Agriculture and environment indicator report available

Today the IRENA indicator report on agriculture and the environment has been released. It provides a comprehensive overview on the interactions between agriculture and the environment in the European Union and is a tool for monitoring the integration of environmental concerns into the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The ‘Agriculture and environment in EU-15 – the IRENA indicator report’ is one of the outputs of the IRENA operation, which stands for “Indicator Reporting on the Integration of Environmental Concerns into Agriculture Policy”. It is a joint exercise between several Commission Directorates-Generals including DG Agriculture and Rural Development, DG Environment, Eurostat and DG Joint Research Centre, and the European Environment Agency that co-ordinated the project.

The project covered the 15 Member States that formed the EU in 2002. It is a response of the European Commission to the request of the Agricultural Council made in 2001 to develop a set of agri-environmental indicators for monitoring progress towards the integration of environmental concerns into the CAP. The 40 indicators produced are based on a wide range of data sources, collected at different geographical levels, and generally cover the period from 1990 to 2000. The indicators help to summarise and illustrate complex agri-environment relationships (and to communicate them to those involved in the development and implementation of policies, as well as to the broader public).

Thematic “storylines” are used to illustrate the indicator results and review the effects of farming on the environment. These include: agricultural water use; input use and water quality; agricultural land use, farm management and soils; climate change and air quality; and biodiversity and landscape. The report also evaluates the usefulness of all IRENA indicators on the basis of data-related and conceptual criteria, such as policy relevance, analytical soundness and ease of interpretation.

The report highlights environmentally important trends in European agriculture, such as the decrease of the utilised agricultural area (UAA) by 2.5% between 1990 and 2000, affecting mainly permanent grasslands and permanent crops. Farm-level and regional specialisation continued during the same period, while intensification levelled off. The overall decrease in input use, coupled with an increase in yields, points to an increase in productivity and a more efficient farm management. The area under organic farming reached 3.7% of the total UAA of EU-15 in 2002, up from only 1.8% in 1998. The share of agricultural land enrolled in agri-environmental measures – which are specifically aimed at achieving environmental benefits on farmland – in the total UAA increased from 20% in 1998 to 24% in 2002.

Regarding water resources, during the last decade, the area equipped for irrigation increased by 12% at EU level and by nearly 30% in the Mediterranean region, although the share of agriculture in total water use remained stable in both northern (7%) and southern (50%) Europe, mainly due to an increase in the water use efficiency.
There has been a general decrease in national gross nutrient balances between 1990 and 2000, but high nutrient pressure, as measured by livestock densities, continues to be a problem in certain regions.

Estimates of soil erosion risk indicate that it remains a significant concern, in particular in southern and western Spain, northern Portugal, southern Greece and central Italy.

In 2002, the agricultural sector contributed around 10% of total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions – mainly methane and nitrous oxide – although emissions fell by nearly 9% since 1990, mainly due to a reduction of livestock numbers, the lower use of mineral fertilisers, and changes in farm management practices. The report also underlines that agriculture helps reduce the greenhouse effect through the production of bioenergy as a substitute for fossil fuels. The emissions of ammonia also decreased by 9%. Nevertheless, the agricultural sector still accounted for the largest share of ammonia emissions in the EU-15 in 2002.

Regarding biodiversity, high nature value farmland and areas – those with the richest biodiversity – are mainly found in the Mediterranean region, upland areas in the UK and Ireland, mountain areas and parts of Scandinavia, and are estimated to cover around 15-25% of the total UAA in the EU-15. The majority of farmland birds suffered a strong decline from 1980 to 2002. This decline levelled off in the 1990s but species diversity remains at a low level in intensively farmed areas. Another finding is that extensive farming systems are important for maintaining the biological and landscape diversity, as about 18% of the habitats in Natura 2000 areas depend on a continuation of traditional agricultural practices.

The report shows that substantial progress in the development of agri-environmental indicators at EU-15 level has been made. However, there are a number of remaining challenges to fully realise the potential of the indicators in support of the policy process.

The whole report and the indicator fact sheets can be found on the IRENA website: http://webpubs.eea.eu.int/content/irena/index.htm