

# Improving Community agricultural statistics

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The European Commission has presented its third progress report on the implementation of Council Decision 96/411/EC on improving Community agricultural statistics.

The purpose of Decision 96/411/EC was to induce Member States, within the limits imposed by available resources, to take appropriate measures to adapt their national systems of agricultural statistics.

The Community provides a financial contribution to the expenses incurred by each Member State in adapting the national systems or in carrying out preparatory work relating to new or increasing requirements provided for under a technical action plan.

## Implementation of the TAPAS Technical Action Plans:

Six technical action plans were defined by the Commission. The Community budget allocation for the period 2003-2007 for the annual action plans amounted to EUR 5 343 519 which covered a total of 135 actions. The areas of action covered were as follows:

- **data on the physical aspects of European agriculture:** the actions undertaken sought to improve data on areas, production and use of crops, and particularly the balances; data on livestock populations, production and use of animal products, and particularly the meat balances; development of feed balances by improving the estimation methods, and achieving better consistency between supply balances and the feed balance. In all, 37 actions were carried out in 16 Member States, which resulted in a significant improvement in the completeness of the corresponding datasets;
- **environmental aspects of agricultural accounting:** one action was carried out, following the actions realised under the previous programme, to test the feasibility of introducing into the Economic Accounts for Agriculture (EAA) methodology certain concepts and definitions that enable environmental elements to be dealt with as services in total production, subsidies or taxes;
- **agri-environmental indicators:** these actions sought to improve existing indicators such as regional-level information on yields of certain crops, and data on the sale or consumption of mineral fertilisers. They also covered the establishment of landscape indicators such as the lengths of hedges or walls or the areas used at regional level outside the utilised agricultural area; the effects of structural characteristics on the operation of holdings; and data on cultivation practices. The actions concerning the use of pesticides continued the collection and processing of data plus improvement in the quality and speed of transmission by using a variety of methods and sources. Actions on nutrient balances are foreseen in the context of the 2007 annual plan. In total, 26 actions were completed, are underway or planned, involving 10 Member States. The actions were a starting point for the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning statistics on plant protection products;
- **rural development:** 31 actions were completed, are under way or planned, involving a total of 14 Member States. A wide range of subjects was covered, including non-agricultural income of farms and families, living conditions in rural regions, and the contribution of agriculture as a support for other economic and cultural activities;
- **farm statistical registers:** the 14 actions undertaken by Member States under the TAPAS 2005 and 2006 action plans involved the improvement and automation of the register-updating procedures; the development of links with other relevant data sources such as the Business Register and animal registers; and the improvement of the quality and coverage of national farm registers;

- **small units surveys:** six Member States took part in the action plans aimed at studying the coverage of small agricultural holdings. The work involved examining the different categories and characteristics of smallholdings, obtained from different sources, and identifying which types of smallholding should be recorded in the national farm register;
- **statistics on the structure of farms:** in 2003, before joining the European Union, the 10 prospective Member States carried out a survey on the structure of agricultural holdings, but they were not obliged to transmit the individual data to Eurostat. The second phase of the TAPAS 2004 action plan enabled them to prepare such transmission and to consolidate those statistics;
- **organic farming:** a further 15 actions on organic farming are planned for 2007. They include actions to establish or improve statistics on the production, processing and consumption of organic products, their balance sheets and prices.

A discussion in the Standing Committee for Agricultural Statistics (SCAS), in March 2007, led to the following conclusions:

- most of the actions now completed have yielded useful results;
- almost all SCAS members appreciated the exchange of experience between the beneficiaries of the TAPAS action plans, as well as the long-term vision of the statistical developments needed;
- on the other hand, some SCAS members raised concern about the effectiveness of TAPAS, and questioned the Community interest of the actions carried out. Certain Members are against prolonging TAPAS or have severe reservations;
- the administrative burden (in terms of contract work and legislation) was also mentioned as being out of proportion to the budget used;
- launching studies through TAPAS was also considered to be quite a lengthy process, taking about one year longer than through the normal grant policy.

The Commission is of the opinion that the need to adapt the statistical system to new needs will remain, as well as the need to financially support such adaptation by the Member States. However, funding the actions through normal EU grants would be an efficient alternative to the TAPAS procedure.