A new strategy for mountain and hill farming

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Adopting the report by Mr Giacomo Santini (EPP, I) on a new strategy for mountainous regions, Parliament calls on the Commission, working together with the regions and governments concerned, to strengthen existing measures to assist mountainous areas and to extend them to less favoured and environmentally sensitive areas. Parliament calls for: - updating of all measures to assist these areas, - a Community action plan for these areas, - rural development measures, - cross-border cooperation measures, - stronger assessment and monitoring procedures under the Structural Funds and better definition of the eligible areas at local or regional level, - increased EU compensation for the environmental services provided in the general interest by the population of these areas and their role in land occupancy. With regard to enterprises operating in areas with important natural features (national and regional parks) in these regions, Parliament calls for exemptions from EU legislation on State aid, while guarding against any risk of distortion of competition in cross-border areas within the EU. It calls for national and regional assistance policies for areas not falling within the future Objective 2, with EU support via partnership agreements. Existing allowances should be maintained and improved so as to boost their impact on farm incomes and combat the trend towards depopulation by making it possible to add maximum value to their agricultural production. The establishment in the valleys of small units for drying or dehydrating fodder should be encouraged. The compensatory allowances system should be adjusted, since the current system is based on surface area and the number of livestock units and does not allow for adequate compensation to offset the natural handicap suffered. Priority should be given to the infrastructure required to strengthen regional economic networks which could open up new employment opportunities in mountain, less favoured and environmentally sensitive regions. Parliament also considers that more favourable differentiated rates of Community aid for investment, processing and marketing of agricultural products and foodstuffs derived from these products and all structural measures should be introduced or maintained, sustainable production systems and local breeds and varieties should be supported, the possibility should be examined of exempting small scale milk producers in mountain areas from the milk quota system where this activity is their sole means of survival and provision should be made under the CAP for specific funds to support the production of milk, meat and breeding cows, these products traditionally being the mainstay of farming in these regions. Given that agriculture and forestry in these regions make an essential contribution to ecological stability and the preservation of the natural landscape, Parliament calls for funding of these activities through Community programmes, including agri-environmental measures, for these measures to be extended to include forestry and for aid to be granted to regional authorities in these areas to prevent and fight forest fires and for reafforestation. There should also be measures within the framework of transport policy, tourism policy and the action plan for the information society to exploit the potential of renewable energy sources in these regions based on agriculture, forestry or wind power. Account should be taken of the problems suffered by these regions in the context of enlargement.