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THE EUROPEAN UNION**



6083/06 (Presse 39)

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2708th Council Meeting

Agriculture and Fisheries

Brussels, 20 February 2006

President

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Federal Minister for Agriculture, Forestry, the Environment
and Water Management of Austria

P R E S S

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6083/06 (Presse 39)

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Main Results of the Council

The Council held a policy debate on the Community Strategy on bio-fuels and on the biomass Action Plan. The Council also held an exchange of views on the protection of animals and on animal welfare for the period 2006-2010.

The Council adopted three Regulations on the reform of the sugar sector in the European Union. The Council also adopted a Decision setting the strategic guidelines in the rural development for the programming period 2007-2013.

Under "Other business" the Commission updated the Council on the latest state of play concerning the outbreak of avian influenza in the Community and elsewhere.

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- Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
- The documents whose references are given in the text are available on the Council's Internet site <http://ue.eu.int>.
- Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the abovementioned Council Internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

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PARTICIPANTS

The Governments of the Member States and the European Commission were represented as follows:

Belgium:

Ms Sabine LAURELLE

Minister for Small and Medium-Sized Businesses, the Liberal Professions and the Self-Employed and Agriculture

Mr Yves LETERME

Minister-President of the Flemish Government and Flemish Minister for Institutional Reform, Agriculture, Sea Fisheries and Rural Policy

Czech Republic:

M. Miroslav TOMAN

First Deputy Minister for Agriculture, State Secretary

Denmark:

Mr Hans Christian SCHMIDT

Minister for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries

Germany:

Mr Horst SEEHOFER

Minister for Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture

Estonia:

Ms Ester TUIKSOO

Minister for Agriculture

Greece:

Mr Evangelos BASIAKOS

Minister for Rural Development and Food

Spain:

Ms Elena ESPINOSA MANGANA

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food

France:

Mr Dominique BUSSEREAU

Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries

Ireland:

Ms Mary COUGHLAN

Minister for Agriculture and Food

Italy:

Mr Giovanni ALEMANNINO

M. Francesco STORACE

Minister for Agricultural and Forestry Policy

Minister for Health

Cyprus:

Mr Timmy EFTHYMIU

Minister for Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment

Latvia:

M. Laimdota STRAUJUMA

First Deputy Minister for Agriculture, State Secretary

Lithuania:

Ms Kazimira Danutė PRUNSKIENE

Minister for Agriculture

Luxembourg:

Ms Octavie MODERT

State Secretary for Relations with Parliament, State Secretary for Agriculture, Viticulture and Rural Development, State Secretary for Culture, Higher Education and Research

Hungary:

Mr József GRÁF

Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development

Malta:

Mr George PULLICINO

Minister for Rural Affairs and the Environment

Netherlands:

Mr Cornelis Pieter VEERMAN

Minister for Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality

Austria:

Mr Josef PRÖLL

Federal Minister for Agriculture, Forestry, the Environment and Water Management

M. Andrä RUPPRECHTER

Director-general, Federal Ministry for Agriculture,
Forestry, the Environment and Water Management

Poland:

Mr Krzysztof JURGIEL

Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development

Portugal:

Mr Jaime SILVA

Minister for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries

Slovenia:

Ms Marija LUKAČIČ

Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Food

Slovakia:

Mr Ján GOLIAN

State Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture

Finland:

Mr Juha KORKEAOJA

Minister for Agriculture and Forestry

Sweden:

Ms Ann-Christin NYKVIST

Minister for Agriculture

United Kingdom:

Ms Margaret BECKETT

Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs

.....
Commission:

Ms Mariann FISCHER BOEL

Member

Mr Markos KYPRIANOU

Member

Mr Joe BORG

Member
.....

General Secretariat of the Council:

The Governments of the Acceding States were represented as follows:

Bulgaria:

Ms Svetlana BACHVAROVA

Deputy Minister, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

Romania:

Mr Mugur CRACIUN

Secretary of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and
Rural Development

ITEMS DEBATED

BIOENERGIES

(15741/05+ADD1, 6153/06+ADD1)

The Council held a policy debate on the Communication from the Commission on the biomass action plan as well as on the Communication of the Commission on the European strategy for biofuels. The Council agreed to come back on this issue at its next meeting.

This exchange of views was based on the following three questions drawn up by the Presidency in order to frame the debate:

- (1) Do you consider the contribution of bioenergy sources to be crucial in reaching the target for Renewable Energy Sources (RES) of 12% by 2010?
- (2) Could you identify the [five top] / [priority] measures to be taken at Community level, which could achieve an economically and environmentally sustainable supply for bioenergy in the EU?
- (3) Do you consider biofuels produced within the EU should constitute a central element in reaching the target inclusion rate of 5.75% of biofuels by 2010?

At the end of the meeting, the Presidency drew the conclusions that delegations:

- "1. are conscious of the need to diversify the Union's energy supply sources, and the importance of meeting sustainability goals, in particular the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions agreed under the Kyoto Protocol, the Council welcomes the Biomass Action Plan and the EU Strategy for Biofuels;
2. recognise that the development of biomass for energy has the potential to provide new income and employment opportunities in rural areas especially for agriculture, forestry and other sectors of the rural economy;
3. recognise the need to ensure that development of biomass for energy and fuel is sustainable and maximises environmental benefits;

4. consider that, in order to reach the renewable energy target of 12% by 2010, the contribution of biomass is crucial. Delegations therefore invite the Commission to stress the importance of the specific contribution biomass can make to energy supply, when drawing up its Green Paper following on from the Hampton Court Informal Council;
5. support the Biomass Action Plan in promoting the use of biomass in all three energy sectors – heating and cooling, electricity and transport;
6. welcome the cautious but forward-looking approach set out in the Strategy for Biofuels, and its objectives of further promoting biofuels in the EU, preparing for their large-scale use by improving their economic and environmental performance, and exploring the opportunities for developing countries;
7. invite the Commission to ensure that the 2010 renewable energy target for the transport sector are met. To this end, delegations invite the Commission to consider the merits of renewable fuel obligations as a way of supporting the development and uptake of biofuels across the EU when reviewing the Biofuels Directive in 2006;
8. invite the Commission to remove existing technical and non-technical barriers to the wider use of biofuels in the EU, in a manner consistent with safeguarding their environmental objectives. In this regard, delegations welcome the intention of the Commission to review the Fuel Quality Directive in 2006 and other fuel standards;
9. endorse the Commission's proposal to continue its support for the research and development of biofuels in the 7th Framework Programme, to help improve the biofuel industry's competitiveness, and to give high priority to the "bio-refinery" concept and second-generation biofuels, and to further encourage the development of an industry-led Biofuel Technology Platform;
10. welcome the balanced approach to ongoing and future trade negotiations concerning biofuels, as set out in the Biomass Action Plan and the EU Strategy for biofuels;

11. invite the Commission when reviewing the energy crop scheme, to ensure that it is consistent with the EU's overall biofuel policy and that adequate incentives are provided to the development of energy crops in all Member States and to address simplification of the energy crops regime in this review;
12. invite the Commission to monitor the development of demand and supply of biomass for energy and other industrial uses, the impact on agricultural prices and on the availability of feedstocks for competing industries."

SUGAR SECTOR

(10514/05, 14982/05 ADD1 REV1)

The Council successfully adopted by qualified majority the three Regulations on the reform of the sugar sector as set out in documents 5588/06, 5589/06, 5590/06. The Greek, Polish, and Latvian delegations voted against. A set of statements issued by the Council, the Commission and by delegations are annexed to the said Regulations (see 6312/06 ADD1).

A general approach on the reform of the sugar sector was reached under the British Presidency last November (see 14178/05 and 14982/05). The political compromise was later clarified and confirmed by the Special Committee on Agriculture in December 2005 (14982/05 ADD1 REV1). The European Parliament gave its Opinion on 19 January 2006.

COMMUNITY GUIDELINES ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT

(10893/05)

The Council **unanimously** adopted the Decision on Community strategic guidelines for Rural Development for the Programming period 2007–2013 as set out in document 5966/06.

The Opinion of the European Parliament was given on 16th February.

On 22 November, the Council reached an unanimous general approach on the redrafted proposal (see 14455/05).

**COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN ON THE PROTECTION AND WELFARE OF ANIMALS
2006-2010**

The Council held an exchange of views on this item on the basis of a questionnaire drawn up by the Presidency in order to identify the key issues and to provide for guidelines on the further examination at technical level of the Community Action Plan for Welfare and Protection of animals. The Council invited the Working Party of Chief Veterinary Officers to pursue a thorough examination of these issues and to report back to Coreper and to Council, where conclusions on this issue will be presented by the Presidency in May (22 and 23).

Delegations answered to the following questions:

1. Do you agree that existing minimum requirements will have to be further developed and/or modified on the basis of scientific knowledge and socio-economic assessment?

A majority of delegations insisted on the need to check the socio-economic impact on the producers and the consumers prior to any modification of the existing minimum requirements;

Several Member States agreed on the need for a sound-scientific basis for updating the existing minimum requirements;

Several delegations expressed their concerns of a possible loss of market shares to the benefit of third countries, should these requirements be upgraded.

2. Do you agree that new EU rules for species not yet covered should be developed?

Some delegations stressed the need to have a scientific evaluation and to assess the socio-economic repercussion on the sector prior to setting new EU rules;

Some delegations questioned the need to implement new EU rules for species which are not yet covered;

A few delegations expressed the wish to respect the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality as regards the implementation of new EU rules.

3. Do you believe that all intervening parts of the food chain (farmers, retailers, consumers, etc.) can be better informed on animal welfare rules in order to improve their application and therefore contribute to a sustainable Community Welfare Policy?

Several delegations were in favour of an information campaign in order to better inform farmers, retailers and consumers on animal welfare rules and on their application; several delegations also supported the introduction of labelling practices to improve the information of the public;

Some delegations suggested the introduction of benchmarks to better inform the public on the different animal welfare rules;

One delegation supported a wider Community initiative on the transport of animals and on an EU ban on the imports of cats and dogs furs.

Commissioner Kyprianou welcomed the comments made by the delegations. He stressed that new animal welfare rules could contribute to savings by improving the animal health conditions and that their shares in the increase of the production costs was limited. He announced that he would present a proposal banning the imports of cats and dogs furs before the end of the Austrian Presidency and a proposal on the welfare of animals during transport before the end of his mandate.

OTHER BUSINESS

– *Avian Influenza (H5N1)*

Commissioner Kyprianou informed the Council on the latest developments concerning the outbreak of avian influenza H5N1 virus in the Community and in the world.

The Council held an exchange of views on the situation. The Presidency indicated that this issue will be tackled at the informal meeting of the Health Ministers held in Vienna on 24th February, and that the Chief Veterinary Officers (CVOs) would meet on 9th and 10th March on this issue. The Presidency summarised the Agriculture Ministers' discussions on the spread of bird flu in Europe as follows:

- "1. The H5N1 virus has to date occurred in the wild bird population only. Its spread to domestic poultry has so far been prevented thanks to the EU and to the national-wide measures taken – for example, the obligation to keep poultry indoors, stricter reporting requirements, restrictions on shows, exhibitions etc..
2. Opinion in Europe is divided on the use of vaccines. Intensive discussions are taking place in various specialist fora (the EMEA and the Standing Veterinary Committee). The Commission will have to examine their conclusions in detail and carefully weigh up the pros and cons.
3. The Commission is to examine measures to compensate poultry farmers who are not directly affected but suffer losses because of the restrictions on trade and the fall in consumption, and to submit proposals to the experts as soon as possible.
4. Since the H5N1 virus could also be introduced into the EU by illegal imports from affected third countries, the Commission has been asked to examine various ways of preventing such an eventuality, for example the introduction of self declaration and initiation of contacts with affected third countries, and to introduce uniform EU-wide implementing measures.
5. The Commission has been asked to collect the latest data from the Member States on incidences of bird flu virus in wild birds, and to analyse this information. Any adjustments that need to be made to the latest measures taken on the basis of experience will be submitted to the veterinary experts for decision."

– *World Trade Organisation (WTO)*

Commissioner Fischer-Boel informed the Council on the latest state of play of the negotiations at the WTO. She insisted on the following issues:

- the European Communities must remain united on the WTO negotiations;
- bilateral meetings had been held in Geneva since the beginning of the year with certain WTO partners in order to seek for common ground on sensitive products and to build up alliances;
- the offensive interests of the Community in Agriculture remain domestic supports and export refunds; she agreed with the Netherlands delegation to discuss the phasing out of the export refunds on their overall budgetary value rather than on their volume;
- the Commission will not table any new offer on agriculture following the last offer issued on 28th October 2005; she made clear in reference to remarks raised by the French delegation, that this offer was within the mandate granted by the Council to the Commission for the negotiations at the WTO, and that Geographical Indications were still being discussed; in response to a question raised by the Polish delegation, she also stated that the special safeguard clause was not to be given up;
- although a tight schedule has been foreseen, the Commission will not accept a trade agreement by end April 2006 at any price, bearing in mind that "nothing could be agreed until everything is agreed"; a G6 Ministerial meeting will be held in London in the beginning of March to assess the progress made on the negotiations;
- she will give an update of the state of play on WTO negotiations at the next Council meeting on 20th March.

The Presidency agreed to come back on this issue at a forthcoming meeting.

– *Cross-compliance*

Commissioner Fischer-Boel informed the Council on the scope of application of the "hygiene package" (Regulations (EC) Nos 852/2004, 853/2004 and 183/2005) when implementing the cross-compliance requirements. First of all she stressed that the scope of application of the hygiene package was limited to the primary production and did not extend to the food processing. She indicated then that a document issued by her services setting guidelines for farmers to observe on the hygiene package rules would be presented in the management committee in March.

The German delegation thanked the Commission for this explanation as well as for the guidance document.

The Presidency concluded that the explanations provided as well as the document mentioned would facilitate the understanding by farmers of the cross-compliance rules.

This request had been previously raised by the German delegation at the December Council (see 15479/05) where this delegation expressed in particular its concerns (15536/05) as regards the possibility of a heavy administrative burden should Member States be required to carry out systematic checks with regard to the "hygiene package" (Regulations (EC) Nos 852/2004, 853/2004 and 183/2005). In reference to Regulation (EC) No 178/2002¹, the rules laid down by the "hygiene package" for primary agricultural production are setting cross-compliance requirements. The German delegation warned of the risk of setting a precedent by extending the initial scope of the cross-compliance requirements foreseen by Annex III of Regulation (EC) No 1782/2003², which cites some articles of Regulation (EC) No 178/2002.

– ***Cooperation in the field of agriculture-related research***

Commissioner Fischer-Boel informed the Council on progress resulting from the SCAR (Standing Committee on Agricultural Research) activities. The Netherlands delegation thanked the Commissioner for the information provided and welcomed the comprehensive report drawn up by the SCAR.

The Presidency recalled the delegations that the informal meeting of the Agriculture Ministers (Krems, 28 to 30 May 2006) under the Austrian Presidency, would examine some aspects of agriculture and research (transfer of know-how, etc.).

¹ Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 January 2002 laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety *Official Journal* 31, 1.02.2002, pp. 1-24.

² Council Regulation (EC) No 1782/2003 of 29 September 2003 establishing common rules for direct support schemes under the common agricultural policy and establishing certain support schemes for farmers

During the Netherlands Presidency a report was drawn up that emphasized the need for increased coordination of agriculture research activities at European level and that this coordination should be implemented through a high level platform, e.g. the Standing Committee for Agricultural Research (SCAR).

The work has advanced in realising a common research agenda, mapping agricultural research capacities and the creation of a website.

In the context of the 7th Framework Programme the SCAR has prepared a working paper on research infrastructures for the agricultural sector.

– ***Poultry meat***

The Greek and the Italian delegations, supported by the French, Spanish, Portuguese, Maltese, Cypriot, Hungarian, Polish, Irish, Slovenian, Dutch and German delegations, raised their concerns as regard the economic impact of avian influenza on the poultry industry in the EU and asked the Commission to take appropriate measures to support the businesses severely affected by the dropping prices of the poultry meat. The measures envisaged in particular by the Greek delegation may include:

- Withdrawal of the existing stocks and finding of additional outlets for their disposal, with the payment of equivalent compensations to the producers.
- Expansion of the export destinations (including the Balkan Countries) with the payment of export refunds
- Funding of information campaigns on the issue of the safety of poultry industry products as well as other issues, for the benefit of the European consumers
- General economic and other support measures for those affected by the crisis.

Commissioner Fischer-Boel said her institution was already well aware of the serious market disturbances in the poultry sector and of the situation created by the outbreak of avian influenza on wild birds.

She reiterated that the Commission will continue to use export refunds within the common market organisation for poultry as the main management tool of the CMO. She recalled the delegations that export refunds had been increased by Eur 6/100 kilos of chicken in two steps in the past meetings of the management committee, in January (Eur 2/100 kilos) and February (Eur 4/100 kilos) from Euro 24/100 kilos to Eur 30/100 kilos.

As concerns the other measures envisaged by the delegations, she pointed out that an information campaign might also be counter-productive.

She made clear that exceptional market measures could not be triggered unless there is a major restriction to the free circulation of chicken and eggs, which could justify such measures. However, she noted that if a change occurs concerning the avian influenza outbreak a review of the situation could be envisaged.

She emphasized that usual market tools such as private storage or public intervention did not exist in the CMO on poultry.

Answering on a possible withdrawal of the existing stocks, she pointed out that the industry should be able to reduce the output of poultry more rapidly than in other sectors (beef) due to the short cycle of production in the poultry sector.

As regards the possibility for Member States to grant state aids to the producers, she indicated that the Commission will examine the request made by Member States in the light of their respective situation and with a positive approach.

Finally, she concluded that the possibility of taking additional measures would take a longer period as it requires a Commission proposal and the consultation of the European Parliament.

The Presidency concluded that the Council will come back on this issue at its next meeting.

– ***Definition of vodka***

(6449/06)

The Polish delegation, supported by the Danish, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Finnish, Swedish and German delegations, drew the attention of the Council and the Commission to the importance of restricting the current definition of vodka in the Commission proposal (15902/05) on the definition, description, presentation and labelling of spirit drinks. The Polish delegation suggests that the definition should be restricted to cereals and potatoes as raw materials used to obtain vodka, arguing that only cereals, and later potatoes were traditionally used to make vodka by the biggest vodka-producing countries. The Polish delegation also expressed fears that the use of raw materials other than the abovementioned such as by-products like grape marc or other products would lead to final product of different organoleptic characteristic, would not guarantee the marketing and selling of a quality product and would not respect the traditional production criteria used in the EU countries.

The United Kingdom, Netherlands and Irish delegations indicated they would support the definition of vodka as stated in the Commission's proposal. The United Kingdom delegation insisted on not restricting the range of products used to obtain vodka to only two products and pointed out that any change to the current definition of vodka - which includes other materials than potatoes and cereals - could face a legal challenge on this trade issue, including at the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The Spanish delegation indicated it would not accept a segmentation of the debate on the Commission's proposal.

Commissioner Fischer-Boel stressed the proposal did not bring forward a new definition of vodka and suggested to come back on this issue at Council's level once the preparatory bodies of the Council started their examination of the proposal.

The Commission's proposal defines vodka in its Annex II (categories of spirit drinks, paragraph 29) as a spirit drink obtained following fermentation, with yeast, from agricultural raw materials.

All aspects of the proposal will be the subject of a thorough examination within the preparatory bodies of the Council beginning on 3rd March.

– *Measures to combat illegal landings of Barents Sea cod*

The Danish and Swedish delegations, supported by the Latvian, Polish and Spanish delegations, drew the attention of the Council and Commissioner Borg to the illegal and considerable organised Fisheries and trade of Barents Sea cod outside established catch limits and the need to step up the international cooperation among the Coastal States to combat illegal fishing activities engaged in fishing, landing and distribution of cod from the Barents Sea. The Danish and Swedish delegations suggest among others, a better coordination and a free exchange of information among Coastal States including Norway and Russia, more strict landing rules and control enforcement in EU ports, to strengthen port state control in the Community of landings from third countries and the ability of the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), to deal efficiently with control measures affecting all important commercial species appearing in the convention area.

Commissioner Borg stressed that the Community represented the main market for the trade of Barents Sea cod and pointed out that he recently met the Norwegian Fisheries Minister and agreed to address together this issue with Russia. He also noted that EU and Norway currently worked closely in the framework of NEAFC to develop port state control.

With regard to the illegal catches of cod which takes place in international waters, where cod stocks are jointly run by Russia and Norway, he noted the very high figure of cod (100 000 tonnes) concerned and underlined the difficulty to draw a distinction between accidental by-catches and illegal catches. He finally indicated that he would seek for Russia to join the ongoing cooperation with Norway.

– *Imported apples*

The French delegation, supported by the Czech and the Polish delegations, brought the attention of the Council to its continuing concern about the situation on the EU apple market due to an alarming increase in third country imports¹. Whilst noting the recent adoption by the Commission of a regulation introducing a system of import licences for apples from third countries² in order to improve monitoring in this area, the French delegation underlines that this in itself is not a sufficient basis for invoking the safeguard measures under Article XIX of the GATT. The French delegation therefore takes this opportunity to encourage the Commission to take the necessary regulatory measures required, including setting up a coordinated and defined procedure within the Commission, in order for the safeguard clause under Article XIX of the GATT to be invoked automatically, as provided for in the agreement on agriculture concluding the GATT Uruguay Round.

Commissioner Fischer-Boel underlined that the dropping prices in the apple sector were mostly due to the lack of transparency of the market and the inaccurate data on imports. She pointed out that the Commission took a two-steps approach consisting of the adoption of a regulation introducing a system of import licences to give reliable data on imports and of the invitation of observers from third countries to take part to a biannual forecast meeting on this issue to take place on 7th March. She noted that, should the volume of the imported apples exceed the quantities communicated by the customs authorities of the Member States, this would be known immediately. However, she clearly stated that the rules of international trade would certainly limit measures to restrict imports of apples. Stressing that 2006 was a transitional year where the new import licence system would be progressively effective, she gave assurance that the Commission will be able to fully manage this issue from 2007 onwards.

¹ Document 6496/06. It is recalled that France brought this matter to the attention of Council at its session on 22-24 November 2005 (document 14645/05). At that meeting the Commission indicated it had been unable to invoke the safeguard clause due to a lack of data on apple imports. The Commission informed the French delegation that it had therefore stepped up monitoring of the market pending the entry into operation of the improved IT system for the transmission of data from the Member States to the Commission in 2007.

² Commission Regulation (EC) No 179/2006 introducing a system of import licences for apples imported from third countries (OJ L 29, 2.2.2006, p. 26).

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

AGRICULTURE

Isle of Man - Special import licences to sheep meat and beef and veal

The Council adopted a decision extending for the last time the period of application of decision 82/530/EEC authorising the United Kingdom to permit the Isle de Man authorities to apply a system of special import licences to sheep meat and beef and veal for the period January 2006-December 2010 with the objective to allow the restructuring of the meat industry on the island (5828/06).

The Isle of Man is allowed to apply a special import system in order to protect its own production and the working of its own agricultural support system.

Agri-environment expenditure for rural development - *Council conclusions*

The Council adopted conclusions regarding the European Court of Auditors' special report¹ on the verification of agri-environment expenditure under the EU rural development policy (6038/06).

EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Special representatives of the EU - New representative for the South Caucasus - Extension of mandates

The Council adopted joint actions appointing a new EU special representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus, extending the mandate of three EUSRs and extending and amending the mandates of three EUSRs.

The joint actions aim at:

- appointing
- Mr Peter Semneby as a new EUSR for the South Caucasus until 28 February 2007, following the departure of EUSR Heikki Talvitie (5119/1/06);

¹ Published in Official Journal of the EU C 279 of 11.11.2005.

Mr Semneby's mandate includes furthering the following EU policy objectives in the South Caucasus: assisting Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in carrying out political and economic reforms, notably in the fields of rule of law, democratisation, human rights, good governance, development and poverty reduction; preventing conflicts in the region, contributing to the peaceful settlement of conflicts, including through promoting the return of refugees and internally displaced persons; encouraging and supporting further cooperation between States of the region, including on economic, energy and transport issues and enhancing the effectiveness and visibility of the European Union in the region;

– extending until 28 February 2007:

- for Moldova, the mandate of Mr Adriaan Jacobovits de Szeged (5117/06);
- for the African Great Lakes Region, the mandate of Mr Aldo Ajello (5121/06);
- for Afghanistan, the mandate of Mr Francesc Vendrell (5189/06);

– extending and amending:

- for the Middle East peace process, the mandate of Mr Marc Otte until 28 February 2007. Mr Otte's mandate has been revised in order to take account of the establishment in November 2005 of the EU border assistance mission for the Rafah crossing point (EU BAM Rafah) (5116/06);
- for Central Asia, the mandate of Mr Ján Kubiš until 28 February 2007 and amending joint action 2005/588/CFSP (5114/06);
- for former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), the mandate of Mr Erwan Fouéré until 28 February 2007. Mr Fouéré's mandate has been complemented in view of the establishment on 15 December 2005 of the EU police advisory team in FYROM (EUPAT) (5145/06).

ENLARGEMENT

Croatia - Accession Partnership

On the basis of the political agreement reached by the Council on 12 December 2005, the Council adopted a Decision on the principles, priorities and conditions contained in the accession partnership with Croatia (15672/05).

The Accession Partnership is an important document to focus Croatia's preparations for accession following the start of accession negotiations on 3 October 2005. The Accession Partnership updates the previous European Partnership with Croatia on the basis of the findings of the 2005 Commission's Progress Report on Croatia and identifies new priorities for action. The new priorities are adapted to the country's specific needs and stage of preparation and will be updated as necessary. The Accession Partnership also provides guidance for financial assistance to Croatia.

Croatia is now expected to develop a plan with a timetable and specific measures to address the priorities of the Accession Partnership. These priorities, which relate in particular to Croatia's capacity to meet the criteria defined by the Copenhagen European Council of 1993 and the conditions set for the Stabilisation and Association Process, have been selected on the basis that it is realistic to expect that Croatia can complete them or take them substantially forward over the next few years. A distinction is made between short-term priorities, which are expected to be accomplished within one or two years, and medium-term priorities, which are expected to be accomplished within three to four years.

The advancement of the accession negotiations with Croatia will be guided by Croatia's progress in preparing for accession. This will be measured, inter alia, against the implementation of the Accession Partnership, as regularly revised.

The Thessaloniki European Council on 19 and 20 June 2003 endorsed the introduction of Partnerships as a means to materialise the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries within the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process. A European Partnership with Croatia was subsequently adopted by the Council on 13 September 2004. Furthermore, the Council last week (14 February) adopted a Regulation (amending Regulation (EC) No 533/2004), which provides for a change of the name of the 'European Partnership' for Croatia to 'Accession Partnership', in order to align the name with that used for the Partnership for Turkey, as both are candidate countries which have started accession negotiations. A revised Accession Partnership with Turkey was adopted by the Council on 23 January 2006.

TRANSPARENCY

Public access to documents

The Council adopted :

- the reply to confirmatory application 04/c/01/06 (5501/06);
- the reply to confirmatory application 06/c/01/06 made by Mr Andreas MOBERG (5801/06);

- the reply to confirmatory application 07/c/01/06 made by Mr Vittorio POZZI, the Finnish and Swedish delegations voting against (5869/06);

 - the reply to confirmatory application 08/c/01/06, the Swedish delegation voting against (5873/06).
-