Challenge of deterioration of agricultural land in the EU and in particular in Southern Europe: the response through EU-agricultural policy instruments

2008/2219(INI) - 17/02/2009

The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted an own-initiative report by Vincenzo **AITA** (GUE/NGL, IT) on the challenge of deterioration of agricultural land in the EU and in particular in southern Europe: the response through EU agricultural policy instruments. It notes that agricultural soils in southern Europe and other regions of the Union's Member States are at the centre of a process of environmental degradation brought about by negative interactions between human activity and climate events. Desertification is now considered to be one of the most significant threats in terms of land deterioration in the Mediterranean countries.

The report considers that CAP guidelines and management methods should explicitly include principles and instruments for climate protection in general and reduction of damage resulting from soil degradation in particular. It also considers it necessary to strengthen the parameters for eco-conditionality and their application throughout the EU, above all as regards biodiversity and organic matter in soils, and to extend them to cover water protection. Community funding for measures to adjust the agricultural sector to climate change must be based on a territorial approach which takes account of the level of vulnerability of the EU regions. Members point out that, according to reliable assessments, the agricultural soils of southern Europe are more susceptible to climate change.

They regret the short-sighted attitude of the heads of state and government in deciding to reduce funding for rural development. The resources provided for under the second pillar are too limited for tackling the new challenges arising from climate change. The Commission is asked to consider the introduction of a **specific fund for financing preventive actions** which would benefit all economic sectors concerned, including agriculture.

The EU should provide greater support for improving **water management** in respect of agricultural land. The committee stresses that this will necessitate creating incentives for introducing **more efficient irrigation systems** adapted to different crops, promoting appropriate research, and encouraging ways of building on advances in biotechnology.

It takes the view that **agricultural and forestry systems** should include programmes for the forestation of marginal and/or polluted farm land. Members advocate a Community forestry policy grounded primarily in the need to tackle climate change. It is also necessary to encourage agricultural measures aimed at ensuring the preservation of surface vegetation, so as to prevent salinisation of groundwaters arising from erosion.

Among the criteria for retaining **organic matter** in soil, the CAP 'good agricultural and environmental condition' principles should provide incentives for carbon absorption and fixation based on optimum use of dryland farming techniques (minimum tilling, crop rotation, genotypes suited to the local environment, etc.)

The report also advocates the creation of a **Community drought monitoring centre** and the reinforcement of the Union's coordinated reaction capacity in facing forest fires. It keenly awaits the creation of the European observatory and early warning system on drought.

Members call on the Commission and Member States, as appropriate, to do the following:

- in connection with the proposal for a new definition of mountain areas and other areas with natural handicaps, to include among the priority evaluation criteria the level of risk of soil degradation and desertification;
- during the mid-term review of the Seventh Framework Programme, to examine the provision of greater incentives to support research and development programmes to ensure sustainable management of soils;
- consider the need to create a financial instrument to combat the causes and effects of climatic change, in particular soil deterioration;
- implement information and training measures aimed in particular at young farmers with a view to promoting the introduction of agricultural techniques favourable to soil conservation;
- strengthen and improve feed and food autonomy and self-sufficiency, including by ensuring better protection for agricultural soils and their productivity;
- in the framework of a global CO2 market, for the promotion of the preservation and regeneration of forests and re-forestation using mixed species, primarily in Member States which have lost their natural forest heritage;
- use the second pillar of the CAP in order to award premiums for farming activities relating to the maintenance of fields, permanent grazing land and wooded areas and, in this way, to contribute to the production of public goods (carbon dioxide storage, biodiversity, soil conservation). The Commission is asked to treat the maintenance of grassland as a priority;
- explore strategies for the recovery of damaged soil on the basis of incentive measures to limit soil deterioration.