

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'proposal for a Council Regulation amending Regulation (EC) No. 1257/1999 on support for rural development from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF)'

(COM(2003) 806 final - 2003/0312 CNS)

(2004/C 110/15)

On 16 January 2004 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 37 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned proposal.

On 27 January 2004 the Committee Bureau instructed the Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment to prepare the Committee's work on the subject.

In view of the urgency of the matter, at its 406th plenary session of 25 and 26 February 2004 (meeting of 25 February 2004) the European Economic and Social Committee decided to appoint Mr Donnelly as rapporteur-general and adopted the following opinion by 60 votes for, one against and with one abstention.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Act of Accession provided to the new Member States the measure 'Compliance with community standards', financed under EAGGF Guarantee Section, intended to support farmers' efforts to reach EU standards during the transition period granted by giving them additional transfers to offset the costs of compliance.

1.2 The CAP Reform introduced a general 'Meeting standards' measure ⁽¹⁾ intended to help farmers adapt to the operating costs resulting from newly introduced EU standards based on Community legislation in the fields of the environment, public, animal and plant health, animal welfare and occupational safety.

1.3 The Commission proposal on the Act of Accession adaptation to CAP Reform ⁽²⁾ deletes the measure 'Compliance with community standards' in order to avoid any overlap and to maintain the possibilities available to the new Member States under the new 'Meeting standards' measure.

1.4 However, the new Member States have allocated substantial amounts of their EAGGF Guarantee rural development allocations to cover on-farm investment to adapt to Community standards in the field of environment, rather than providing for this expenditure out of their EAGGF Guidance allocations.

2. Gist of Commission Proposal

2.1 As it seems at this stage very difficult to increase the Structural Funds resources to support compliance with standards, and as it is at the same time a priority for the EU to speed up compliance with Community standards, particularly in the field of environment, the Commission proposes to introduce a further derogation to Council Regulation (EC) 1257/1999 to allow new Member States to take investment costs into account, under certain conditions, when determining the level of the annual support under the 'Meeting standards' measure.

2.2 This temporary derogation would be limited to the 2004-2006 programming period and would not involve additional spending from the Community budget as it will be financed within the envelopes 2004-2006 approved for the new Member States.

3. General comments

The Committee fully endorses the Commission's priority to speed up the new member states' compliance with Community standards, particularly in the field of environment, and therefore supports the Commission's proposal allowing the ten acceding countries to utilise funding from the Guarantee Fund on measures to improve and protect the environment.

⁽¹⁾ Council Regulation (EC) No. 1783/2003 of 29 September 2003 amending Regulation (EC) n. 1257/1999 on support for rural development from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), Chapter Va – OJ L 270 21.10.2003

⁽²⁾ COM(2003) 643: 'Proposal for a Council Decision adapting the Act of Accession of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the European Union is founded, following the reform of the common agricultural policy'

4. Specific comments

4.1 The EESC places a high priority on measures in the field of environment and believes that investments in projects to ameliorate the environment at farm level in the new member states are desirable.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The EESC fully supports the Commission proposal.

Brussels, 25 February 2004.

The President
of the European Economic and Social
Committee
Roger BRIESCH
