

Situation and prospects of agriculture in mountainous regions

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted an own initiative report by Michl **EBNER** (EPP-ED, IT) on the situation and outlook for hill and mountain farming.

The report recalls that mountain areas account for 40% of Europe's total surface area and are home to 19% of Europe's population. These areas are, in many respects, 'disadvantaged' due to permanent natural handicaps, resulting in their gradual desertification and declining agricultural production. However, there are vast differences in the actions taken by Member States on mountain areas (particularly high mountains and highlands), which are based on purely sectoral rather than integral development.

The Committee on Agriculture calls for particular attention to be paid to mountain regions and urges the Commission to develop **an integrated EU strategy for mountain areas within six months** of the adoption of this resolution. It also calls for national action programmes containing specific implementation measures to be drawn up on this basis by arrangement with regional authorities and civil society representatives, with account to be taken of existing regional initiatives.

The report stresses the role played by hill and mountain farming in production, in the cross-sectoral maintenance and utilisation of landscapes and as a multifunctional basis for other sectors of the economy and characteristic feature of traditional cultural landscapes and social fabrics. In this context, MEPs call for specific and greater account to be taken of the **multifunctionality of mountain and hill farming** in future CAP reforms by bringing the framework directives for rural development and national programmes into line with the role of mountain and hill farmers.

The committee believes that compensatory payments for mountain areas (in particular in highland and high mountain areas) should continue, in future, to be exclusively geared towards offsetting permanent natural disadvantages and additional costs stemming from farming difficulties. In this respect, they emphasise that the needs of mountain areas cannot be met by rural development funding alone.

According to MEPs, the strategy should:

- provide more **assistance for young farmers** and equal opportunities for women and men and ensure that the demographic balance is maintained in those areas that often face problems arising from urban migration;
- ensure a **high level of services of general economic interest**, improve the accessibility and interconnection of mountain areas and provide the necessary infrastructure, particularly as regards passenger and freight transport, education, the knowledge-based economy and communication networks (including broadband access);
- provide special financial assistance for the **dairy sector** (dairy farmers and processors) and additional funds from the first pillar, in particular in the form of a dairy cow premium;
- establish additional per-hectare payments for **organic farming** and extensive grazing and provide support for investments in livestock facilities appropriate to the species;
- include measures to protect and promote **regional and traditional products** or their manufacturing procedures and their certification and to safeguard them from imitations;

- provide incentives for the **protection and the sustainable use of mountain pastures**, grassland, forests and other less favoured, sensitive areas in order to regenerate and re-grass them, protect them from erosion, promote rational management of water resources and combat unwelcome developments;
- establish repositories of **indigenous genetic material** from animal and plant species.

The report emphasises the importance of a long-term **forestry strategy** that creates prevention, response and compensatory mechanisms in crisis situations (e.g. storms) and incentives for integrated forest management. With regards to **water management**, the Commission should encourage local and regional authorities to develop a sense of solidarity between downstream and upstream users, including through appropriate funding to support the sustainable use of water resources in mountain regions.

Stressing that mountain areas are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change, the report calls on the Commission, the Member States and the competent regional and local authorities to promote the immediate implementation of measures to provide **protection against natural disasters**. MEPs stress the need to ensure comprehensive anti-erosion protection for soil as well as to build and conserve aquifers in order to minimise the risks of flooding and soil erosion and to prevent drought and forest fires and also for the purpose of increasing the supply of groundwater and surface water in the countryside.

MEPs also stress the significance of introducing an **integrated approach to decision-making** and administrative procedures such as regional planning, the licensing of construction projects and the refurbishment of dwellings by means of environmental, heritage and urban-planning practices, with a view to ensuring sustainable development in mountain areas. The report recommends that the potential of mountain areas should be exploited in order to promote the comprehensive development of **tourism** and the use of innovation in land development.

Lastly, MEPs highlight the importance of the **voluntary sector** (especially mountain rescue, civil protection, charities) with regard to services and the cultural and natural heritage in the mountains. They consider it necessary to invest in local, advanced **training** centres in agricultural economy for mountain areas, so as to train professionals with the ability to manage activities in a mountain environment, protect the land and develop agriculture.