EU agriculture and climate change

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Stéphane Le FOLL (S&D, FR) on EU agriculture and climate change It notes that agriculture, as one of the main sources of two major GHGs (nitrous oxide and methane) which are generated by various biological processes linked to agricultural production is contributing to climate change while also being very vulnerable to its adverse impact. Such impact includes declining water resources, brackishness and more frequent drought, desertification, a significant increase in winter rainfall and flooding in the north, threats to low-lying coastal areas from rising sea levels and the danger of salination, extreme weather events, erosion and landslides and the proliferation of insect pests and animal and plant diseases. The expected acceleration of such problems could have serious economic, social and environmental repercussions for the agricultural, forestry and tourism sectors.

Contribution of EU agriculture to global warming mitigation efforts: Members affirm that EU agriculture and forestry can contribute to achieving the Union's climate change mitigation objectives by finding ways to help reduce its GHG emissions, promoting CO2 sequestration in the soil, develop the production of sustainable renewable energies, and maximise photosynthesis function. To this end, it is essential to foster the development of an agriculture producing tradable and non tradable goods which exploit the potential of each ecosystem as efficiently as possible and which reconcile economic, environmental and social performance as well as animal welfare imperatives so as to improve its sustainability. Members also state that, if agriculture is to be more actively involved in the global process of curbing climate change, care must be taken to ensure that the competitive position of the EU's agri-foodstuffs sector in the world market does not suffer.

They call for the future CAP to encourage – through the provision of information, training and incentives – practices that contribute to improving the efficiency of agriculture and its potential to reduce GHG emissions, and to improving carbon sequestration, including:

- cultivation techniques that provide plant cover (such as reduced or no-tillage and leaving crop residues on the ground) and facilitate intercropping and crop rotation, thereby maximising photosynthesis and helping to enrich the soil with organic matter, as demonstrated by the SoCo project launched at the European Parliament's instigation;
- the development of afforestation, reforestation, agroforestry, hedges, wooded areas on farmland, permanent or temporary grassland pasture systems and reforestation;
- the introduction of farming methods which will increase the carbon storage period in existing forests;
- better management of soil and of minerals and protection of carbon-rich land (peatland) and wetlands (growing suitable crops, such as reeds, as an alternative to drainage);
- farm modernisation (building insulation, energy-efficient equipment and the use of renewable energies) and more efficient production chains;
- modern techniques of feeding, animal keeping and manure treatment and use, which will significantly reduce methane emissions;
- the use of biomass energy integrated into food production, which will contribute to reducing CO2 emissions in addition to making use of by-products and waste;
- the planting of woody and herbaceous energy crops) in floodplains, areas which are wet or sandy and areas less suitable for agriculture, with the aim of increasing CO2 absorption and carbon sequestration.

Members recommend introducing a **common European forestry policy** that promotes sustainable forestry management and does more to tap the potential and the economic development of this industry, which is the one that makes the greatest contribution to carbon capture. They also point out that the use of biomass for heating might significantly reduce the harmful impact of climate change, and therefore call for rural development funding for rural public institutions switching to heating systems based on bioenergy.

The committee goes on to emphasise that the EU's position as the leading importer of agricultural produce results in a higher carbon cost than that generated by European farms, owing to the lower environmental standards often found in non-EU countries, coupled with long-distance transport emissions and deforestation. Accordingly, there is a need to inform consumers of the benefits of a healthy, balanced diet made up of high-quality regional and seasonal items produced by a sustainable agriculture, the carbon footprint of which could be differentiated from those of imported products. There is also a need to compensate European farmers fairly for their efforts to reduce emissions and to encourage local farms to diversify (inter alia by developing EU production of plant proteins). The committee endorses the idea of **voluntary EU origin labelling** in the case of products originating entirely within the EU. It calls for the implementation of effective **control mechanisms on imports** from third countries and advocates full reciprocity between the criteria that have to be met by European producers to combat climate change and the requirements applying to imports from third countries, to avoid any loss in the competitiveness of Community products.

Measures to help EU agriculture adapt to the effects of global warming: the report states that the EU must develop a coherent strategy for agriculture to adapt to the two kinds of adverse climatic effects anticipated: overall global warming; and more marked variations in climate conditions resulting in an increase in extreme weather events. It states that CAP and its reform must focus on the management of resources including optimising water resource management, choosing crop varieties, particularly those selected for their ability to resist extreme weather events, and protecting the soil from water and wind erosion by ensuring organic matter content.

Implications for the European agricultural model: Members note that the current cross-compliance system, which was designed to ensure that agricultural producers meet very high standards in terms of animal welfare, animal health and environmental protection, has been problematic for farmers and has, in its current form, perhaps not been the best means of achieving the desired outcomes. They call in the next reform of the CAP, for greater emphasis on more sustainable and efficient production models, bearing in mind that these require public funding to enable farmers to cover the extra costs arising from the supply of 'public goods' of benefit to the whole of society (such as the preservation of rural areas, biodiversity conservation, carbon capture and food security). The committee considers that, to enable European agriculture to contribute to food security and climate protection, an ambitious CAP must be maintained, including the system of direct payments from the Community budget and simplified and fair payments for the EU as a whole. It calls therefore on the Commission, in reforming the CAP, to bear in mind that southern EU Member States are disproportionately affected as a result not only of the direct impact of climate change but also of its indirect impact on the scope for diversification, given that diversification is a decisive factor for developing the necessary adaptability, limiting the degree of vulnerability and narrowing regional differences.