

CAP reform to ease pressure on farmers

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Opinion

These are challenging times for European farmers, but Phil Hogan is confident his reforms will ease the pressure.



The past year has been a challenging one for European farming families. The impact of global oversupply in dairy products and pig meat, and the consequences of the Russian ban and lower demand in large markets such as China, have contributed to making the past year a volatile one for our producers. There is a shared understanding of the crisis in a number of sectors, notably in relation to dairy and pig meat.

As European agriculture Commissioner, I am not satisfied with the current situation and I believe it requires a concerted EU-wide response.

There needs to be consideration given to new and innovative solutions, in addition to the measures which the Commission has already introduced, as part of the €500m Solidarity Package announced last September.

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I have asked member states to submit such ideas by 25 February. The Commission will also reflect on what more can be done to alleviate the pressure on our European farmers.

Any further measures will have to have regard to the following three parameters, namely consistency with the existing legal framework of the CAP; not exceeding the resource constraints of the budget, and they must be capable of achieving majority support among EU member states.

The period between now and the March agriculture Council provides an opportunity for us all to intensify our efforts in finding solutions to the current crisis.

Meanwhile, I continue to plan for the future. The agri-markets taskforce, which I established to examine how to strengthen the position of the producer in the food chain, will meet in March. And I am continuing my 2016 'diplomatic offensive' to find new export markets for EU food and drink products.

In February I led a business delegation to Colombia and Mexico, and will follow this up with visits to key markets such as China and Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia later in the year. EU producers deserve a level playing field in the global market place.

In order to deliver on this for our farmers, I, alongside trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström, negotiated a square deal for EU agriculture in Nairobi last month at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial conference.

The WTO deal will see our major competitors phase out both direct and indirect export subsidies to their producers - following the lead of the EU. This means fair play for our exporters on global markets - a significant boost for EU farmers in 2016 and beyond.

I value my ongoing engagement with the European Parliament, and recently I announced a new package of CAP simplification measures to the agriculture and rural affairs committee. I proposed a new, fairer system of penalties for errors, as well as a 'yellow card' system for first time mistakes. This should hopefully end the stress and anxiety that many hard working farm families feel when filling out detailed forms.

Farm families across the EU often feel they are being 'caught out' by authorities when it comes to applications for direct support. Forms are filled out at kitchen tables late at night, or increasingly at the home computer as more member states move to online services.

A couple of months later, an inspector appears, and if any errors are found in the application, the farmer can be penalised, and direct payments cut.

This can lead to a feeling of incomprehension and victimisation - a climate of fear is created, as 'repeat offenders' face even harsher penalties.

To treat an honest mistake as an 'offence' is not in the spirit of fair play. Additionally, it is not proportionate, especially if the error is minor and occurs for the first time.

It is for this reason that I proposed a new, fairer system of penalties for errors, as well as a 'yellow card' system for first time mistakes. This should hopefully end the stress and anxiety that many hard working farm families feel when filling out detailed forms.

This will build on the significant changes made in 2015, including the simplification of guidelines for direct payments, the extension of the period for submitting payments applications, as well as the inclusion of preliminary cross checks for 2016, to help weed out the errors and prevent penalties before the application is submitted. 2016 will also be about listening to the views of farmers on the first full year of greening.

In conclusion, the new CAP is more than ever a policy for all the citizens of Europe. As European Commissioner for agriculture and rural development, I will continue to work hard to ensure that the CAP is fit for our European farmers and for the people of Europe as a whole.

About the author

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