

Friday 23 October 1998

(c) A4-0368/98

Resolution on a new strategy for mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to Rule 148 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the study drawn up for the Directorate-General for Research on 'mountain regions in the European Union — problems, results obtained and adjustments needed',
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (A4-0368/98),
- A. whereas mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions account for over half of the European Union's UAA,
 - B. whereas agricultural activities in these regions are severely restricted and specialised as a result of countless factors including the geomorphology, very variable soil fertility, low population density, the heterogeneous nature of land structures and the variable climatic conditions,
 - C. whereas a similar situation is to be found in arid and semi-arid zones, owing to low and irregular rainfall, and in Arctic areas, owing to a short growing season and a harsh climate,
 - D. whereas geomorphological and pedological barriers can generate major difficulties for communications and transport in these regions, a problem aggravated by their remoteness from centres of high consumption,
 - E. having regard to the danger of a gradual depopulation of these regions because of an ageing population and the difficulty of attracting young people to settle there, deterred as they are by the harsh living conditions, isolation and the poor prospects for earning a livelihood linked to the higher production costs and inherently lower level of productivity resulting from the specific natural handicaps of these regions,
 - F. whereas these areas represent an irreplaceable heritage comprising resources that are vital for the Union as a whole, ensuring the preservation of watercourses, forests, rare species and habitats, areas of rural tranquillity and recreational activities, and maintaining minimum population levels throughout the territory of the Member States,
 - G. whereas, because of their special character and environmental and social importance, these areas cannot be treated in the same way as other rural areas, but require a specific strategy geared to their own environmental, economic and social characteristics; whereas the set of measures for disadvantaged and environmentally sensitive areas must therefore be made flexible,
 - H. whereas, in the context of the agreements on cross-border transport, for mountain regions, in particular alpine passes, a proposal was made to introduce a specific clause recognising these areas as 'sensitive areas' from the environmental point of view,
 - I. whereas these specific regions — with particular regard to the farming population — are not adequately recompensed for the services they provide in the general interest,
 - J. having regard to the risks encountered by small farms which find it difficult to face the globalisation of markets by themselves,
 - K. whereas these areas need basic infrastructures (schools, roads, social services, public services) in order to allow some diversification of agricultural activity and to prevent desertification, an irreversible process because of the inevitable deterioration suffered by such areas if they are abandoned and the difficulties and costs of rectifying the situation,
 - L. whereas, because of the natural handicaps referred to above, agriculture in these areas is totally unable to compete with agriculture in lowland areas or in a region near to a centre of consumption,

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- M. whereas the measures taken by local, regional, national and Community bodies should, from an economic point of view, seek to encourage local initiatives designed to promote endogenous development through the creation and diversification of activities and products linked as closely as possible to the region concerned, in particular by adding maximum value to agricultural products,
- N. whereas, from an environmental standpoint, such measures should seek to disseminate the necessary knowledge and skills among all those concerned, with a view to ensuring rational management of natural resources and balanced land-use planning,
- O. whereas the subsidies provided by the European Union under Directive 75/268/EEC have had a positive effect in slowing down the exodus of the farm population from mountain areas, but whereas it is urgent to adjust them, to review the parameters and criteria set out at that time and to continue to define the mountain regions and the environmentally sensitive regions on the basis of Community criteria whilst in the Member States there should be national differentiation between their disadvantaged areas,
- P. whereas the Structural Funds, Community initiatives such as Leader and the new rural development strategy should include specific measures for mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions which are different from those intended for other regions,
- Q. whereas the consideration of Agenda 2000 currently in progress may provide an opportunity for a productive debate on the problems of mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions, which should be given the prominence warranted by their social, economic and environmental importance,
1. Calls on the Commission, working together with the regions and governments concerned, to strengthen existing measures to assist mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions, or to adopt new initiatives, designed in particular to:
- 1.1 gather and update all available information, issue periodic reports and submit a communication to the Council and Parliament on mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions of the Member States of the European Union;
 - 1.2 submit a Community action plan for these areas;
 - 1.3 make provision for a specific programme for mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions as part of the new rural development measures, as well as in the framework of cross-border cooperation initiatives;
 - 1.4 with regard to the reform of the Structural Funds, particularly the new Objective 2, strengthen the assessment and monitoring procedures, precisely defining the areas eligible at local level through criteria based on the most recent data; facilitate the introduction of the necessary transport and communications infrastructures; step up Union action to provide compensation for the environmental services provided in the general interest by the population of these areas and their role in land occupancy;
 - 1.5 exempt from EU legislation on state aids firms operating in areas with important natural features, such as national and regional parks located in mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions, while guarding against any risk of distortion of competition in cross-border areas within the European Union;
 - 1.6 encourage national and regional assistance policies for those of these areas not falling within the future Objective 2, with Union support via partnership agreements;
 - 1.7 maintain and improve existing compensatory allowances so as to boost their impact on farm incomes, in order to combat the trend towards depopulation more effectively by making it possible, *inter alia*, to add maximum value to their agricultural production;
 - 1.8 adjust the compensatory allowances system, since the current system is based on surface area and the number of livestock units and does not allow for adequate compensation to offset the natural handicaps suffered;
 - 1.9 give priority to the infrastructure and legislation required to establish and strengthen regional economic networks which, because of the added value thus created within a region, could open up new employment opportunities in mountain, less-favoured and environmentally sensitive regions;

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- 1.10 introduce or, where they already exist, maintain more favourable differentiated rates of Community aid for investment, processing and marketing of agricultural products and foodstuffs derived from these products and all structural measures;
 - 1.11 support sustainable production systems and local breeds (for example good breeding cows which are not intended for reproduction on the farm but to be sold to milk producers) and varieties;
 - 1.12 examine the possibility of exempting small-scale milk producers in mountain areas from the milk quota system, where this activity is their sole means of survival and the milk produced is processed to make high-quality local products (butter, cheese) covered by the Community provisions on protected designations of origin;
 - 1.13 make provision under the CAP for specific funds to support the production of milk, meat and breeding cows, these products traditionally being the mainstay of farming in these regions;
 - 1.14 given that agriculture and forestry in these regions make an essential contribution to the ecological stability of the regions and to the preservation of cultivated land which is in harmony with nature, reward these achievements as a matter of priority through Community programmes, including agri-environmental measures, extend these measures to include forestry and make regional authorities in these areas eligible for aid to prevent and fight forest fires and for reforestation based on criteria related to environmental protection, biodiversity and preservation of the countryside;
 - 1.15 ensure that the management of all kinds of aid and intervention is as decentralised as possible in line with the subsidiarity principle;
 - 1.16 within the framework of transport policy, the multiannual programme for tourism, and the action plan for the information society, give priority to the regions concerned for short haul transport, the planning of various forms of tourism, local cooperation, the promotion of local culture and traditions and new information technologies;
 - 1.17 exploit and maximise the potential of renewable energy sources in these regions based on agriculture, forestry or wind power, through financial incentives and/or tax concessions;
 - 1.18 encourage investment in small local production units, traditional craft industries — supporting business initiatives by young people via financial incentives or tax relief in order to ensure the continuity of traditional production, direct marketing of agricultural products and foodstuffs produced in these regions, and the establishment of local collection and sorting centres facilitating maximum recycling of waste;
 - 1.19 support the establishment in the valleys of small units for the drying or dehydration of fodder;
 - 1.20 take account of the problems suffered by these regions, and in particular those bordering on applicant countries, during accession negotiations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with particular reference to assistance and support using the pre-accession financial instrument;
2. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and Commission.

2. EAGGF: 26th financial report

A4-0298/98

Resolution on the 26th Financial Report concerning the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), Guarantee Section (1996 financial year) (COM(97)0589 — C4-0112/98)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Commission report, COM(97)0589 — C4-0112/98,
- having regard to the report of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development and the opinion of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A4-0298/98),