



Farm policy reform plans debated by ministers and MEPs in Brussels

Committees: Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development

How can EU farm policy be reshaped to make it less bureaucratic, and help farmers to produce high-quality foods at competitive prices even in times of crisis? Legislative reform proposals were debated Monday at a unique meeting of EP Agriculture Committee MEPs, Member States' farm ministers and the European Commission.

The debate focused on direct support for farmers, market regulation, rural development and the financial implications of the reform proposals. This was the first time in the EU's history that legislative proposals for farm policy reform were discussed in the one room by the two co-deciding bodies - the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers.

Striking balances

In his opening speech, European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek urged participants to act responsibly in reforming "one of the EU's oldest policies", accounting for 37% of its budget for 2014-2020.

MEPs and agriculture ministers "will have to find solutions that strike a balance among all farmers in 27 Member States, big and small farms, central and remote areas" to shape a new policy, able to respond to new challenges and be accepted by EU citizens, said Mr Buzek. Strong and internationally-competitive agriculture is "one of elements that will get us out of the current crisis", he said.

New challenges

Given the unusual circumstances that farmers all around the world face today, such as increased pressure on food security and extreme price volatility, the logic of continuity with past reforms must be superseded, said EP Agriculture Committee chair Paolo de Castro (S&D, IT). "Today our first responsibility is to offer our farmers new tools to meet new challenges", he said, emphasising that the EU "cannot afford further loss of agriculture potential".

The legislative proposals tabled by the European Commission have led to "widespread perplexity - what should have been an update [...] looks more like continuity", said Mr de Castro, explaining that "the proposed measures would keep production down instead of promoting it, add more red tape for farmers [...] and appear insufficient to deal with the crisis".

However, Parliament "will use all its prerogatives" to make sure the new farm policy is able to tackle all new challenges ahead, he said.

Expectations to be met

Reforming EU farm policy is a "huge challenge" and the expectations of farmers, producers and citizens are enormous, said President-in-office of the Agriculture Council, Polish minister Marek Sawick, who welcomed the Commission proposals as a "starting point" for an open public debate.

Cut bureaucracy, say MEPs and ministers

Press release

Whilst agreeing with ministers that many parts of the proposals, such as stepping up support for young farmers and investment in research, go in the right direction, MEPs nonetheless felt that as currently drafted, they were unlikely to deliver.

Many MEPs echoed the view of Albert Dess (EPP, DE) that "this proposal brings more bureaucracy", and many ministers agreed with German minister Ilse Aigner that "simplifying the CAP is the core point [of the reform]".

Greening

The proposal to set aside 7% of land for ecological purposes "would run counter to the food security goal", said Luxembourg minister Romain Schneider. John Stuart Agnew (EFD, UK), went further, saying that proposed measures would "increase world hunger." George Lyon (ALDE, UK), urged that "we need to stick to the main objective - that of feeding the population".

The new farm policy must be based on sustainability, said Martin Häusling (Greens/EFA, DE). Irish minister Simon Coveney agreed that "the EU should lead the world" on sustainability, adding however that differing rules should apply to countries with differing conditions.

The plan to make up to 30% of payments conditional upon farmers taking "greening" measures was also criticized. "Environmental measures do matter, but 30% is too much", said Bulgarian Minister Miroslav Naydenov, echoed by other ministers and MEPs.

Fairer distribution of EU funds

"The new CAP must be fairer and at the same time more effective", addressing the needs of farmers and society as a whole, said one of Parliament's rapporteurs, Luis Manuel Capoulas Santos (S&D, PT). "There is no justification for a system based on historical references", added Mr Häusling.

The proposed gradual move towards uniform per-hectare payments by 2019 drew widespread criticism. Several ministers from Baltic states and MEPs such as Alfreds Rubiks (GUE/NGL, LV), said that this move would be too slow in reducing differences among Member States.

Others, such as Mr Coveney and his Spanish counterpart Rosa Aguilar Rivero, said that new system would cause "huge damage" and "territorial imbalances".

No to capping direct payments

Plans to cap direct payments to farmers were rejected by several ministers, including Ilse Aigner (DE), Petr Bendl (CZ) and Zsolt Simon (SK).

Sugar quotas

Many participants also rejected a Commission proposal to abolish sugar quotas as soon as 2015 and some, such as Romanian minister Valeriu Tabara, said they should be extended until 2020.

Improving content

No-one had rejected the proposed measures, and the discussion was about improving their content, said Agriculture Commissioner Dacian Cioloş in his concluding remarks.

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