Arctic agriculture

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Mikko PESÄLÄ (ELDR, FIN) on Arctic agriculture. The report outlined the particular features of farming in the EU's subarctic regions and pointed out that the cold climate was a permanent handicap, resulting in a short growing and grazing season which entailed additional costs for arable farming and stockfarming. MEPs also drew attention to the high standard of environmental protection and the purity of the water and soil in northern farming regions, and said that a thriving agricultural sector helped to preserve the natural and man-made landscape. The report added that reindeer meat was a speciality of the northernmost parts of Finnish and Swedish Lapland but that reindeer herding - an important means of livelihood for the Sami, northern Europe's only aboriginal people - could not be expanded because of the limited capacity of the winter pastures. MEPs concluded that the rules governing international agricultural trade should recognise more clearly that production conditions varied in different parts of the globe and that farming tasks were not confined to food production alone. They called on the IGC to include a provision in the constitutional treaty recognising the "permanent special status" of sparsely populated northern regions. The committee also pointed out that the system of direct aid under the common agricultural policy had been conceived before Sweden and Finland joined the EU in 1995 and was not designed to allow for the special conditions in subarctic farming areas. Pending any reform of the CAP to redress this situation, provision should be made for northern regions to qualify for rural development measures. The Commission was urged to lay down clear definitions and criteria based on climate, the length of the growing season, low population density and outlying position so as to ensure that permanent handicaps could be taken into account when support schemes were drawn up. The report stressed that subarctic farming areas should be able to produce food locally, among other things for environmental protection and animal welfare reasons. Moreover, if agriculture was to survive in these regions, thereby helping to maintain the vitality of the countryside and prevent rural depopulation, it was important that agricultural entrepreneurship and the motivation to work should be kept alive by maintaining the necessary linkage to production. Lastly, MEPs said that entrepreneurship beyond traditional agriculture and forestry should also be fostered but they warned that such activities, while generating additional income, "cannot guarantee a sufficient livelihood unless farming pays".