

European action plan for organic food and farming

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In this Communication, the Commission intends to assess the situation and to lay down the basis for policy development in the coming years, thereby providing an overall strategic vision for organic farming's contribution to the common agricultural policy (CAP).

In designing a global policy concept for organic farming, the dual societal role of organic farming should be recognised.

1) Organic food marketing, responding to the concerns of some consumers, and should therefore be rewarded by the markets and hence be financed by the consumers. The development of organic farming will, in this respect, be governed by market rules.

2) Organic land management is known to deliver public goods, primarily environmental, but also rural development benefits and in certain respects may also result in improved animal welfare. Seen from this angle, the development of organic farming should be driven by society.

In order to ensure stable market development, there needs to be a balance between supply and demand.

The Commission analysis has shown that more emphasis should be put on facilitating the development of the market. The current market share is on average about 2% in EU-15. In order to increase this figure or even to maintain the current figure in the long run, more focus on consumer expectations is needed. Consumers need better information on the principles and objectives of organic farming as well as the positive impact on, for example, the environment. At the same time, it is important to safeguard the integrity of the inspection system.

The internal trade of organic products is hampered by the many different national and private standards and their implementation, which can make it very complicated to sell organic products in other Member States. The developing of common objectives, development of a multilateral concept of equivalence, further harmonisation of inspection requirements and more emphasis on the EU logo would help to minimise these problems.

To facilitate the expansion of organic farming, but also to increase production capacity, new information and, above all, new technologies are required. It is therefore essential to ensure the necessary research into organic farming and processing methods. At the same time, the gathering of statistical information about production and the market should be improved.

One of the objectives in the 2003 CAP reform was to promote production that supports environmentally friendly, quality products. Organic farming is an important device towards the attainment of this goal.

Organic farmers are currently entitled to receive support from the first pillar of the CAP through direct payments and price support measures. More importantly, organic farming is fully integrated in the rural development policy in the second pillar of the CAP and has a prominent place in the agri-environment measures. The 2003 CAP reform has provided a useful framework for the future development of organic farming and has made a range of instruments available to Member States.

Based on this analysis and building upon the achievements already accomplished, the main proposals in the Action Plan concentrate on:

- an information-led development of the organic food market, by increasing consumer awareness, providing more information and promotion to consumers and operators, stimulating the use of the EU logo, including on imported products, providing more transparency on different standards, and improving the availability of production, supply and demand statistics as policy and marketing tools;
- making public support for organic farming more effective by encouraging Member States to make a more coherent and greater use of the different rural development measures, for example, by means of the national action plans, and by strengthening research on organic farming;
- improving and reinforcing of the Community's organic farming standards, import and inspection requirements by defining the basic principles of organic agriculture and thus making its public service explicit; increasing transparency and consumer confidence; by establishing an independent committee for scientific and technical advice; by a further harmonisation and reinforcement of the standards making use of international organisations; by improving standards, for example, with regard to animal welfare; by completing the standards for areas not yet covered such as aquaculture or environment-related standards such as fossil energy use, etc.; by explaining the standards laid down for the prohibition of the use of GMOs; by increasing the efficiency and transparency of the inspection system and, finally, by making import provisions more efficient.