Apiculture programme: measures to improve the production and marketing of honey

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The Commission presents this follow-up report in fulfilment of its obligation under Article 7 of Council Regulation (EC) No 797/2004 on measures improving general conditions for the production and marketing of apiculture products, whichprovides for a report on the implementation of this Regulation to be submitted to the European Parliament and the Council every three years. In accordance with the Regulation, Member States submitted notification of their studies on the structure of the sector (including hive censuses). It is important to note that all Member States set up an apiculture programme, which shows their interest in this area and the needs of the European beekeeping sector.

World Situation: World honey production increased by 9.2% in the period 2001–05, and has risen by 25% since 1996. Since 2004, the EU has become the world's second largest producer. In 2005, the EU produced 13% of world production, while China consolidated its position as the world's largest producer. The two new EU Member States are also major honey producers. With regard to exports, Argentina became the single largest exporter (over 30% of world trade), with exports up by more than 40% on previous years. China, which has traditionally been the largest exporter, has seen its exports fall quite sharply since 2001. The main import market is still the EU, which absorbed about 45% of global honey imports in 2005. Germany and the United Kingdom accounted for almost 70% of total imports into the EU in 2005. Global imports have been rising steadily since the end of the 1970s as a result of increased consumption of natural products, efforts on the part of certain traders to introduce speciality honeys or low-price honey, usually in the form of blends, and increased industrial use of honey.

Situation in the EU: the EU has a honey deficit and usually has to import about half of the honey consumed, self-sufficiency in 2004/05 being 54.2%. Nevertheless, self-sufficiency has improved since EU enlargement to 25 Member States, as before this it was about 45%. The Union’s three major honey producers are Spain, Germany and Hungary. The EU imports approximately 150 000 t of honey each year. Argentina remains the main supplier, with almost 50% of total Community imports in 2005, followed by Mexico and Brazil. With regard to import prices, the average price of imports into the EU has dropped considerably since 2003, falling from EUR 2.31/kg to EUR 1.29/kg. The figures available for 2006 show that import prices are once again rising slightly. The average export price of Community honey has also been falling since 2004, but remains relatively high. At EUR 3.63/kg, the average price is well above that of imported honey. This is because European honey is often high-quality honey with specific desirable organoleptic qualities (monofloral honeys).

The Commission goes on to discuss the structure of the sector, noting that 3% of the beekeepers own nearly 40% of the hives. The number of hives has increased since 2003, due to EU enlargement. Annual per capita honey consumption was 0.7 kg in 2005. There has been no significant increase in the last few years. The Member State in which the most honey is consumed is Greece. To enable Community honey to compete against global competition, apiculture products have, under Commission Regulation (EC) No 422 /2005,for the first time, become eligible for measures to provide information on, and to promote, agricultural products on the internal market.

Implementation of honey programmes: there has been no substantial change in the way the budget is used, either as a result of the amendment to the Council Regulation in 2004 or as a result of enlargement. It should be borne in mind that when the Council Regulation was amended in 2004, a new type of measure was introduced: namely, aid to support the restocking of hives. In 2005 and 2006, the most widely used measure remained varroasis control (between 33% and 35%, amounting to over EUR 8 million), followed

by technical assistance (26% or almost EUR 6 million), rationalisation of transhumance (19% or almost EUR 4.5 million) honey analyses (8% or approximately EUR 1.8 million), restocking of hives (between 6% and 7%, or EUR 1.5 million) and finally applied research (5% or approximately EUR 1 million). Compared to previous years, there has been quite a considerable decrease in the funds allocated to varroasis control, although it still remained the most widely used measure, accounting for more than 42% of the budget for 2001-02. This is mainly because of the introduction of measures for restocking of hives and a slightly higher uptake for honey analyses. The Commission discusses relevant figures for implementation of expenditure, and states that in 2006, provisional expenditure under the Member States' programmes came to 82.5% of the total planned expenditure; that is to say, approximately EUR 19 million were spent out of a total of EUR 23 million. As Member States can pay some expenses later, the definitive percentage use of funds for programmes in 2006 should be higher. For programmes in 2004, which preceded EU enlargement, the percentage used was 84%. For programmes in 2005, which were the first ones to be implemented under the triennial system, the percentage was slightly lower (78%). This can be explained by the fact that the new Member States had no experience with these programmes, and national legislative and administrative procedures sometimes took a long time to set up. Furthermore, most of these Member States saw their percentage use of funds improve appreciably in 2006, which was the case for Hungary and Poland in particular. This shows how easy these programmes are to operate. We can expect the percentage used to be even higher for programmes in 2007.

Overall, Member States are satisfied with the way in which these programmes are run and there have been no persistent requests to amend Regulation (EC) No 797/2004. The fact that programmes are scheduled to run for a period of three years is seen as an improvement which makes it possible to anticipate and plan certain measures. The request that Member States made most often was for greater flexibility in adjusting programmes. Implementing Regulation (EC) No 917/2004 provides for changes to be made to the content of programmes during the course of the year, as Article 6 states that the budget allocated to each of the six eligible measures may be increased or reduced by a maximum of 20% without seeking the opinion of the Management Committee. If a change exceeds this limit, it is possible to make adjustments to the programme by seeking the opinion of the Management Committee. Member States made a variety of other suggestions as did those working in the sector. Both the industry (FEEDM) and the producers (COPA-COGECA) recognise the benefit that the apiculture programmes bring in terms of real support for the sector. They emphasise the fact that this is the only instrument available to the sector. The sector’s suggestions include ensuring greater cooperation between Member States and the sector when drawing up programmes, and providing for greater flexibility in changing the budget allocated to different measures during the course of the programme.

The Commission concludes that Regulation (EC) No 797/2004 seems to be yielding positive results in the beekeeping sector, both for Member States and for beekeepers. This sector is characterised by a wide diversity of production conditions, and by the dispersion and variety of players both at the production and at the marketing stage. The priority measures in the Regulation, although limited from the budget point of view, have been valuable in terms of quality. The triennial nature of the programmes since 2004 seems to have brought greater flexibility when it comes to preparation and implementation.

In view of the contents of the report, the Commission considers it inadvisable to amend Regulation (EC) No 797/2004. However, the flexibility to be able to make changes to programmes during the course of the year without affecting the total budget allocated to each Member State, as requested both by the majority of Member States and by the traders, could form the subject of a draft amendment to Commission Regulation (EC) No 917/2004.