Water policy: pollution by nitrates from agricultural sources (implem. Directive 91/676 /EEC)

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The Commission presented a report that concerns the implementation of the "nitrates" directive (Directive 91/676/EEC) and provides an overview of the current situation with regard to the directive together with possible pathways for the future. This Commission report is a synthesis of the information transmitted during 2000-2001 by Member States (2nd reporting exercise). It is completed by aggregated maps and analysis of pressure from nitrogen from agricultural sources in the EU maps, of present NVZs and by a comparative table on the main content and deficiencies of the first action programmes (1996-1999). It illustrates, with some case studies, the positive effects of some farm practices on the quality of water. However, it is emphasised that there is a considerable time lag between improvements at farm and soil level and a response in waterbody quality. In conclusion, the report highlights that although incomplete and lacking of coherence, the water monitoring networks set up by Member States show that more than 20% of EU groundwaters are facing excessive nitrates concentrations, with a continuous increasing trend in the most intensive areas of livestock breeding and fertiliser consumption. At least 30-40% of rivers and lakes show eutrophication symptoms or bring high nitrogen fluxes to coastal waters and seas. The agricultural origin of these N fluxes accounts for 50 to 80% of total N inputs to EU waters, depending on Member States, watersheds and annual variations (Be, Dk, D, Fr, Irl reports to the EC, and EEA report no 4 "nutrients in European ecosystems" - 1999). Following a delay of 5 years or more by Member States to fulfil their commitments for implementation of the Directive and an effective reduction of N losses from agriculture to water, a real improvement can be pointed out in the sensibilisation of Member States during recent years. All Member States have now transposed the directive, set up a comprehensive monitoring network, established a code of good practice, and designated at least partially their vulnerable zones (except Ireland). Indeed the effects of action programmes, often published only in 1997-1999, will be significant only after some years ("tanker" effect of soil and groundwaters), but success stories can already be noticed in regions where intense field controls, including soil analysis, have accompanied dissemination of good practice advice (e.g. in Denmark, some German Länder, East of France, Algarve). A CAP more oriented towards quality rather than quantity, encouraging extensive cropping or breeding, "buffer" natural areas and accurate balanced fertilisation, can further contribute to these purposes. However, the failure of a proper application of the "Nitrate" directive in some Member States cannot be rectified only through CAP measures. Controlling nitrate emission is still primarily the task of transposition and implementation of the "Nitrate" Directive. Cost-efficiency studies on preventive measures should also be encouraged, in order to focus action programmes and practice changes towards the most efficient one. Besides financial support for a more environmental-friendly agriculture and dissemination of knowledge, it is necessary that all Member States arrive at a full implementation of the Nitrate Directive, reinforce surveys and controls at field level(including checking of fertilisation plans and records, manure storage and handling, soil analysis, natural buffer strips, etc.), and introduce dissuasive penalties for the producers who do not ensure eco-compliance. Nevertheless a synergy has to be developed in the future work for common implementation of these water directives, on items such as: - Harmonisation of water sampling points, networks, parameters and frequencies for water quality monitoring; - assessment of point and diffuse losses of nutrients to waters, and of the breakdown of their origin; - models correlating environmental impacts (e.g. algae blooms) and causative factors; - cost-efficiency approach for preventive measures. Nitrogen and Phosphorus will certainly appear as priority polluters in many E.U. watersheds.