Research actions for agriculture and fishery, FAIR. Special report 9/1999, Court of Auditors

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PURPOSE: presentation of the European Court of Auditors' Special Report No 9/99 concerning research activities in the field of agriculture and fisheries FAIR programme. CONTENT: The fourth framework programme, which was adopted for the 1994-1998 period with a total of 11 879 Mio ECU, comprises four main measures. Community research activities in the field of agriculture and fisheries come mainly under the first of these measures and receive a total budget of 739,5 Mio ECU. They are intended to improve production, promote the development of modern agricultural holdings and render agriculture and forestry less intensive, more environment-friendly and more compliant with end-users' demands for quality and safety. The Court's audit was focused on examining the procedures for managing and monitoring these activities. As the audit was focused more particularly on the FAIR specific Community research programme, attention was paid to analysing the rules, procedures and methods implemented by the Commission, both within the Directorates-General managing the programme and on the basis of a sample of beneficiaries and/or research contracts. The structure and the management methods of the FAIR specific research programme have not been sufficiently adapted. The fact that there are no quantified objectives also makes it difficult to measure results. Certain rules for implementing the programme were not applied correctly as a result of insufficient detail: for example, the use of selection criteria that favoured the compliance of projects with Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) objectives or the application of the principle that financing should decrease in proportion to the proximity of the market. The procedures for selecting projects were inadequate and, in some cases, poorly applied. As for final evaluation, the obligations resulting from the four previous specific programmes were not fulfilled. The Commission's management tools do not enable the complementarity of the programme's projects with those financed by other Community instruments or forms of intervention to be assessed. The respective responsibilities of the three Directorates-General which co-manage the programme were not formalised, resulting in a lack of clarity and homogeneity. The fact that separate computer applications were developed hindered the coordinated management of the activities and the effective exploitation and dissemination of the information available. Cases where the regulatory or contractual provisions had not been adhered to, and weaknesses in the implementation of the procedures for managing, monitoring and controlling the projects were detected. The standard contract for research projects contains defects: no provision for the joint and binding financial liability of the contracting parties; inadequacy of the obligations regarding the justification of the expenditure declared and the over-restrictive nature of the conditions for imposing penalties. The Court issued a series of recommendations: - The act of making extra resources available for the FAIR specific programme would have been more effective had it been accompanied by a suitable structure and appropriate management methods. Efforts should be made to develop indicators and to meetobligations regarding the final assessment of previous programmes. - There should be an increase in the coordination of the programme's measures with Community policies to ensure the complementarity of the efforts made and to obviate redundant work. - The homogeneity of the procedures and the overall consistency of the programme's measures would be improved by a better definition of the role of project leader and the use of joint computerised management tools. The selection of measures would be better understood by the beneficiaries if the key procedures for implementing the programme were specified and clarified prior to its implementation. - Lastly, provisions applicable to the entire framework research programme should be defined in order to guarantee the quality and independence of expert assessors and improve the justification of the results of selections. The legal and technical quality of contracts is unsatisfactory and should be improved.