

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: A strategy for the sustainable development of European aquaculture'

(COM(2002) 511 final)

(2003/C 208/21)

On 22 October 2002 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned communication.

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 1 April 2003. The rapporteur was Mrs Santiago.

At its 399th plenary session on 14 and 15 May 2003 (meeting of 15 May) the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 82 votes to 8 with 10 abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Commission's communication proposes a strategy for the sustainable development of European aquaculture that is designed to:

- create secure employment, particularly in fisheries-dependent areas;
- assure the availability of safe, healthy products in sufficient quantity to meet market demand;
- ensure an environmentally sound industry.

1.2. To achieve this, the Commission proposes various measures:

1.2.1. Expansion of production, by further promoting research into new species and alternative protein sources for fish feed. Promotion of organic, environment-friendly aquaculture, by laying down specific Community standards and rules.

1.2.2. Public aid for aquaculture, inter alia to help modernise existing farms.

1.2.3. Environmental protection, by finding ways of reducing the impact of waste from intensive farms, e.g. by installing effluent treatment equipment. Caution is to be exercised with regard to the introduction of non-native species, and the possibility of establishing specific rules on transgenic fish will be considered.

1.2.4. Safety of aquaculture products and animal welfare, to ensure a high level of protection of consumer health, inter alia by enforcing the maximum limits for dioxins in foods for

human consumption, monitoring the use of antibiotics and assessing the risks associated with harmful algal blooms.

- The welfare of farmed animals is now a matter of particular public concern. The Standing Committee of the European Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes (Council of Europe) is currently drawing up a recommendation on farmed fish, and Commission departments are taking part in this work.

1.2.5. Creation of secure, long-term jobs, particularly in fisheries-dependent areas, by increasing employment by between 8 000 and 10 000 jobs, increasing the Union's aquaculture production growth rate to 4 % per year, opening new markets, integrating production and marketing, and stimulating demand for quality products.

2. General comments

2.1. In drawing up its first document on a sustainable development strategy for European aquaculture, the Commission has recognised the importance of aquaculture within the common fisheries policy. This is a commendable and essential step, as the sector faces a number of problems to which it has already drawn attention on various occasions. In this connection it is worth noting the conclusions of the regional meetings which the Commission arranged in 1998 and 1999 ⁽¹⁾ on the common fisheries policy after 2002. Interested Member States:

⁽¹⁾ Commission Report COM(2000) 14 final, 24.1.2000.

- considered that aquaculture was the poor relation of the common fisheries policy;
- again criticised the lack of support from the Commission;
- urged the Commission to put aquaculture on the same footing as the fisheries sector;
- warned of the problem of enlargement, which would bring cheaper products whose production is subject to less stringent environmental, quality and health requirements, particularly as regards residues of medicinal products.

2.2. The present Commission document, which merits support, goes some way towards addressing these shortcomings.

2.3. The Committee agrees that aquaculture provides an important supplement to traditional sources of fisheries products and helps to reduce the Community's chronic trade deficit in fisheries products.

2.3.1. The Committee stresses the role of aquaculture as an alternative source of income for coastal communities, and in helping to ensure a healthy and balanced diet.

2.3.2. The Committee considers it essential that the sector should be able to develop in a balanced manner, without impairing the environment or the quality and safety of the end product.

2.4. However, the Committee thinks that the Commission is being a little optimistic in anticipating that 'in the next ten years aquaculture must reach the status of a stable industry which guarantees long term secure employment and development in rural and coastal areas, providing alternatives to the fishing industry, both in terms of products and employment' ⁽¹⁾.

2.5. The Committee welcomes the Council Conclusions on a strategy for the sustainable development of European aquaculture ⁽²⁾, notably when it 'acknowledges the need to ensure the economic viability and the competitiveness of the aquaculture sector which has to remain a market-led activity, and the important role of the industry in this context.' And also when it notes that 'different forms of special environment

friendly aquaculture, as for instance some extensive fish culture, deserve favourable attention, including the development of specific labels. The research into and development of environmentally friendly production techniques should be encouraged, for instance through support co-financed by FIGF.'

2.6. The EESC also takes note of the Committee of the Regions' Opinion on aquaculture ⁽³⁾.

3. Specific comments

3.1. Product safety: The EESC endorses the objective of informing consumers that aquaculture products are of high quality and meet the relevant production, food safety and traceability standards so that they are given an objective picture of this still rather unfamiliar sector.

3.1.1. The specific legislation governing aquaculture products, particularly as regards production and packaging conditions, guarantees that they are safe.

3.1.2. The Committee shares the Commission's views regarding the quality of the products obtained from extensive aquaculture, and the need for appropriate labelling to give such products a commercial advantage. However, the absence of a specific definition of intensive and extensive systems could raise doubts among consumers as to the provenance and labelling of products.

3.1.3. The use of transgenic fish must be treated with serious reservations: the Committee would warn not only researchers, but also political decision-makers, producers and consumers not to underestimate the risk of a loss of biodiversity.

3.1.4. Fish imports from third countries must be subject to rigorous quality checks, with details of any pharmaceutical products used in their production. The analytical methods used in these checks by the Member States should also be harmonised.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2002) 511 final.

⁽²⁾ 2481st Council meeting — AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES — Brussels, 27 and 28.1.2003 — Press: 13 Nr: 5433/03, pages 11-12.

⁽³⁾ CdR 20/2003 COM-DEVE/014.

3.1.5. A clear definition of organic aquaculture must be provided, as has already been done in other sectors of production. This form of aquaculture is practised by small family-run farms, generally in the less advantaged regions. To make up for their modest output and higher production costs, such farms will be able to offer a special quality product, which could raise a higher price on niche markets.

3.2. Environment and rural development: Competition for space in coastal areas, which are already congested with other activities such as tourism, could be eased by the use of offshore technology.

3.2.1. This technology would require a high level of investment, and bad weather or accidents could lead to safety lines becoming damaged or even detached. Risk insurance would have to be available as otherwise the use of offshore techniques would be limited.

3.2.2. Producers are increasingly using closed-circuit water recycling systems. These systems should be upgraded by deploying new environmentally-friendly technologies. They are particularly recommended for inland aquaculture and for aquaculture in protected coastal areas.

3.2.3. Some aquaculture production systems use advanced technology, and many farmers state that after treatment on their farms the water is of a higher quality than it was at the point of entry.

3.2.4. Some Member States lay down stricter environmental requirements than the Community. This leads to significant differences between producers and may distort competition between producers and Member States.

3.2.5. The Committee appreciates such environmental awareness and considers that these producers deserve incentives to promote products that meet stricter ecological production requirements. It would imagine that a system could be introduced in the field of aquaculture to promote particular environmental objectives, along similar lines to environmental programmes in agriculture.

3.2.6. A balance must be struck between the development of aquaculture and other forms of rural development.

3.3. Research: Research is vital for the sector's development, and the Committee regrets that funding for it has been reduced in the Community Support Framework. To offset this reduction, the FIG should be amended to allow SMEs to conduct their own research, as under the previous framework. In this regard, the Committee stresses that the Council recognises in its conclusions that 'more research in aquaculture should be undertaken and appropriate financial support be allocated, in order to contribute towards sustainable development of the aquaculture industry in the Community'. The EESC believes that alongside pure research, applied research that is targeted towards producers' needs should also be promoted.

3.3.1. Research should be carried out on the effects of fish farms on wild stocks, in particular relating to disease and interbreeding, special attention being paid to the effects on tourism in rural areas based in angling.

3.3.2. Given the possible glut of certain fish species on the market, research on new species should be encouraged.

3.3.3. Research should also be conducted on feed, using alternative raw materials to those generally used and continuing the search for less polluting types of feed. Research should also continue on systems for managing feed supply more effectively, so as to cause less damage to the environment.

3.3.4. The Committee thinks that a socio-economic survey of coastal communities and their relation with the aquaculture sector should be conducted, as in some areas the sector forms the main source of employment and also provides jobs for former fishermen.

3.4. Employment: In order to achieve the intended increase in employment, the priorities of the FIG will have to be revised. At all events, the Committee is somewhat sceptical about the anticipated increase, as a rise in production does not necessarily mean an increase in the number of jobs.

3.4.1. Many jobs in the sector are of a seasonal or temporary nature, and steps must be taken to ensure that new jobs are sustainable. Given the need for specialist training in this field, continuing vocational training is extremely important. Particular attention should be paid here to the role of women in aquaculture.

3.5. Market: Although the EU's aquaculture sector accounts for just 3 % of world production, the EU is the leading producer of such species as trout, sea bass, sea bream, turbot and mussels.

3.5.1. As the sector has developed very rapidly, the production of certain species has increased, thereby destabilising market prices.

3.5.2. In order to improve the sector's image, campaigns are needed — preferably at Community level — to inform consumers and encourage them to eat aquaculture products.

3.5.3. As producers are the crucial link in the chain, cooperation through producer organisations and cooperatives

is vital in order to develop the market, bring stability and organise supply.

3.5.4. The Committee considers that cooperation between the authorities, the scientific community and duly organised producers could also do much to help solve the problems facing the sector.

3.5.5. The Committee endorses the Commission document and welcomes the fact that the Council, together with the Commission, will undertake to examine and implement appropriate initiatives which fall within Community competence, so that the Community can play a leading role in developing a sustainable aquaculture sector to the benefit of all citizens in the Community ⁽¹⁾.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2002) 511 final.

Brussels, 15 May 2003.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger BRIESCH

APPENDIX

to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

The following amendments, which received at least a quarter of the votes cast, were rejected during the debate:

Point 2.3.1

Amend as follows:

~~'3.5.6. The Committee stresses the potential role of aquaculture as an alternative source of income for coastal communities, and in helping to ensure a healthy and balanced diet.'~~

Reason

Aquaculture can also have a negative impact on the employment situation in that it threatens jobs in the traditional fisheries sector.

Aquaculture does not specifically help to ensure a healthy and balanced diet.

Result of the vote

For: 24, against: 50, abstentions: 12.

Point 3.2.3

Delete the point:

~~'Some aquaculture production systems use advanced technology, and many farmers state that after treatment on their farms the water is of a higher quality than it was at the point of entry.'~~

Reason

It can happen that, in specific individual cases, certain water quality parameters show an improvement after treatment. This is not an argument in favour of aquaculture, but rather an indictment of the state of the water before use. The opposite case is presumably far more frequent, which is one of the reasons why the Commission submitted this Communication (cf. point 1.2.3). Also, it is not up to the EESC to evaluate producers' claims, but rather to assess the Commission document.

Result of the vote

For: 30, against: 48, abstentions: 11.
