task for politicians, administrations and the general public.

1.2. Part 2 of this document draws attention to the importance of Europe’s natural heritage and the need for the EU to coordinate nature conservation at a general level. Part 3 looks at the way in which the EU directives on this matter have been implemented. Part 4 — the key part of the opinion — examines the coherence of the policy pursued. It analyses whether greater importance is now being attached to nature conservation in the various fields of EU policy than was the case in past years, and examines where improvements are urgently required. The observations made in this opinion focus on policy areas in which the EU brings a decisive influence to bear.

1.3. There is no doubt that a great variety of measures have an effect on nature e.g. building development, recreational use of land, earth-removal, agriculture and forestry, the development of transport and infrastructure, the building of canals and the damming and diversion of waterways, to name but a few. In this opinion the Committee focuses its attention, in particular, on the CAP, through which the EU brings a considerable influence to bear on the way in which land is utilised and consequently on the state of nature conservation. The incorporation of nature conservation into agriculture is of key importance, since 44 % of the EU’s surface area and large parts of the NATURA 2000 areas are used for agricultural purposes.

2. **Initial situation as regards nature conservation in Europe**

2.1. Europe does not have just an outstanding cultural heritage. The various cultural and natural landscapes also represent a remarkable natural heritage. The continent of Europe owes its appeal and fascination to its great variety of different types of landscape and animal and plant species. The preservation of this natural heritage has become a key task for politicians, administrations and the general public.

2.1.1. Nature conservation is, however, not just an end in itself. Nature plays a vital role in our lives and in the economy; it provides an important resource for economic activities and is a prerequisite for a variety of sporting, leisure and recreational activities, health care and also some forms of medical treatment.

2.2. The great diversity of animal and plant species has arisen as a result of the different conditions to be found in nature and the corresponding uses which have been made of these natural conditions. Many species and habitats therefore depend directly on how land is managed. Many of the species which now require a higher level of protection came into existence only as a result of what we now regard as the ‘extensive’ agricultural production methods used over the last few centuries. ‘Europe’, however, is much too varied to enable us to speak of comparable and transferable conditions in respect of nature and the landscape. As a consequence, nature conservation requirements also differ to a considerable extent: nature conservation conditions and problems in the vast forests of Scandinavia differ from those in the Scottish Highlands, the Alps, the arid Spanish Extremadura or the Member States or regions(1) in which intensive agriculture is frequently practised.

2.3. Preservation of nature and natural diversity is, above all, a task for the individual Member States, regions and local authorities. Every member of the public, too, is called upon to help preserve nature and the environment. The many positive examples of measures which have already been taken by private individuals, nature conservation organisations and farmers, show that many people have an affinity with the conservation of nature and the landscape. This is a classic case

(1) e.g. Brittany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, north-west Germany, south-east England, the Po valley, etc.
of a task requiring a bottom-up approach but which needs, however, to be backed up by political measures. A coordinated commitment at EU level, too, is therefore not only advisable but also absolutely necessary. Nature conservation in Europe cannot be successful in the absence of top-level coordination by the EU.

2.3.1. This coordination is necessary, on the one hand, because many species are not tied to one single regional habitat but may migrate over thousands of kilometres between their summer and winter quarters. Nature knows no boundaries. Many species, such as migratory cranes, can only be successfully preserved if they are protected not only in their breeding grounds and summer quarters, e.g. in northern Europe, but also in their winter quarters, e.g. in Spain. Furthermore, migratory species — just like human beings moving on foot or by car — require not only resting places but also corridors for their journeys between their winter and summer quarters. Europe also provides winter quarters for Asian migratory birds which breed in the wide open expanses of Siberia, and breeding grounds for migratory birds which overwinter in Africa. Species diversity in areas outside Europe therefore often plays a decisive role in nature conservation in Europe.

2.3.2. The need for general EU-wide coordination also arises because, even though there are animal and plant species which are not common to the whole of Europe, they still form part of Europe's heritage. To put it another way, the protection of these species is in the interests not only of a given nation but also of Europe as a whole, just as it is also generally accepted that particular, national cultural monuments should be protected at EU level. One example of such a species of animal is Europe's largest bird capable of flight, namely the Great Bustard (Otis tarda); the last remaining birds of this species are to be found above all in the Iberian peninsula — the c. 15 000 birds living in Spain and the 200-300 birds living in Portugal account for approximately half of the total world population. Further examples are: the brown bear, the wolf, the lynx, the bison and a large number of bats and even insects (for example butterflies, such as the Marsh Fritillary (1)) and the Dusky Large Blue (2), and the Alpine Sawyer Beetle (3)). In order to protect these species, special measures are required which frequently involve the maintenance of traditional forms of agriculture that are not viable in today's competitive environment.

2.4. There has been a drastic and rapid decline in the diversity of animal and plant species over the last few years. The suddenness of the decline is particularly worrying: within the space of a few years or decades a number of species have already become extinct, others face grave threats of extinction and yet others are endangered or potentially endangered. Only a small number of species have been able to adjust to the changed conditions of cultivation and are thriving. Generally speaking, however, the state of nature and nature conservation in Europe is a matter of considerable concern. Some spectacular successes in stabilising the numbers of particular species (e.g. birds of prey in central Europe) cannot hide the fact that the measures introduced in the last few years have regrettably been only partially effective and have been unable to intrinsically halt the overall decline, let alone reverse it. In its second report on the state of the environment in Europe (1999), the European Environment Agency (EEA) pointed out that wild species in Europe continued to be seriously endangered and the number of species in decline was increasing, that in many countries up to 50 % of the known species of vertebrates were threatened and that over a third of bird species in Europe were declining in number.

2.5. The causes of this phenomenon are very varied. The main threat today is clearly the reduction or disappearance of animal and plant species' habitats. In the past, direct persecution of particular species (bears, wolves and lynx) was more widespread than it is today; direct persecution does, however, remain a problem in some respects. Suitable habitats are being lost for a number of reasons: building developments, changes in agriculture and forestry practices, the use of pollutants and the fragmentation of wide areas of countryside as a result of, for example, the construction of roads and tourist infrastructure (in particular in coastal areas); this loss of suitable habitats has not yet been halted. On the contrary, land continues to be built on, wetlands continue to be drained, dry habitats continue to be irrigated and oligotrophic habitats continue to be eutrophicated or hypertrophicated. Responsibility for this lies not only with local and national bodies but also with the EU and its agricultural and structural policies, which focus too one-sidedly on production and growth, thereby bringing about and — in many cases — continuing to bring about these damaging changes. A number of EU Member States have in the meantime introduced measures to tackle this situation but these measures have failed to reverse the overall negative trends.

2.5.1. Fisheries policy constitutes a problem which, if anything, has been underestimated so far. Large fishing fleets are responding to the steadily growing economic pressure by using ever more effective fishing methods. Endangered species of marine turtles or marine mammals, e.g. seals such as the monk seal (Monachus monachus), small whales and dolphins, are frequently caught in trawl nets. Sustainable, traditional fishing methods, such as tuna fishing by rod and line, as practised by Spanish fishermen, are, however, finding it difficult to survive economically (4). The use of bodies of standing and running water for fish-farming is also a potential source of conflict in cases where they provide a habitat for fish-eating species (such as otters) or may suffer damage as a result of, for example: eutrophication caused by feed and fertilizer (and also by household sewage and industrial effluent); the introduction of calcium; stocking with alien species; and construction of ponds.

(1) Euphydryas (syn. Hyprdryas), aurinia.
(2) Maculinea nausithous.
(3) Rosalia alpina.
(4) It is important to inform the public on this matter. The flesh of tuna caught by rod and line is white, whilst that of tuna caught by trawling is red. Consumers can make their contribution to nature conservation through their choice of product.
2.5.2. Dramatic losses of species and therefore of genetic resources are not, however, confined to the wild; they are also occurring amongst farm animals and plant varieties. Many long-established regional breeds of domestic animals have already disappeared or are threatened with extinction. The situation in respect of varieties of cereals and vegetables which are now rare is equally problematic. This is a nature conservation issue to which neither state nor private nature conservation bodies have given sufficient thought so far. Although a rethink is starting to take place in this area and a number of measures have been taken in the context of agri-environmental programmes, much remains to be done. It has, nonetheless, been demonstrated that, for example, the marketing of old breeds of domestic animals (such as the Schwäbisch-Hall pig and the Iberian domestic pig) may be economically viable.

2.6. Long over a hundred years ago the differences in types of habitat and species prompted the division of Europe into specific biogeographical regions and the detailed examination of what types of habitat or species were of particular (European) importance in these regions and therefore required special protection. On the basis of earlier scientific work, Article 1c) of the flora/fauna/habitat Directive divided Europe into a number of biogeographical regions.

2.7. Since the early 1970s the Member States, the Commission and, in particular, its Directorate-General for the Environment, have been endeavouring to tackle the critical situation facing nature conservation not only by drawing up (and implementing) Directives but also by formulating special strategies (1) and incorporating nature conservation into other policy areas.


3.1. Two key nature conservation Directives have been adopted at EU level in the last few decades: the Directive on the conservation of wild birds (79/409/EEC) was adopted in 1979 and the flora/fauna/habitat Directive (92/43/EEC) was adopted in 1992. These two Directives have established vital prerequisites for the conservation of endangered types of habitat and species of animals and plants which are of European importance. One of the aims is to establish a European network of conservation areas of particular importance (NATURA 2000). Both of these Directives are therefore vital for the implementation of the 1992 Rio Convention on Biological Diversity, which was signed by the Member States and the EU.

3.2. The Committee would stress that the Directive on the conservation of wild birds and the fauna/flora/habitat Directive are vital pieces of legislation (2). It is quite clear that the decimation of animal and plant populations repeatedly catalogued by national nature conservation authorities and the EU institutions and lamented by those working in the field of nature conservation cannot be put down to an inadequate legal framework.

3.3. Implementation at national level of the abovementioned Directives is, however, frequently unsatisfactory and sometimes inadequate, as regards both the notification of NATURA-2000 areas and also the administration of areas which are or are to be protected.

3.4. In its opinion on the overall appraisal of the 5th EU Environmental Action Programme (EAP) (3), the Committee pointed out that: 'The failure of Member States to apply environmental legislation which they have adopted themselves in the Council of Ministers, or their application of it only under pressure (when taken to court by the EU), is damaging to the environment and impossible to explain to the public at large when an attempt is being made — supposedly — to alert the public to environmental issues: The opinion goes on to mention, as 'key examples' of such environmental legislation, the two important nature conservation directives, namely the Directive on the conservation of wild birds and the flora/fauna/habitat Directive.

3.5. The Committee criticises the Member States for dragging their heels over the notification and designation of conservation areas. The fact that 22 years after the adoption of the Directive on the conservation of wild birds, the Commission still has to resort to arguing with the Member States over the correct implementation and application of this Directive represents a very sad chapter in the history of European nature conservation. The Commission is still obliged to observe that in several Member States the areas classified as special conservation areas 'are still too few in number or cover too small an area' (even though the procedure for notifying protected areas should have been completed by 1981). Therefore, 'the Commission's present strategy revolves around initiating general infringement proceedings, rather than infringement proceedings on a site by site basis' (4). Both the legal and technical implementation of the flora/fauna/habitat Directive by the Member States has left and continues to leave very much to be desired. The timetable decided upon under the Directive by national environment ministers for setting up the necessary network of conservation areas under the title 'NATURA 2000' is in complete chaos, thereby having a profoundly detrimental effect on the real issue, namely the maintenance and safeguarding of important habitats and the conservation of rare animal and plant species.

3.5.1. Very considerable differences do, however, exist between the individual Member States in this respect. A number of countries have already, albeit belatedly, met a major part of their commitments and, to a large extent, completed the notification process with regard to their conservation areas. Other Member States have, on the other hand, particularly distinguished themselves in a negative sense although, in the case of these countries too, progress has fortunately been made in recent weeks and months.

(1) Community strategy for the maintenance of biological diversity (COM(98) 42).
(2) It should, however, be pointed out that the two Directives do not always pay adequate attention to their actual purpose, namely to promote preventive nature conservation.
(3) OJ C204, 18.7.2000, point 3.4.1.6.
3.5.2. The Commission has made it clear that payments under the Structural Funds, including Regulation (EC) No 1257/1999 on support for rural development, can only be made if the number of notifications is sufficient to ensure, to a large extent, that projects (co-)financed by the EU do not have a detrimental effect on potential areas of importance to flora, fauna and habitat. This clarification has proved to be extremely effective. Despite the fact that the freezing of payments — whatever political interpretation one may wish to place on this — has so far not been carried out comprehensively, it has stimulated the notification of areas (1). In this context the Committee draws attention to the fact that payments made under Regulation (EC) No 1257/1999, for example, represent an important source of income for farmers. It is therefore all the more important to complete the notification of conservation areas rapidly so that farmers do not have to suffer financially because of the authorities' failure to act.

3.6. There is a wide variety of reasons for the delays in implementing the EU Directives. One of the reasons is local opposition to the designation and establishment of the areas from rival parties competing for the use of the land. Local authorities fear that the development of housing or industrial estates will be restricted; transport-planners envisage problems in deciding where routes are to run; farmers — who are also facing growing pressure from housing developments and their consequences (building of estates, roads, leisure centres, etc.) — feel that restrictions are being placed on their use of land and on their future plans.

3.6.1. The conflict between nature conservation and agriculture, in particular, has over the last few years been a major factor in causing delays in the notification of conservation areas. Such conflicts arise as a result of a lack of understanding of the multi-stage procedure specified in the habitat Directive, namely: a preselection process involving the Member State and based on purely scientific criteria; an equally scientific selection process involving the Commission; and only then the actual designation of the area. The lack of public involvement, in some cases, in the initial phase (the preselection based on scientific criteria) has been seen by the parties concerned to show that decisions are being taken over the heads of the owners and users of the land concerned. It is essential to learn from this and make sure that extensive consultations are held at an earlier stage, without waiting until areas are designated and management plans discussed. By failing to consult and making designations that are sometimes incomprehensible (2), nature conservation officials make no friends for themselves. On the contrary, opposition grows and nature conservation acquires a negative public image.

3.6.2. Owners and users of land have in many cases up to now not been adequately informed about the consequences of the designation of areas for the NATURA 2000 network. This lack of involvement and the consequent uncertainty about the implications for the further use and management of the land has led to opposition. This opposition should be minimised by ensuring that following the conclusion of phase I and the selection of 'special areas of conservation', farmers receive financial compensation in respect of the nature conservation provisions desired by society, as set out in the flora/fauna/habitat Directive. In its capacity as the forum for dialogue between organised civil society, the Committee regards this measure as being of decisive importance in ensuring greater acceptance of nature conservation.

Administration of conservation areas

3.7. With the — albeit sluggish — extension of conservation areas, the focus is gradually shifting towards the administration of these areas in accordance with Article 6 of the flora/fauna/habitat Directive (establishment of conservation measures, measures to avoid the deterioration of natural habitats, assessment of plans or projects to determine whether they are compatible with the conservation objectives set for the respective sites, plans and projects having adverse implications for conservation sites to be implemented only under strict conditions). Here, too, potential conflicts should be resolved, wherever possible, through dialogue with the parties involved, on the basis of existing EU nature conservation laws, and management plans, when required, should be drawn up by agreement. The ESC draws attention to the fact that much fuller account can be taken of economic interests under the flora/fauna/habitat Directive (Article 6) than under the conservation of wild birds Directive.

Recommendations concerning the implementation of the EU nature conservation directives (3)

3.8. The ESC considers that implementation problems must, under no circumstances, lead to the directives being called into question, having some of their provisions deleted or not being fully implemented.

3.9. The Committee calls upon the Member States to comply at long last with their obligation under Directive 92/43/EEC to incorporate the Directive into national law (cf., for example, the case of Germany) and to submit complete national lists of suitable areas, selected according to technical criteria (4). Not until this has been done will the Commission be able to draw up a list of areas of Community importance.

(1) The ESC would point out in this context that under EU law the Commission must not release funds which could have a damaging effect on the environment. Potential threats to or the destruction of areas which could form part of the NATURA 2000 network fall into this category.

(2) For example, part of a motorway has been notified as a flora, fauna and habitat conservation area, and in Austria a conservation area has been designated for the roller (species of bird — Coracias garrulus) despite the fact that no rollers live in this area — they are to be found in a directly adjacent habitat.


thereby making it possible, as provided for under the Directive, for the Member States to designate these areas as special areas of conservation by 2004 at the latest. In this context, the Committee welcomes the fact that the Commission has initiated infringement proceedings against a number of Member States, and it calls upon the Commission to rigorously pursue this course. The Committee also urges the Member States concerned to comply at long last with their obligation under the Directive for the conservation of wild birds (79/409/EEC)\(^{(1)}\) to take adequate steps to designate European bird conservation areas.

4. Incorporation of nature conservation into agriculture

Introduction

4.1. This part of the opinion examines the extent to which nature conservation is incorporated into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The Committee makes a number of recommendations for improving the incorporation of nature conservation into the CAP with due regard to: two own-initiative Committee opinions from 1999 on the agri-environmental priorities for the multi-function agriculture of Agenda 2000 and the European agricultural model\(^{(2)}\); the Communication from the Commission on guidelines for sustainable agriculture\(^{(2)}\); and special report No 14/00 of the European Court of Auditors on the greening of the CAP. In making its recommendations, the Committee distinguishes between accompanying measures and rural development (second pillar of the CAP) and ‘traditional agriculture’ (first pillar of the CAP).

4.2. In addition to other threats, the European Environment Agency (EEA) recognises that nature conservation faces a major threat from particular present-day forms of intensive farming. In its second report on the state of the environment in Europe, issued in 1999, the EEA pointed out that the main reason for this threat to nature conservation was to be found in the loss of habitat due to changed land-use, brought about, in particular, by intensive agriculture, that the threat to species diversity caused by human activity had intensified and that an environment-friendly agricultural sector had hardly been brought any nearer.

4.3. There is no doubting the fact that agriculture which is productive in the agro-economic sense represents a serious threat to natural diversity. The threat is twofold: firstly, intensively-farmed areas are lost as habitats for most of the threatened animal species, and at the same time, the continued use of extensively-farmed areas — which are valuable in terms of nature conservation — becomes increasingly less attractive in economic terms. From a nature conservation perspective, both the intensification of agricultural production and the abandonment of extensive farming therefore represent a problem.

4.4. The Committee thinks that a positive relationship between agriculture and nature conservation is important if nature conservation and biological diversity (also in respect of breeds and types of productive animals) are to continue to prosper in Europe. Outside the natural landscapes which have not been influenced by man (there are now only extremely few areas of this type left in Europe), biotope diversity in the man-made landscapes of Europe has been created by, and continues to be created by, a number of particular extensive forms of agricultural and forestry land-use. The continued use and development of particular extensive agricultural and forestry

---

\(^{(1)}\) Nature conservation associations, in particular BirdLife International, have identified ‘Important Bird Areas’ (IBA), which present the appropriate technical characteristics and which have been used by the European Court of Justice, too, as a reference in several cases.

\(^{(2)}\) Both opinions are set out in OJ C 368, 20.12.1999.

production methods (seen today in terms of the inputs used) is therefore a vital prerequisite for maintaining and exerting a positive influence on species diversity. A coordinated and appropriate nature conservation policy may help to maintain such extensive forms of production. Nature conservation and environmental protection can also bring economic benefits; working in tandem with regional policy, ecological development may provide new jobs and promote regional economic development.

4.5. The CAP must provide new incentives in this respect and must help to ensure that nature conservation concerns are discussed with the agricultural sector and that financial compensation is paid. Seen in this light, nature conservation and environmentally-compatible agricultural production may even become a new source of income, as society pays farmers for those services which it demands of them. In order to further this positive contribution by agriculture to nature conservation and at the same time avoid any negative impact on nature, wherever possible, there is a need for a general economic framework which ensures that it is more profitable to preserve nature and the environment than it is to harm them. The more financially worthwhile it is to protect nature and the countryside, the more the land-owners and users concerned will find it acceptable.

4.6. The CAP has so far, however, been geared to an agricultural sector focused on optimum performance and rationalisation. Environmental considerations have frequently been neglected, just as social questions have (e.g. the question of how many farmers society actually needs). Under such circumstances, a species-rich, diverse landscape came to be regarded as a locational disadvantage for agriculture. There is a need to reverse this situation in a manner beneficial to farmers. If society wants agricultural production to take account of nature conservation, it must also be prepared to pay for services which go beyond the social obligations attendant upon ownership of land and also beyond the observance of statutory requirements in respect of ‘good business practice’. Possible solutions are for consumers to be prepared to pay a higher price for products or for farmers to be compensated from public funds for the additional expenditure incurred in using methods which are more in tune with the environment and nature. At all events, it is essential that in future environmental diversity and diversity of landscape be regarded as constituting a locational advantage for farmers. This could herald a move away from subsidies towards the remuneration of services of benefit to society (such as the maintenance of biotopes, man-made landscapes, landscape features, etc.). Such a move was envisaged by EC Commissioner MacSharry in the run-up to the 1992 reform of agriculture but has still not been rigorously pursued.

4.6.1. The changes brought about by current agricultural policy are reflected in the changing face of the man-made landscape. It is not just in Germany that, for example, the use of grasslands, which are important for nature conservation, is becoming increasingly less attractive in economic terms. Traditional pastural agriculture is disappearing more and more, grassland areas are declining and the remaining areas are being farmed more intensively. Germany used to have 57 different types of grassland used for pasture, comprising different mixes of plant species; there are now only six such pasture grassland types remaining, a factor which is having devastating consequences for nature conservation. Changes are taking place at the same time in arable farming. Birds species which nest in open arable lands and meadows are now systematically being placed on the Red List of Threatened Species or at least being included in the associated early-warning list. In other EU Member States, too, such as the UK, birds which were formerly commonly found on farmland, such as skylarks, partridges, yellowhammers and corn buntings have seen their numbers fall by up to 80% since the 1970s(1).

4.6.2. There are, on the other hand, examples of the positive effects of extensive farming, such as the use of the ‘Dehesas’ (pasture) in the Extremadura (Spain) and in Portugal. The coordinated mix of extensive arable farming, extensive pastoral farming and the economic exploitation of the cork oak and the holm oak represents, in conjunction with the historic practice of transhumance (the driving of livestock from the arid south to the summer pastures in the north of Spain), a form of land-use which has brought clear benefits to particular species inhabiting these man-made landscapes. Agriculture in this region is, however, experiencing considerable difficulties in economic terms.

4.7. The conflict between economic viability, on the one hand, and environmental requirements, on the other hand, has not yet been resolved. The fact that the WTO has so far failed to introduce environmental standards which are applicable worldwide makes it that much more difficult to resolve the conflict at EU level, although since the successful conclusion of the GATT Uruguay Round, it has been recognised that ‘green box’ measures deserve to be promoted. EU farmers find it difficult, on the one hand, to accept tougher environmental standards whilst, on the other hand, having to compete with producers in countries where climatic conditions are better and where environmental protection and nature conservation are alien concepts.

4.8. Under Agenda 2000 the Commission and the EU ministers stressed the need to improve the competitiveness of EU agriculture on the world market and to maintain the multifunctional character of EU agriculture. The term ‘European agricultural model’ is now employed. The EU Commission uses this term to mean an agricultural sector which not only provides high-quality products but also upholds rich cultural traditions, maintains the beauty of the landscape, works in harmony with nature and the environment, safeguards employment and creates new jobs, whilst at the same time also being able to compete on the world market without receiving large subsidies.

4.9. In its own-initiative opinion on a policy to consolidate the European agricultural model(2), the Committee emphatically reaffirmed the need to safeguard the multifunctional

---

character of agriculture, whilst, at the same time, raising the question of 'how, against the background of increasing competition, a multifunctional agricultural sector can continue to provide the various services ... It is likely that, apart from some exceptions and cases of particularly favourable market situations, EU farms will continue to be unable to match world market prices for agricultural products on a sustained basis ...'.

Accompanying measures and the second pillar of the CAP

4.10. As long as world-market conditions tend to hinder the widespread adoption of farming practices which are in line with the goals of nature conservation, special policy measures will be required to counteract the negative trends. Regulation (EEC) No 2078/92 on the agricultural environment ushered in the first systematic establishment of agri-environmental programmes in the EU Member States which are co-funded by the EU. Overall, c. 17 % of agricultural land in the EU is affected and influenced by these agri-environmental programmes (which implies that some 83 % of agricultural land is not affected or influenced); there are vast differences between the individual Member States as regards the impact of these programmes on agricultural land and their effectiveness in promoting nature conservation (1).

4.11. In an evaluation of the programmes established under Regulation (EEC) No 2078/92 (2), the Commission reached a number of conclusions in respect of the measures taken; inter alia, it concluded that these measures:

— had a very positive impact on the development of 'green' agriculture, which it regards as a key environmental objective;

— had met with too little acceptance and consequently had too small an impact in intensively-farmed regions; and

— had not brought about an extensification of livestock farming.

4.12. These views are reaffirmed by the European Court of Auditors in its Special Report on 'Greening the CAP' (3). It should be pointed out that many national governments are failing to take advantage of the opportunities open to them to improve nature conservation, and are even failing to take advantage of measures co-funded by the EU. The European Court of Auditors notes (4) in this respect that only Ireland has made use of the possibility of establishing 'ecological reserves' with land withdrawn from production under the early retirement provisions; in the EU a total of only 54 hectares has been used under this scheme for the establishment of new nature-conservation areas.

4.13. On a general note, however, it should be pointed out that the agri-environmental measures have failed to fully compensate for the economic discrepancies between forms of production which are desirable for promoting nature conservation and forms of production which are desirable for meeting market-economy objectives. The reasons for the low level of success are due, inter alia, to: the inadequate level of funding for the programmes; the inadequate financial incentives; farmers not knowing whether the programmes are long-term, and therefore sustainable; and the fact that other support measures outside the scope of the accompanying measures offer greater financial incentives to farm land more intensively.

4.14. The Agenda 2000 decisions brought a number of further improvements and established rural development as the second pillar of the CAP. As an example of such improvements, funding for agri-environmental measures was further increased under Regulation (EC) No 1257/1999 on support for rural development. It does, however, have to be recognised that the second pillar of the CAP accounts for only some 10 % of expenditure on agriculture and that expenditure on agri-environmental measures amounts to just half of this 10 %; in other words, only 5 % of overall expenditure under the CAP is devoted to classical agri-environmental programmes. The major part of CAP funding therefore continues to be allotted to first pillar measures. Farmers are given no incentives at all or totally inadequate incentives to continue to work extensively-farmed areas or to keep in place hedges or other landscape features. They are therefore not given adequate economic motivation to gear their production methods to nature conservation requirements.

First pillar of the CAP

4.15. The greater part of funding under the Guarantee Section of the EAGGF (i.e. approximately 90 % of the funding) continues to be used to finance market regulation measures under the first pillar of the CAP; here it should be borne in mind that under the co-financing arrangements Member States have to provide substantial sums for rural development measures (second pillar).

4.16. Not all agricultural crops are covered by market regulations. Direct payments are made to producers of wheat and silage maize, for example, but not in respect of areas under clover or grasslands. The fact that particular crops are given preferential treatment over others has consequences for the landscape, which in turn also affect nature conservation. These payments should be scrapped and could be replaced, for example, by per hectare premiums.

4.17. The Committee deplores the fact that a number of proposals which were made by the Commission in the course of the debate on Agenda 2000 and which could have, directly or indirectly, promoted farming methods in tune with nature conservation, were, in the end, not accepted by the Member States. These proposals included the Commission's plan to

(1) In Austria, for example, just under 70 % of agricultural land is affected by the agri-environmental programmes, whereas the corresponding figures for intensively-farmed regions, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, are 1.7 % and 1.9 % respectively — figures which are well below the average.

(2) Working document of DG VI (VI/7655/98) on the evaluation of the agri-environmental programmes.


(4) see point 32 of the report.
scrap the silage maize premium. Also, the fact that the linkage of compensatory payments to the fulfilment of environmental requirements is only to be optional may well be criticised, since it means that those Member States which introduce cross compliance would place their farmers at a competitive disadvantage.

4.18. Regulation (EC) No 1259/1999 of 17 May 1999 sets out EU rules for direct payments under the CAP. Under Article 3 of this Regulation, Member States are to ‘take the environmental measures they consider to be important in view of the situation of the agricultural land … or the production …’ in respect of which direct payments are made. The aim is to give more weight to environmental aspects in connection with the common organisation of the markets (cross compliance). It would be useful if the Commission were to indicate, as soon as possible in a communication to the European Parliament, the Council and the ESC/CoR, how the individual Member States have responded. Furthermore, it would also be desirable for the implementing regulation currently under discussion to be adopted and brought into force as soon as possible.

Recommendations for improving the incorporation of nature conservation into agriculture

4.19. The Committee underlines the fact that the opportunities provided by the forthcoming WTO negotiations, eastward enlargement of the EU and the mid-term review should be used to introduce a new agricultural policy which is more in tune with conservation of the environment and nature. The Committee intends to draw up an own-initiative opinion on this issue.

4.20. The Committee recommends that in the long term all EU financial instruments should provide an incentive to meet the objectives of the nature conservation Directives, or, at the very least, should not undermine these objectives.

4.21. Financial incentives to promote an agricultural sector which pays sufficient heed to nature conservation are at present inadequate in many cases. As long as general worldwide conditions do not permit the whole of the agricultural sector to comply with nature conservation objectives, agri-environmental aid should be increased to a level where all farmers in the EU are prompted to switch to ‘green’ production methods. The CAP financial instruments should be geared towards the results-oriented promotion of environmental and socio-cultural interests (biodiversity, positive impact on jobs). To this end, indicators will need to be formulated to gauge the successes of agricultural policy. A consensus between organisations representing farmers, environmental associations and the social partners needs to be achieved. The integrated nature conservation blueprints which the EU should help develop will therefore need to be implemented with the aid of appropriate nature conservation budgets and agri-environmental programmes. The financial arrangements will need to be discussed at a later stage.

4.22. There is generally a low take-up rate for agri-environmental measures in highly-productive, intensively-farmed regions. It is particularly in these regions that species diversity is under serious threat. The Committee therefore recommends, as a matter of urgency, that a review be carried out of aid provisions funded under the first pillar to determine whether they are in line with environmental protection and nature conservation. This review, too, should be carried out as soon as possible so that any conclusions as regards the amending of the agricultural policy can be drawn before the accession to the EU of the CEEC and the WTO negotiations.

4.23. The Member States should set an example to their citizens and, in particular, to land-owners, who are expected to show a commitment to nature conservation. Only if the state tailors the management of the areas under its control to the requirements of nature or turns such areas into nature conservation areas, can landowners (such as district authorities, insurance companies, churches and royal families) be expected to follow suit.

4.24. In this context the Committee would point out that the applicant states still have considerable natural potential, which may be threatened by the adoption of the current agricultural policy legislation. The Committee therefore calls upon the Commission to carry out an immediate review of the likely consequences for nature and the environment of the adoption of the CAP by the applicant states and to submit its findings forthwith. There must be no transitional period for the adoption of EU nature conservation Directives.

4.25. In the Committee’s view, interested parties and organised civil society in both the EU Member States and in the applicant states must be consulted much more closely in order to increase the acceptability of political decisions which promote nature conservation. Action should also be taken to meet the general public’s demand not only to be informed but also to be actively involved in decision-making processes.


The President

of the Economic and Social Committee

Göke FRERICHS