

1. Can you explain to our readers what is the aim of the CAP reformation, what are the changes and how well informed are the EC farmers?

The aim of CAP reform is to make EU farmers more competitive and market-orientated, while at the same time making EU agriculture more sustainable.

Payments have been decoupled from production, meaning that farmers receive their aid from Brussels but are free to follow market signals rather than taking their decisions based on the level of subsidy they get for a particular product. They must also respect a series of standards of environmental protection, animal welfare and food safety.

The results have been extremely positive. Farmers' incomes are supported through the direct aid and production is now orientated to what the consumer wants. We are also putting greater emphasis on Rural Development policy, which is a very flexible instrument where enterprising people can get additional financing if they come up with a worthy project, either in terms of farm modernisation, environmental protection or diversification.

We have done our best to inform people of the changes we have made and why we have made them. But I feel that there is still a job of work to be done to ensure that the message gets through to the public at large.

2. What is the significance of the CAP simplification which the Commission announced in order to reduce administration burden in agriculture by 25 percent by 2012? Practically, what does this mean and which benefits will it bring to the farmers?

We've been making great progress with our efforts to make the CAP simpler and more user-friendly. Simplifying the policy means less hassle for administrators, but more importantly, it means that farmers can spend more time in the field doing what they do best and less time doing paperwork. The changes we have made will also save hundreds of millions of euros. At a time of economic difficulties, this is a real bonus.

Thanks to the considerable progress we have already made and other measures still to be carried out, we are confident of meeting our objective of reducing the administrative burden by a quarter by 2012.

Since 2005, the Commission has pushed ahead with its Simplification Action Plan, repealed hundreds of obsolete acts, introduced reforms which streamline the CAP, and improved law-making practices and IT systems.

A key change was the recent Health Check agreement, which will render the CAP much less complex. Other measures on the Commission's agenda include the possibility of streamlining cross-compliance rules, a more regular review of legislation and possible changes to EU quality policy, including marketing standards, certification schemes and the system of geographical indications.

3. During the conference in Prague, on the 12th and 13th of March the Ministers of Agriculture proposed the New European Alimentary Model. In the same conference you have stressed that the main issue is to inform consumers on the excellent quality of EC products. Based on this proposal can you tell us how EC is going to implement this model?

I've often said that as the world gets smaller, it is quality that will keep European farmers ahead of the pack. Agricultural product quality policy is about connecting the farmer and the consumer. It's about letting the consumer know what goes into making a product so he or she can make an informed choice.

As things stand, there is a certain amount of confusion about what some of the labels currently used in the EU actually mean. I want to move away from the idea that labels serve only as a kind of warning to consumers. Our schemes need to project the positive benefits of the farming practices that go into producing certain foods.

Last October, we launched a Green Paper on the different issues, on which we received an unprecedented 560 contributions. The sort of key issues we are looking at include:

On marketing standards, what needs to be obligatory and what voluntary?

For PDOs and PGIs, what are the opportunities and what are the threats?

What new EU schemes are needed?

And how do we handle the proliferation of private and national certification schemes?

Based on all the data we have gathered, we will publish a Communication on 27 May.

Stakeholders will be invited to react and legislative proposals could be tabled in 2010.

4. How does the consumer demand which includes the provision of the right product, in the right quantities and of the right quality, at the right prices meet the EC Agricultural Product Quality Policy?

I don't see a contradiction between the two.

All EU products have to meet a number of exacting standards. Part of our quality policy is to improve the way we communicate this to our consumers.

Some producers choose to go further, producing according to additional standards, which are either regulated at a European level or through voluntary certification schemes. They can hope to gain a premium for such products.

That way the consumer has a choice whether to purchase the basic product, with all the guarantees this brings, or to go a step further and possibly pay a little more. In a more

and more competitive world, EU farmers need to produce to the highest possible level of quality.

5. Recently, a big increase in food prices with a simultaneous fall in agricultural products prices was observed, worldwide, that was not accompanied however by a reduction in the cost of production, and this resulted in many farmers abandoning the sector. How does the European Union face the desertation of rural areas and what measures does it take to reverse this situation?

We have seen considerable volatility in food commodity markets recently, with rapid increases in 2007 followed by a rapid fall in 2008.

This had a serious effect for many farmers, although I am pleased to say that we have observed a recent reduction in input prices, thanks to a decline in energy, fuel and fertiliser costs.

It is very important for us to keep farmers in business and keep the land in production, for social, economic and environmental reasons.

There are many things we do to ensure farming has a future, even in the least favourable areas.

For a start, farmers are unique in receiving a direct aid payment from Brussels which provides a basic level of income. Thanks to the reforms, farmers can now be more flexible and produce what the market really wants.

Through the increasingly important Rural Development policy, additional financing is available to support farm restructuring and modernisation, environmental projects and diversification of the rural economy.

The recent drop in milk prices has seen us introduce a number of market support measures to try to stabilise the situation. We will do all we can to help farmers through this difficult period.

The recent European Economic Recovery Plan included more than €1 billion for rural areas, with Member States given a lot of flexibility how best to use this money.

6. As for the new regulation for better management or even reduction of pesticides that has been launched by the beginning of this year, which are the measures that derive from it in order to enhance the environmental and human protection?

The changes which have been introduced will ensure improved protection for both the environment and human health.

Pesticides on the EU market before 1993 had never been subject to a harmonised risk assessment to exclude any unacceptable risk to humans and the environment.

In our recent review, substances were reviewed against new, stricter and harmonised scientific requirements, which were developed with the support of scientists in all Member States and the European Food Safety Authority.

After detailed evaluation of the dossiers submitted by industry, it was concluded in certain cases that safe use was not possible.

In the majority of these cases, the industry did not produce a dossier and the substance was therefore withdrawn from the market.

EU farmers are directly exposed to pesticides, as many of them apply pesticides directly on the fields. They are among those who will benefit the most from the finalisation of the review programme.

Other substances have not been approved because the consumer exposure to treated crops was unacceptable or because of the risk of groundwater contamination.

So I think consumers, farmers and the environment in general will benefit from this review.

7. Although there is an EC Legislation on the labeling requirement for products containing GMOs which are subject to compulsory labeling, do you think that consumers are well informed about the existence of GMOs in products? Is there a plan in EC for a more strict regulatory framework on the use of GMOs in general, as well as the introduction of a compulsory United European GMO Label which will be easily recognized by the consumer?

The EU has one of the strictest systems in the world for the approval, tracing and labeling of GMOs.

No GMOs may be used or sold on the EU market if there is any danger to the environment or human health.

All foods derived from GMOs must be labeled, so that people have the choice whether to buy them or not.

I believe we have a good system. We have to make sure it functions efficiently, particularly for imports of animal feed.

If we fall too far behind our supplier countries in approving GMOs for animal feed, it will become more and more costly to source feedstuffs.

This would drive up the cost of meat production in the EU, harm our own farmers and have the perverse result that we would end up importing more meat from animals fed on GMOs which are not approved here.

That would cheat both our farmers and our consumers.

8. Within EC someone could find several protocols for Integrated Crop Management, like the Greek *AGRO 2* (Integrated Management of Agricultural Production). 'Environmental sensitivity' has emerged as the key component to all of them and they appear similar in their strategies to provide benefits such as pest control, maintain soil fertility, etc. Why doesn't the EC has developed a unified ICM protocol that could be applied to all EC member states, similar to Organic Regulation 834?

Integrated production means production systems that are well adapted to specific local conditions and situations. A number of private labelling schemes have been developed promoting these systems. Common specifications laid down by the EU would be unlikely to reach the level of detail needed to provide guidance for putting integrated farming in place. Therefore, we doubt a common approach would deliver meaningful benefits.

I like very much the principle of Integrated Crop Management as a way of offering producers the chance to produce according to a set of high standards of environmental sensitivity. However, I don't think we can realistically adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

9. Finally, let us ask you which are the latest developments with respect to the additional information EC has requested from the Greek Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development regarding the 500 million euros compensation for the Greek farmers?

In March, we received a letter from the minister with a certain amount of information.

This is not sufficient to allow us to determine whether these measures are in line with EU state aid rules.

We will shortly send Greece a letter urgently requesting additional information.