Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Council Decision amending Decision 90/424/EEC on expenditure in the veterinary field


(2006/C 324/09)

On 22 June 2006, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 37 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

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 8 September 2006. The rapporteur was Mr Leif E. Nielsen.

In view of the renewal of the Committee’s term of office, the Plenary Assembly has decided to vote on this opinion at its October plenary session and has adopted Mr Nielsen as rapporteur-general under Rule 20 of the Rules of Procedure.

At its 430th plenary session, held on 26 October 2006, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion unanimously:

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EU co-financing mechanism for veterinary prevention and control measures has developed gradually over time and been adapted to reflect experience gained in the field to date. However, this mechanism should now be subject to a more fundamental rethink to take account of prospective developments, not least increased trade. The EESC will be monitoring the way forward in this regard and wants to play a constructive role in giving the process form and practical substance.

1.2 The EESC endorses the Commission’s proposal, which, for the time being, involves only limited changes and adaptations. These tie in with the proposals set out in the preliminary evaluation of overall policy in this area, and simplified administrative arrangements and scope for multi-annual planning are, at any event, desirable objectives. The EESC likewise backs the proposal to provide for financial assistance for the computerisation of trade and import procedures and integrated computerised veterinary systems. The proposed list of diseases and zoonoses, and the simplified procedure for modifying that list, also appear expedient.

2. Background

2.1 The Commission has launched an evaluation of the EU’s overall animal health policy. This includes a cost-effectiveness assessment of the current financial instruments that are designed to cover the surveillance, control and eradication of animal disease and zoonoses. Consideration is also being given to the most effective ways of inducing producers to take the requisite preventive measures. Based on the outcome of this evaluation, alternatives to the current way in which Community financial support is granted to the Member States might be proposed (1). For the time being, the Commission has opted to propose only a few, limited adjustments involving no change of policy on the eradication, control and monitoring of animal diseases and zoonoses. The proposal merely seeks to make directly applicable and obviously necessary changes that have been shown to be useful as part of the ongoing evaluation.

2.2 The Commission proposal simplifies the approval and financing procedures for national programmes for the eradication, monitoring and control of animal diseases and zoonoses. Under the proposal, programmes may be approved and financed for up to six years at a time. Up to now, although the Member States have been entitled to submit multi-annual programmes, the Commission has been unable to approve the financing of such programmes for more than one year at a time. There is also a proposal to broaden the scope of the financial provisions to improve information policy on animal health and food safety in products of animal origin and the use of integrated computerised veterinary systems (2).

2.3 Under the existing rules, financial assistance may be provided to cover expenditure incurred by the Member States for the financing of national programmes for the eradication, control and monitoring of 23 endemic animal diseases and 8 zoonoses or epizootics (3). The list may be added to or modified


(2) Article 37a of Decision 90/424/EEC provides for Community financial assistance for computerisation of veterinary import procedures. This so-called Shift project and the corresponding computerised instrument linking veterinary authorities (Animo) have been replaced by the integrated system Traces, which has been mandatory for all Member States since 1 January 2005.

(3) The contribution to national control measures and programmes usually covers 50 % of expenditure, or 60 % for foot and mouth disease.
by the Council acting by a qualified majority on a proposal from the Commission. With a view to securing sharper prioritisation, the Commission is proposing a shorter list of diseases eligible for co-financing. The Commission explains that the list has been drawn up to a greater extent on the basis of the impact of the diseases both on public health and on international and intra-Community trade. It is also proposed to merge the lists of diseases and of zoonoses and to subject them to the same procedure for the granting of any financial contribution (1). As the Commission says, this is designed so as to make better use of resources and to ensure that Member State priorities tie in with those of the EU and are consistent with other national programmes. It is also proposed that any future modifications to the list be adopted under a regulatory committee procedure. The Commission feels that this is particularly relevant in respect of emerging diseases that pose a risk for both animal and public health.

3. General comments

3.1 Community co-financing of measures to eradicate, control and monitor infectious animal diseases and zoonoses has always attracted considerable interest, given the complex nature and impact of the diseases involved and the substantial costs that such activities incur. To control serious infectious animal diseases, however, clear financial procedures need to be in place and assurances must be given from the outset and in all cases that full compensation will be paid in cases where, for instance, animals have to be slaughtered or products destroyed. Otherwise there is a risk that, at the start of any outbreak or suspected outbreak of a serious infectious animal disease, the action taken will be too ineffectual, thus making the impact more far-reaching than need be the case. This applies in particular to the national policy-making process. Also, any outbreak of a serious infectious animal disease often attracts a great deal of public attention, provoking major consumer reaction even in the absence of any direct and incontrovertible link to food safety issues.

3.2 Greater market access and trade, longer transport times and the concentration of livestock in various different ways increase the risk of diseases spreading and raise the economic impact involved in prevention and control. For that reason too, there is a need for an overall evaluation of Community animal health policy, including a more detailed assessment of the cost-effectiveness of the current financial instruments that are designed to cover animal disease surveillance, control and eradication, and of the prevention measures required in herds. The EESC wants to play an active part in framing the requisite co-financing models in respect of national programmes, not least to provide a more coherent and effective framework for food safety policy ensuring a higher level of transparency.

3.3 In this connection, the EESC laments the opaqueness and complexity of the existing rules and will thus, as part of the upcoming revision, be calling for a more readily understandable and cohesive system and a better classification of the co-financing rules. There is a need, therefore, to identify and facilitate the use of the relevant legislation throughout the EU in the wide field of animal health and food safety. This will also support the activity of the Commission and the Member States in the international framework by improving the understanding and transparency of EU legislation vis-à-vis the EU’s trade partners and neighbours. Information gathering and dissemination will also help secure more effective implementation of the rules.

4. Specific comments

4.1 The EESC feels that the proposal giving scope to approve and finance national programmes for a number of years at a time will clearly make for administrative simplification and help ensure the more effective achievement of the programme objectives. It will also help make for a better and more transparent administration, thus securing better use of Community funds.

4.2 The collection and dissemination of current information relating to animal health and food safety is needed for the better development and implementation of legislation in this field. In future, it will be particularly important to put in place more transparent Community legislation and to communicate that legislation to the authorities, producers and consumers concerned.

4.3 The EESC thus backs the proposal that the EU make a financial contribution to the establishment of an information policy in the field of animal health, animal welfare and food safety in products of animal origin including the installation and development of information tools, such as, for instance, an appropriate database for gathering and storing information relating to Community legislation.

4.4 Likewise, it is appropriate to take into account the technical developments achieved in the computerisation of the

(1) The existing list covers the following production-related diseases: IBR/IPV, enzootic bovine leukosis, Aujeszky’s disease, salmonella pullorum, salmonella gallinarum, Maedi/Visna and CAEV, Johne’s disease (paratuberculosis), mycoplasma gallisepticum and certain diseases transmitted by vector insects in the French overseas departments.
veterinary procedures and to provide for the resources needed for the hosting, management and maintenance of the integrated computerised veterinary systems.

4.5 The list of animal diseases and zoonoses that may give entitlement to co-financing should, it goes without saying, reflect the priorities set in line with the potential impact of such diseases and zoonoses both on public health and on international and intra-Community trade in animals and products of animal origin. The EESC agrees that, as proposed, the focus should be placed more on zoonoses and public health rather than on more production-related animal diseases, and endorses the proposal to merge the lists of diseases and of zoonoses and to provide for the same procedure for the granting of any Community financial contribution.

4.6 Naturally, the technical and information requirements for the eradication, control and monitoring programmes for which Community financing is sought should be updated and adjusted in a regular and timely fashion in order to match technical and scientific progress and feedback from experience in the implementation of the programmes. It is therefore appropriate, in line with the proposal, to enable the Commission to adopt those technical criteria — and update them as necessary — using a regulatory committee procedure.

Brussels, 26 October 2006.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS