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) - 12/03/2009 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 327 votes to 268, with 11 abstentions, a resolution on the challenge of deterioration of agricultural land in the EU and in particular in southern Europe: the response through EU agricultural policy instruments.

The text adopted in plenary had been tabled by the EPP-ED group, in accordance with Rule 45(2) of the Parliament's Rules of Procedure, in the form of a proposal for a resolution to replace the proposal for a resolution tabled by the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development.

The resolution 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. Desertification is now considered to be one of the most significant threats in terms of land deterioration in the Mediterranean countries. Moreover, according to reliable assessments, the agricultural soils of southern Europe are more susceptible to climate change.

Climate protection: the Parliament 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. 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.

In this context, MEPs note that the resources provided for under the second pillar are too limited for tackling the new challenges arising from climate change.

Water management: the resolution considers that the EU should provide greater support for improving water management in respect of agricultural land. It 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. MEPs also consider that "micro" reservoirs for irrigation (hill reservoirs) and for fighting fires, to be managed by the relevant local agencies, should be built. They stress the importance of terraces in combating erosion and increasing the water-storage capacity of soil.

Forests: MEPs take the view that agricultural and forestry systems should include programmes for the forestation of marginal and/or polluted farm land. They 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.

Plant genetic resources: the resolution acknowledges the important role which plant genetic resources can play in helping land management adjust to changing climatic conditions. It therefore calls on the

Commission and the Member States, therefore, to draw up programmes to foster the conservation and further development of plant genetic resources by farmers and gardeners and by small-and-medium-sized nurseries.

Carbon: 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, evapotranspiration control, targeted fertilisation, integrated control, etc.).

Community monitoring centre: the resolution advocates the creation of a Community drought monitoring centre, as a special department within the European Environment Agency in Copenhagen, and the reinforcement of the Union's coordinated reaction capacity in facing forest fires. It also recommends the development of a rapid alert and continuous surveillance system for soil conditions.

The EU is called upon to:

- 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, promote the **preservation and regeneration of forests**, primarily in Member States which have lost their natural forest heritage;
- make it possible for the issue of **green certificates** to be tied to the production of public goods (carbon dioxide storage, biodiversity and soil conservation). The Commission is called upon 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.

The Parliament calls on the Commission, in connection with the proposal for a **new definition of mountain areas** and other areas with natural handicaps it is to submit in 2009, to include among the priority evaluation criteria the level of risk of soil degradation and desertification in the areas subject to monitoring. During the **mid-term review of the Seventh Framework Programme for research**, the Commission should look into the provision of greater incentives to support research and development programmes aimed at improving knowledge with a view to ensuring more sustainable management of soils and areas affected by degradation.