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

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The directive on nitrates, which dates from 1991, was designed to reduce water pollution caused by nitrates from agriculture and prevent them spreading by laying down maximum permitted levels of nitrogen (N): 210 kg N/Ha from 20th December 1998 and 170 kg N/Ha as of 20th December 2002. Member States which already had lower levels could not raise them to these levels. The report by the Commission on the implementation of the directive is brief: it simply notes that the directive is still not properly applied in most Member States. The motion for a resolution, drawn up by the rapporteur, Patricia McKENNA (Greens, Irl), and adopted unanimously by the Committee under the consultation procedure, calls on the Member States to implement the Nitrate Directive from 1991 "fully and swiftly". Apart from health problems (excess nitrites in the blood), marine pollution (accelerated growth of algae as a result of eutrophication) and pollution of groundwater, the great variation in the way the anti-nitrate measures are applied leads to distortions of competition. Although the Member States are seen as primarily responsible, the committee also believes the Commission has a duty to enforce the legislation. It therefore calls for infringement procedures to be speeded up against Member States which do not implement the directive or implement it incorrectly. It also believes that Member States should respect the "polluter pays" principle when devising solutions to the problem. Lastly, the report asks the Commission to bring forward a communication proposing effective solutions to the problem of nitrates. The committee makes a number of suggestions: compliance with the code of good agricultural practice should be made mandatory and EU farm subsidies should be reduced or even withdrawn where the code is not observed; there should be a reduction in the maximum number of animals per hectare; and energy production at small-scale bio-gas plants should be promoted.