

# Common agricultural policy CAP: support schemes for farmers

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The Commission presents a report on the application of the Farm Advisory System (FAS) in accordance with Council Regulation (EC) No 73/2009. The report is based on replies by Member States to a Commission questionnaire for 2008 and the FAS evaluation study commissioned by the Commission in 2009.

The FAS evaluation report considers that the FAS did help increase farmers' awareness of material flows and on-farm processes relating to the environment, food safety and animal health/welfare. One-to-one advice using checklists was considered particularly effective, as it is a very individualised and structured way of providing advice. In some Member States, the establishment of the FAS represented a good opportunity to rethink and improve their wider advice and knowledge information systems in the agricultural sector.

The FAS helped farmers to meet cross-compliance requirements, and this was the main motivation for farmers to make use of the system. FAS support also increased farmers' financial management skills (accountancy) and improved their book-keeping as regards cross-compliance obligations.

Overall, however, the effectiveness of the FAS was still limited, since few farmers sought the advice on offer. The evaluators see potential for improvement since the FAS has reached more farmers (up to 20 % of those receiving direct payments) in Member States which implemented the system from 2005 onwards. In some cases the pre-financing of the advice may have discouraged some farmers from taking advantage of the FAS.

The evaluators considered it a fundamental prerequisite for the FAS that EU farmers should have access to the advice on a voluntary basis, since following advice is by its very nature voluntary — in contrast with compulsory control/certification systems. So far, the FAS had done little to improve EU farmers' perception of the CAP. Farmers often saw the FAS as being strictly about cross compliance and the related system of farm inspections, and this cast it in a negative light. However, there were cases where the FAS had succeeded in building a trustful and effective relationship between the farmers and the advisors. The evaluation report recommends that the voluntary concept and overall flexible architecture of the FAS should be maintained.

The Commission considers that the FAS is an essential tool for a successful implementation of the CAP. Farmers are supported in their efforts to comply with the EU's legal requirements relating to the environment, food safety and animal health and welfare. By assisting them with these 'cross-compliance' requirements, the FAS helps farmers avoid losing CAP payments. A farmer receiving advice is more likely to understand his cross-compliance obligations, and will thus more readily comply with them.

Advisory services are certainly not new in many Member States, but they may have been taking place in a piecemeal manner. By obliging each Member State to have a FAS in place, the legislator has adopted a more strategic overarching approach. The efforts being made in the Member States illustrate the important role that the system and the FAS coordinating bodies can play in helping farmers understand and implement EU rules.

The start-up phase has required considerable effort, especially from Member States where few if any advisory services were available in the past. For other Member States, setting up an FAS has been more a

question of coordinating existing services so as to give farmers a single contact point for advice on practical questions.

Moreover, with new challenges emerging, expectations from advisory services have risen since 2003. The FAS should therefore pro-actively develop and encompass issues that go beyond legal requirements under cross compliance.

The Commission therefore makes the following recommendations to the Member States:

- keep the scope of the FAS broad but with the rules to be respected as the core minimum scope;
- emphasise the role of the FAS advisor as a 'general practitioner' directing farmers, if necessary, to specialist advisors;
- use aggregated farm inspection data to help target the advice better, while taking into account the great importance of respecting the confidentiality of advice data. The FAS advisor should act as a 'general practitioner', interlinking all different aspects of farming with a holistic approach. He should explain to farmers not only the EU's requirements but also their objectives, and the underlying policies;
- promote the FAS via specific measures, such as taking appropriate opportunities to give farmers the list of advisors, ensuring that small farms are reached too;
- improve the management of the FAS, and ensure that knowledge is shared between actors in the field of cross compliance. FAS coordinating bodies should enhance the synergies between various instruments such as advice, training, information, extension services and research. It is very important to evaluate and monitor the FAS.

The Commission further considers that the following actions are necessary:

- clarify the terms 'FAS' and 'farm advisory services', clearly distinguishing advice from the mere provision of detailed information, and ensuring that the FAS is targeting all farmers in the EU;
- include within the minimum scope of the FAS the minimum requirements for fertiliser and plant protection products as laid down in national legislation, and highlight the need for specific action on climate change;
- explain the role of FAS advisors vis à vis other actors in the field of cross compliance, recommending a clear separation between advice and farm inspections;
- promote the FAS by introducing flexibility in the content and frequency of uptake of the advisory measure, and by obliging Member States to provide farmers with the list of FAS advisors;
- improve the management of the FAS by requiring that advisors are suitably qualified and regularly trained, with training sessions being organised by the FAS coordinating bodies.

These actions may lead to legislative changes in the post-2013 package