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

1997/2226(COS) - 20/10/1998 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

Adopting the report by Mrs Patricia McKenna (Green, Irl.) on protection of water against agricultural pollution, Parliament calls on the Member States to implement the nitrates directive of 1991 fully and swiftly. This directive aimed to reduce water pollution by nitrates from agriculture and prevent its increase by setting maximum limit values for nitrogen (210 kg N/Ha from 20 December 1998 and 170 kg N/Ha from 20 December 2002), Member States with lower limits not being permitted to increase them. Apart from health problems (excessive nitrites in the blood), marine pollution (proliferation of algae - eutrophication) and pollution of groundwater, the very variable application of measures to combat nitrates distorts competition. Although the Member States bear the main responsibility, Parliament considers that the Commission also has a duty to ensure that regulations are respected. Parliament therefore calls on the Commission to speed up the infringement procedures against Member States which do not implement or incorrectly implement the nitrates directive. It also suggests that national action programmes be implemented as a means of solving the problem. The Member States should apply the 'polluter pays' principle with regard to solutions to problems caused by nitrates. Parliament also calls on the Commission to outline effective solutions to nitrate problems. In this regard, it proposes: - making compliance with the code of good agricultural practice mandatory, - drawing up specific requirements regarding the setting aside of protected areas, - reducing the number of animals to a maximum per hectare as a structural measure, - promoting energy production at smallscale biogas plants. Parliament also recommends that the horizontal measures proposed by the Commission in the context of AGENDA 2000 to promote environmental protection in agriculture (interaction between market- related direct payments and environmental levies) be made binding, especially with regard to nitrate pollution. Parliament asks the Commission to send it an annual report on implementation of the nitrates directive 91/676/EEC.