Agricultural product quality policy: what strategy to follow?

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PURPOSE: to provide a framework for the establishment of the future agricultural product policy.

BACKGROUND: **thequest for quality is a vital part of the EU agri-food sector's strategy in the global marketplace**. The EU remains an important producer of basic commodities, but the lion's share (two thirds by value) of its annual agri-food exports worth around EUR 70 billion a year are 'finished products', such as meat, dairy products, wine and vegetable oils.

The EU's agri-food sector will need to build on this approach in the years ahead to sustain its competitiveness and profitability. For farmers as for food producers, doing this means two things: first, offering products with the qualities that customers want; and second, informing customers clearly about the qualities of their products.

Consultations on the development of agricultural product quality policy began in 2006 with a stakeholder hearing, followed by a conference in Brusselson 5-6 February 2007.

This Communication was drawn up based on the contributions received in response to the Commission's Green Paper on agricultural product quality (COM(2008)0641) from October 2008 and input from the High level conference organised by the Czech Presidency in March 2009.

The main messages from stakeholders included strong support for the EU's main quality schemes (**geographical indications** and **organic farming**) and **marketing standards**, but also called for simplification and streamlining. Farmers, producers and consumers urged greater use of **place of farming** labelling. For all schemes — EU, private and national — defence of the single market and simplification were also strong messages.

In the light of these consultations and examination of the current measures, the Commission has identified three main issues to be addressed in developing agricultural product quality policy, namely:

- **Information**:to improve communication between farmers, buyers and consumers about agricultural product qualities;
- **Coherence**:to increase the coherence of EU agricultural product quality policy instruments;
- **Complexity**:to make it easier for farmers, producers and consumers to use and understand the various schemes and labelling terms.

CONTENT: against this background, it is proposed to develop agricultural product quality policy through a **structured approach**, comprising:

- for **certification-type schemes**, the development of **guidelines** for good functioning of certification schemes, and ensuring coherence of any new EU schemes;
- for **labelling-type measures**, the development of EU **marketing standards** within the single Common Market Organisation.

In addition, existing EU schemes and marketing standards should be simplified and clarified wherever possible.

In the Communication the Commission proposes in particular to:

- **extend labelling** that identifies the place where agricultural product was farmed;
- examine the feasibility of laying down specific **optional reserved terms** for 'product of mountain farming' and 'traditional product'. The latter could replace the current 'traditional specialities guaranteed' scheme;
- prepare the ground for a **possible recast of the geographical indications legislation** along the following lines: (i) create a **unique register** for all geographical indications (for wines, spirits and agricultural products and foodstuffs) while preserving the specificities of each system; (ii) clarification of intellectual property rights, and particularly the relation between different types of intellectual property; (iii) generic terms (i.e. names that have become the common name for an agricultural product or foodstuff): the Commission will consider whether any clarifications are needed, in particular in identifying generic terms and the scope of protection of registered geographical indications on some generic terms; (iv) information where necessary on the place of farming of raw materials where this is different from the place indicated by the geographical indication; (v) possible extension of certification requirements to different operators in the supply chain (such as importers and distributors) as is the case for organic product;
- improve the single market for products under labelling schemes, particularly for **organic products**;
- **strengthen international protection of geographical indications** and contribute to the development of international standards for marketing standards and organic product;
- develop 'good practice' **guidelines** for private certification schemes to reduce potential for consumer confusion and to reduce red-tape for farmers.

Taking into account comments on this Communication, and in the light of any further analysis where necessary, the Commission will:

- develop guidelines for agricultural product quality certification schemes in consultation with the Advisory Group on Quality;
- prepare the ground for possible legislative initiatives on geographical indications, traditional specialities guaranteed, and marketing standards, including optional reserved terms;
- investigate the potential for using the CEN standard setting body;
- improve recognition of EU quality schemes in third countries.