Agricultural product quality policy: what strategy to follow?

2009/2105(INI) - 22/02/2010

The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted the own-initiative report drafted by Giancarlo SCOTTA' (IT, EFD) on Agricultural product quality policy: what strategy to follow?

The report states that the European Union has the highest quality standards for food products in the world and that there is ever-increasing consumer interest not only in food safety but also in the origins and production methods of food products. The EU has already responded to this trend by introducing four food quality and origin schemes, namely: (i) Protected Designation of Origin (PDO); (ii) Protected Geographical Indication (PGI); (iii) Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) and (iv) Organic Farming. The committee notes that consumers associate these certification schemes with a guarantee of higher quality and they therefore agreed on the need to keep the current certification systems in place, albeit with slight amendments.

The report welcomes the Commission's communication and the incorporation therein of several of Parliament's recommendations following the reflection process launched through the green paper on agricultural product quality. The committee wishes to see the measures proposed by Parliament in this resolution implemented as soon as possible.

Product quality policy: Members call for the strengthening of the EU quality policy. It should be more open to products from the new Member States, which gained access to the system for registering geographical indications only a few years ago. They believe that the requirements to be met in order to register a given product should be transparent and understandable not just to applicants (producers) but also to consumers. They advocate **closer monitoring and more coordination** between the Commission and the Member States so as to ensure that imported food products meet the EU's quality and food safety standards, as well as its environmental and social standards.

It is believed that the European quality policy should be closely linked to the reform of the CAP after 2013 and that the **EU needs to offer financial support** with a view to obtaining agri-food production of high quality.

EU farming requirements and marketing standards: the report stresses the need for formal recognition of the efforts made by European producers in meeting EU farming requirements with regard to quality, environmental, animal welfare and health standards. It considers that EU agricultural products meet a quality standard in themselves, since they are produced in accordance with EU legislative provisions concerning product quality, sustainable production and environmental and health criteria (cross-compliance). It considers that sectoral marketing standards play an important role in the production chain, and that consequently they should be kept.

The committee urges that consumers be provided with all available relevant information and in this context it favours the introduction of compulsory legislation for **'place of farming' labelling for primary products** on a case-by-case basis. The report also states that supplementary and specific information shall be voluntary and that the **total labelling content must not be overloaded**. The EU quality label should remain clearly recognisable as a priority.

In addition, the Commission is called upon to:

-

- conduct a study of the various options available for giving European producers the possibility of displaying on their products their commitment to quality, food safety and observance of all European standards of production, including the option of an EU quality logo, which should be made available exclusively to agricultural goods resulting entirely from production in the EU, and which, since it would certify compliance with the legislation subject to official controls, should in no circumstances involve any additional cost to operators or any financial or administrative burden on the Member States exercising the controls;
- launch a reflection process on the possibility of introducing quality indicators related to the social conditions of production, e.g. producers' incomes and contractual relations between producers, processors and marketers;

- carry out a thorough technical and economic study to ensure that the new legislation does not impose excessive costs on the food processing industry, in particular on SMEs;
- maintain consistency in its proposals on agricultural product quality policy, in terms of the approach to 'country of origin' labelling and the proposed regulation on the provision of food information to consumers.

Protecting geographical indications and traditional specialities: Members consider that **geographical indications have considerable importance for European agriculture** and they are of the opinion that the three systems of registration of geographical indications (for wines, spirits and for agricultural products and foodstuffs) should be maintained as they stand at present. In particular, they believe that the current EU system for the protection of GI products should be maintained and that protection at EU level should be accorded to all GIs. They also consider that the two instruments in place – the protected designation of origin (PDO) and the protected geographical indication (PGI) – should also be kept in the future, given their high degree of recognition and success. However, it does consider that a clearer distinction, for consumers, needs to be made between PDO and PGI and that this can be achieved through an overall information and promotion effort, involving Community financial support in the context of both the international market and third countries, inter alia by increasing the percentage of Community cofinancing.

Members consider that the **current EU rules on GIs should be supplemented** to ensure full recognition and enhancement of the role played by organisations designated or recognised by the Member States as responsible for managing, protecting and/or promoting intellectual property rights conferred by registration as a GI.

They also consider that, on the basis of producers' experience, it has emerged that the management of product quality through PDO and PGI specifications and the effectiveness of protection against usurpations are not sufficient for the further development of GI products. They take the view that **EU legislation should be amended** so as to enable Member States to recognise and enhance the proper role of organisations which they designate or recognise as responsible for the management, protection and/or promotion of GIs and their intellectual property rights and to authorise such organisations to adapt production potential to market demands, on the basis of fair and non-discriminatory rules. The committee proposes **enhancing the role of geographical indication owners' consortia**, with a view to defining the legislation with regard to both volume management and use of geographical indications in respect of the goods produced. The definition of the role of consortia should be included in Community legislation.

The report notes that the current procedures for registration of PDOs and PGIs are complex and lengthy. The Commission is urged to find ways by which this process could be speeded up. Members consider that the Commission should establish **clear guidelines regarding use of the names of GI products used as ingredients** on the labels of processed products, so as to avoid consumers being misled. They endorse the establishment of Community rules to enable GI management bodies to lay down packaging rules for their products in order to ensure that their high quality is in no way diminished.

The report considers that the instrument of **Traditional Specialities Guaranteed (TSG) must be kept**, whilst the corresponding rules for registration need further simplification. It states that this instrument should be better communicated to producers and allowed to become a familiar tool for quality promotion in Europe. In order to prevent the disappearance of knowledge about traditional food and how it has been prepared for generations, the Commission should consider creating a **European knowledge bank for old recipes and historical food preparation methods**.

WTO rules and counterfeiting: the committee emphasises that, in the WTO negotiations, the Commission must seek to secure an agreement on the 'non-trade concerns' which will ensure that imported agricultural products meet the same EU requirements, in the areas of food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection, that are imposed on agricultural products produced inside the Union. The report recalls that **some GIs are systematically counterfeited** in third countries. It emphasises that securing protection of a GI in a third country is a long and difficult procedure for producers, since each third country may have developed its own specific protection system. Members call for a **binding multilateral register of all GI products worldwide**, to be agreed at the WTO (under TRIPS article 23), which is essential to fight usurpation and counterfeiting. Members also call on the Commission to provide GI bodies with financial and technical support to tackle these problems. The Commission's aim to include geographical indications within the scope of the 'Anti-counterfeiting trade agreement' and in the work of the future 'European observatory on counterfeiting and piracy' is also supported.

Organic farming: the committee supports recent efforts to develop a **new EU organic logo**, applicable to all EU farmed products. It takes the view that there should be a **genuine single market in organic products**. In this connection, expresses its support for the framework established in Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 on organic production and labelling of organic products and repealing Regulation (EEC) No 2092//911, and hopes that, even though it has come into force only recently, it will fulfil all of its legislative potential as soon as possible. Stressing that both the Member States and the EU have the duty to promote quality products and their protection at international level, Members believe, in this connection, that more **stringent controls are needed on organic products from third countries**. Members are concerned at the growing number of private organic labels in non-food products, a rapidly expanding sector which is not covered by the above-mentioned regulations. Therefore, they call on the Commission to assess whether the provisions should be extended to cover this sector.

Private certification systems: the report stresses that, as things stand, private certification systems do not provide additional information on the quality of the products concerned: rather, they are in many cases becoming a financial and administrative burden as regards farmers' access to the market. It calls for an inventory of all private quality certification systems which European producers are required to implement in addition to the quality specifications already imposed under EU legislation. It supports the establishment of a **Community Legislative Framework of Basic Principles** for the transparent implementation of the private certification systems in question. The committee supports the **Commission' s initiative of drawing up guidelines for best practice** for the operation of all systems related to agricultural product quality.

Information and promotion policy: Members believe that the promotion instruments currently available to the EU need to be revised so as to improve their efficiency. It proposes, in this connection, **extending to the EU market the promotion aids recently introduced in the wine sector**.

Lastly, the report favours encouraging agricultural markets directly managed by farmers as points of sale for seasonal local products. The committee believes the Member States should encourage the **creation of marketing units where producers can directly introduce consumers to their products**.