



European Commission
Directorate-General for Agriculture

Newsletter

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Quality of life in rural areas: building towards the future with the Leader experience

The seminar entitled 'Quality of life in rural areas: experiences and cooperation' organised by the Agriculture DG took place on 25 October 2004 in Brussels in the presence of Commissioner Fischler. The event to launch the new Leader+ observatory was attended by more than 400 participants, including 120 LAGs (local action groups) and representatives from the new Member States.

Leader+ is one of four initiatives covered by the EU Structural Funds and, in the programming period 2000–06, over EUR 5 billion is intended to be spent. Of this, more than EUR 2 billion is funded by the EAGGF Guidance section, EUR 1.5 billion by private contributions, and the rest by the Member States.

The theme 'Quality of life' was selected by 250 of the 892 different local action groups as the subject for projects in their area. Presentations were given on six innovative projects and projects demonstrating good practice on related topics such as accessibility, transport, housing culture, social inclusion, community life as well as local basic services and a living environment. The seminar provided the opportunity for LAGs and national network units to meet, exchange ideas and learn about others' experiences from across the EU.

The quality of the debates and presentations during the seminar reflected the high degree of interest in the issues tackled. What distinguishes 'Quality of life' from other Leader+ priority themes (new know-how and technologies, adding value to local products, making the best use of natural and cultural resources) is its strong linkage to wider social development, to living conditions of target groups and community well-being.

Quality of life is also related to economic development since new services to the population and occupational training generate employment opportunities. In addition, an increase in quality of life reinforces the attractiveness of a rural area for business. European political determination is, as demonstrated by the CAP, aiming for a stronger social and territorial cohesion which is well balanced and harmonious and will allow long-term preservation and improvements in the quality of life in rural areas.

Rural areas are places in which quality of life can be constructed actively by those who sustain it. There are many reasons why this is the case, but one very important reason is that the 'sense of belonging' is a crucial ingredient in quality of life.

Commenting on the event, Franz Fischler, Commissioner for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries said, 'The experience that we have gained on the ground implementation, and in the role that the different administrative levels have to play in rural development strategy, have proved that territorial and bottom-up approaches are the best and most efficient way of promoting and securing rural development. This is why we have to succeed in mainstreaming the Leader approach, and why the Commission so explicitly defined the role that Leader should play in future rural development policy'.

Follow-up seminars on other Community strategic themes for Leader+ (e.g. new skills and new technologies) are expected to take place in local regions across various Member States.

Latest Eurobarometer survey produces mixed results on the CAP

The results of a special Eurobarometer survey, published in a September report entitled 'European Union citizens and agriculture from 1995 to 2003', give an overview of the evolution of people's perceptions of the CAP, its objectives, its benefits and how they evaluate the changes that have occurred in the CAP over the years.

The report presents the main findings of a representative selection of questions asked in the Standard Eurobarometer, in the 1995–2003 period, about the common agricultural policy and the quality of food products.

The main findings are as follows:

- agriculture is the EU policy that European citizens are most aware of, and they believe that it is appropriate for agricultural policy to be dealt with at EU level;
- the majority are, however, ill-informed, about the CAP (many — especially in Italy, Spain, Austria and Sweden — having little or no knowledge about it);
- low levels of awareness about the CAP are more likely to be observed among women, people aged 15–24 years old and over 54, and the least educated,

suggesting that the Commission should target its communications differently;

- people across the EU clearly believe that the primary role of the CAP should be to ensure that agricultural products are healthy and safe;
- promoting respect for the environment is the second-placed objective for the CAP;
- less than half the population believes that the CAP currently fulfils its roles effectively, but the new direction in which CAP reform is taking agricultural policy is widely supported;
- quality of food products is an important issue for EU citizens, especially in northern countries. A quality food product has to have a good, natural taste, to look appetising, and be produced under strict, hygienic conditions.

EU citizens would apparently be ready to pay more to have higher quality meat and vegetables, for example,

and would trust them more if the EU could guarantee the origin or the way a product is produced. A majority of EU citizens, especially in the southern countries, support the idea of a European quality label.

The readiness to pay more is perhaps the most surprising result. But the report shows that a majority of people (52 %) said they were prepared to pay higher prices in return for quality of both meat and vegetables (a 5–10 % increase seems to be acceptable). On the other hand, almost a third (31 %) were not prepared to pay more. Forty per cent of Finns and French people were not prepared to pay more for quality food.

A mixed picture therefore, but plenty of information to assist the Commission in its thoughts for the future.

The full report can be found at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/survey/2004/rep_en.pdf

News in brief

The *de minimis* principle is being applied for the first time in State aid rules for agriculture (and fisheries). This should help farmers (and fishermen) out in crisis situations.

This change in current rules comes via a Commission regulation adopted on 6 October ⁽¹⁾. It allows Member States to pay national aids, of up to EUR 3 000 per farmer over a three-year period, without having to seek prior notification from the European Commission. This exemption also covers aid granted to companies processing and marketing agricultural products.

Commissioner for Agriculture Franz Fischler expressed his pleasure at the adoption of the new rules, saying ‘This is an important step in our efforts to modernise the State aid rules applying in the field of agriculture and fisheries. We now offer Member States a very flexible and simple tool to support farmers, notably in crisis situations where quick action is needed.’

Member States may use this facility only within overall financial ceilings which amount to approximately 0.3 % of each State’s agricultural output. Member States will have to maintain registers to show that the ceilings have been respected — these are specified in the regulation (they apply as a rolling average over a three-year period). If all Member States fully use this possibility, this would amount to an average amount of *de minimis* aid of around EUR 317 million per year for agriculture across the EU.

The seeds for this initiative were sown during the CAP reform debate last year — the Luxembourg CAP reform agreement of 26 June 2003 included a Commission Declaration on Crisis Management, in which the Commission committed itself to ‘examine specific measures to address risks, crises and national disasters in agriculture.’ This was followed by a period of consultation with Member States and third parties.

Member States may grant *de minimis* more or less as they like (though some measures, such as export aid, are not allowed).

More information on State aids in agriculture can be found on the Agriculture DG website at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/stateaid/index_en.htm

New publications from the Agriculture DG

The following publications are now available:

- *The Common Agricultural Policy explained* (in EN only) at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/publi/cap_en.pdf
- Meat fact sheet (in all EU-15 languages) at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/publi/fact/meat/2004_en.pdf
- Rural development fact sheet (EN, FR, DE): http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/publi/fact/rurdev/refprop_en.pdf

For paper copies, please contact Agri-library.

⁽¹⁾ Commission Regulation (EC) No 1860/2004 of 6 October 2004, OJ L 325, 28.10.2004, p. 4.

