Quality policy for agricultural products and agri-foodstuffs

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The Committee adopted the own-initiative report by Jan MULDER (ELDR, NL) on quality policy for agricultural products and agri-foodstuffs. The report was drawn up in connection with the prolongation of Parliament's decision at the time of the 1995 budget to place ECU 10m in the reserve to promote a European "quality label" for agricultural products. The committee believes that a package of EU rules is needed to ensure that only safe food products are admitted onto the European market. Since 1992 there has been a shift in emphasis in the CAP from market and price policy to direct income support. However, the committee argues that farmers should be able to derive most of their income from selling on the market. For this reason, an extension of the EU's "quality policy" could have beneficial effects, enabling the Union to distinguish itself from its competitors through the quality of its farm products. For these reasons, the committee is proposing that the existing rules on organic and environmentally sound production methods should be strengthened and that they should also apply to animal products. It also envisages the possibility of creating denominations of origin and geographical indications for certain fruits and vegetables, which would increase their added value. It is calling for a European logo to be introduced as a guarantee of quality for consumers and as a means of differentiating EU products. The report acknowledges that the concept of quality is subjective and thus cannot have a standard definition. It therefore says that EU quality policy should not take the place of existing national, regional and local quality policies but should complement and coordinate them. In addition, EU legislation should be adopted to regulate the labelling of quality products so as to ensure transparency for consumers. Quality labels recognised at EU level will have to meet strict, precise conditions such as voluntary participation in the scheme, availability of technical details for public inspection and independent monitoring, at the expense of the interested parties, by a State body or an independent agency acting on the instructions of the State. The committee is also calling for a third European quality category to be created on the basis of environmental criteria in the broad sense, including animal welfare. Lastly, it calls on the Commission to guarantee greater rewards for producers of quality products and to ensure that such producers can benefit from special tax provisions, incorporating incentives, and also to use promotion funds to encourage the EU public to consume quality products.