Rural development in the framework of Agenda 2000: interim assessment in the Union and the candidate countries

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by María RODRÍGUEZ RAMOS (PES, E) on the interim assessment, in the framework of Agenda 2000, of rural development in the EU and the applicant countries. It was dissatisfied with the inadequate amount of funding - currently less than 10% of the CAP budget - so far allocated to rural development, despite the creation of the second pillar within the CAP at the Berlin Summit, and called for urgent reassessment. The report also complained that the rural development measures currently in force were applied unevenly in the different Member States, a situation likely to be exacerbated with enlargement. There was also a need for greater coordination between EAGGF rural development programmes and actions carried out under the Structural Funds. A new typology of rural areas should be defined on the basis of objective socio-economic, environmental and climate-related criteria, with a view to establishing priority measures for each region. The committee stressed that the second pillar of the CAP must guarantee sustainable rural development and the maintenance of multifunctional family-based agriculture throughout the territory of the enlarged Union. Rural development policy should therefore be geared towards combating depopulation by helping to preserve essential public services and social facilities in rural areas and providing extra support to enable smallholdings to stay in business. Consideration should be given to increasing direct income support while ensuring that this created minimum distortion of competition. Measures to encourage young people to go into farming were also a key priority. Other recommendations made in the report included a call for the European Parliament to be allocated full codecision powers for the agricultural sector ahead of enlargement, and for the rules, procedures and financing relating to second-pillar rural development measures to be simplified. While warning against the renationalisation of the CAP, the report called for more compulsory co-financing by the Member States of measures taken under the CAP. Lastly, the committee advised against linking the mid-term review of Agenda 2000 with the enlargement negotiations.