



European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/156
Sustainable use of pesticides

Brussels, 23 January 2003

OPINION

of the European Economic and Social Committee

on the

**Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the
European Economic and Social Committee:
Towards a thematic strategy on the sustainable use of pesticides**

COM(2002) 349 final

On 1 July 2002 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 175 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee: Towards a thematic strategy on the sustainable use of pesticides
(COM(2002) 349 final).

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 7 January 2003. The rapporteur was **Staffan Nilsson**.

At its 396th plenary session on 22-23 January 2003 (meeting of 23 January 2003), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 74 votes in favour, with two dissenting votes and 11 abstentions.

1. Summary

1.1 The EESC supports the Commission's effort to draw up a thematic strategy on pesticides along the lines set out in the present communication. The strategy should include measures already to be found in existing directives, along with supplementary measures, to be implemented in an organic and coherent way so as to avoid overlaps that could lead to confusion over roles or to excessive cost increases for economic operators. The Committee also feels that mention should be made of crop protection, which can be secured through the use of pesticides, the risks and benefits of which must be assessed on a sound scientific basis.

1.2 The new measures to be proposed in the future strategy should include common EU criteria, guidelines and other parameters regarding what measures should be taken; although the practical details of the action programme must be determined at national level. The EESC prefers this approach as it enables general criteria to be tailored to local circumstances and to the nature of the problems faced.

1.3 An important part of the measures to reduce environmental and health risks consists of training of, and advice to, farmers, farm workers, seasonal workers and other users. The EESC thinks that the Commission should consider the possibility of part-funding measures through a fair levy on pesticides. In order to avoid distortion of competition, the Commission should seek to ensure that corresponding levies are also introduced in non-EU countries.

1.4 It is right to focus attention primarily on reducing pesticide-related risks, which may also involve reducing the quantities of chemicals used, particularly when tailored to national, regional and local requirements.

1.5 The revision of Directive 91/414/EEC is welcomed, and aspects such as the substitution principle and regional tests are regarded as positive.

2. Introduction

In agriculture pesticides are very often a necessary expedient to protect crops against attacks by harmful insects, fungi and plant diseases which would otherwise destroy or damage the harvest. However, the use of chemical pesticides in agricultural production is still questioned by many consumers. Strong opposition exists within environmental organisations, accompanied by calls for a rapid and sizeable reduction in their use.. At the same time the manufacturing industry constitutes an important force for a continued research and development drive to find better and safer pesticides (both chemical and biological). High priority must therefore be given to the Commission's and Member States' work in this field.

3. Summary of the Commission communication

3.1 In the sixth environment action programme, it is stated that a thematic strategy will be drawn up on the sustainable use of pesticides. The European Commission has now issued a communication which constitutes one stage in taking this strategy forward. In tandem, interest groups were invited to take part in a conference on 4 November 2002 to discuss the strategy. In addition, the Commission's internet site contains all the relevant documentation and statements; the public can also express their views there.

3.2 The strategy aims to reduce the impact of pesticides on the environment and human health, while ensuring adequate plant protection; it has the following objectives:

- to minimise the hazards and risks to health and environment from the use of pesticides;
- to improve controls on the use and distribution of pesticides;
- to reduce the levels of harmful active substances, in particular by replacing the most dangerous by safer (including non-chemical) alternatives;
- to encourage the use of low-input or pesticide-free crop farming;
- to establish a transparent system for reporting and monitoring progress, including the development of appropriate indicators.

3.3 The Commission states that the communication concentrates on the use of plant protection products (PPPs), with particular emphasis on agriculture. Even if the environment action programme uses the term "pesticides", it is clear that it is primarily a matter of PPPs. Pesticides is a generic term for all products used in agriculture, and to some extent for non-agricultural purposes (railway embankments, parks and as consumer products). The bulk of them are chemical compounds but pesticides can have both chemical and biological components.

3.4 The communication contains an analysis of legal provisions in force in the European Union. It emphasises the links with other EU policy areas and initiatives, and account is also taken of enlargement and the Union's international commitments. Moreover, examples are given of effective

measures already taken by some Member States, and several possible measures are proposed which could become part of the thematic strategy.

3.5 In 2003, once the wide-ranging consultation process has been completed, the Commission will frame a thematic strategy encompassing all the proposed measures and initiatives and present it for approval to Council and Parliament at the beginning of 2004.

4. **General comments**

4.1 The EESC welcomes the Commission's move to draw up a strategy for sustainable use of pesticides. When the chemical preparations applied are alien to the environment and can be harmful, it is expedient to focus action on risk reduction. Ultimately the overriding long-term objective should be to make farming less dependent on chemical pesticides. Efforts should concentrate on developing various biological alternatives, the plants' inherent resistance and farming methods which could minimise pesticide use. At the same time, agriculture today needs to be able to use pesticides to stop various forms of harmful organisms. The Commission communication therefore constitutes an important step towards sustainable use.

4.2 Environment and health are naturally influenced by a large number of activities and by substances other than pesticides. The strategy should therefore place pesticide-related risks in the context of risks stemming from other day to day activities.

4.3 The Committee supports the Commission's work with a view to the presentation of a thematic strategy in 2004, and hopes for a clearer and more detailed description of the benefits and dangers associated with pesticides. In the EESC's view, the proposals presented by the Commission are rightly founded on environmental and health concerns, and can realistically be implemented on a timescale yet to be decided .

4.4 The EESC does not consider that this strategy should complement existing legislation such as Directive 91/414/EEC, but that the strategy should operate as an umbrella framework and include existing legislation, probably also proposing new legislation. It is important for the Commission to clarify the role of the future strategy, taking care to avoid overlaps between legislation at different levels, both European and local, at the risk of causing confusion and increasing costs.

4.5 Although the Commission deals in one section with the advantages of using pesticides, it does not describe the benefits that directly result from the possibility of curbing damage to farm crops, viz. that food production can be maintained at a sufficiently high level (in terms of quantity, quality and variety of crops), in order to guarantee the supply of food. A future strategy should also spell out how food prices are influenced by access to chemical pesticide use. Had it not been for these benefits, the use of pesticides could have been phased out within a foreseeable period.

4.6 The EESC advocates a more detailed description of the threats involved than that given by the Commission - i.e. the true reason for use of pesticides. Understanding why pesticides are

used presupposes a sound knowledge of the problems with which agriculture has to contend as regards weeds, fungi and insects. The EESC wishes the future strategy to include a description of the threats involved, the scale of damage currently inflicted by weeds, fungi and insects, the potential damage if currently known alternative methods were used, and the impact of absence of pesticides on food supply and prices in Europe.

4.7 In the drive to reduce pesticide-related risks, clashes of aims can arise between different types of environmental measure. For example, the impact of mechanical methods on the climate can be set against the risks involved in the use of pesticides. A pesticide strategy needs to address these clashes of aims.

4.8 Even if the communication focuses on reducing risks involved in the use of pesticides, it is important for the strategy also to seek to reduce the scale of use. For agriculture, pesticides are a valuable input. Reduction in use can be achieved through more effective utilisation, adapting use to requirements, improved methods and other measures relating to use. The Commission should also have a use-reducing strategy for non-agricultural areas that use pesticides (private, public etc.). Reduced use may lead to risk reduction.

4.9 The food trade and industry has its own schemes and regulations which make demands on pesticide use in agriculture. A number of supermarket chains, food producers and farming cooperatives require farmers to comply with certain delivery conditions with a view to boosting their brand names; this has spin-off effects for pesticide use. Consumers' choices and hence the specific requirements made by commerce and the food industry, have a decisive impact on farm production methods. Further, consumers often prefer foodstuffs of unblemished appearance, which in turn acts as an additional incentive to protect crops from harmful organisms. However, market-driven development - in which increased product marking can be a promotion ploy - can encourage reduced use and sustainable development of pesticides, as compared with legislation-driven development.

5. Specific comments

5.1 *Chapter VI* lists the possible components of the Commission's future thematic strategy for pesticides. The various proposals are commented on in detail below; the points indicated in brackets refer to the relevant parts of the communication.

5.2 (1a) The EESC supports the drawing up of national plans and wishes to place special emphasis on the participation of farmers and their organisations, farmworkers and the chemical industry. However, it is important for this to build on common EU criteria, guidelines and other parameters for the measures to be taken to avoid distorting competition in the internal market. Many of the remaining measures in the proposed strategy ought to be incorporated into these national plans, which should be assessed at regular intervals.

5.3 (1b) On the introduction of special precautionary measures in particularly sensitive areas, e.g. water protection areas and areas defined according to Natura 2000, it is important

for local conditions to be taken into account. The EESC is in favour of laying down common rules and minimum levels, but the details of how to achieve the necessary protection will depend on local conditions. It is reasonable and essential for individual rights that it should be possible to award compensation for changes in the value of land and crops when the existing land use is affected. To the extent that these areas need extra protection, this ought to be made clear in the Habitat Directive (92/43/EEC) or in the framework directive on water (2000/60/EC) and related subordinate directives which deal with the whole range of threats.

5.4 (1c,d) The EESC takes the view that it is important to keep the public constantly updated on pesticide-related risks and what can be done to reduce the risks. One aspect which the Commission fails to highlight is how it will be possible to measure not only pesticide residues in water but also the products of their decomposition. A future thematic strategy should sketch out what can be changed or complemented in daily work procedures. The Commission's intention to cooperate in the development of suitable indicators can also make this possible.

5.5 (2a,b,c) It is important not to build up the reporting system and administration with the associated costs unless there is a clear benefit to be gained from them. The information to be provided by users should be of such a kind that they feel it is worthwhile in production terms to collect the information.

5.6 (2d) As regards the collection of packaging containing pesticide residues, it is important in drawing up the rules to make it possible to cooperate in the collection of other dangerous waste, e.g. batteries, waste oil and fluorescent lamp tubes. There are many good examples of campaigns organised in various Member States (e.g. Germany and Belgium) to collect used pesticides and packaging. It is important to raise awareness of contamination connected with the filling and cleaning of equipment and with the handling of packaging.

5.7 (2e,f) The EESC supports the proposed measures to introduce technical inspection of spraying equipment and to require the training and qualification of all pesticide users (farmers, farm workers, seasonal workers, etc.). Several surveys in different Member States indicate that training, and providing advice to, users can significantly curb risks. Training should also be given to increase knowledge and understanding of existing legislation. Training, qualification and technical inspection of equipment should be made compulsory.

5.7.1 (2) On points 2a-f, the Commission intends to return with proposals for suitable mandatory requirements within two years of the strategy being adopted. It also proposes to link compliance with the proposed requirements to the CAP ("cross-compliance"). Hence aid beneficiaries will not receive aid if they fail to observe certain rules, in this instance rules relating to pesticide use. In its opinion on the mid-term review of the CAP¹ the EESC has stated that it is necessary to get a clearer idea of how these rules are framed before a position can be taken on the "cross-compliance"

¹ CESE 1366/2002

rules. Further, it must be deemed reasonable that the same mistake can trigger both criminal proceedings and withdrawal of aid.

5.8 (3) The process of assessing active substances with a view to including them in Annex 1 to Directive 91/414/EEC must continue to have priority and further delays are unacceptable. To include a substitution principle in this Directive, as proposed by the Commission, is a reasonable suggestion with a view to constantly reducing the environmental and health risks associated with the use of pesticides. The EESC assumes that the Commission proposal will allow reasonable periods of time for the phasing out of substances under the substitution principle, in order to reassure the manufacturers and give them an incentive to develop new, less harmful substances.

5.8.1 It is also important for the amended version of Directive 91/414/EEC to assess how the testing of various preparations can be made more effective. For example, this could be done through regional testing, without encroaching on individual Member States' right of decision. A regional testing procedure would mean that certain products with a narrow field of application, which at present are perhaps withdrawn from the market for economic reasons, could still have access to it. In the EESC's view, preparations with the highest environmental and health risks are the ones which should disappear from the market, not necessarily those with few users.

5.9 (4a) To promote in various ways farm practices which reduce dependence on pesticides is a welcome and very important measure. We also need to be open to the idea of supporting a whole range of practices which in their different ways reduce both utilisation and risks. In its own-initiative opinion on *The future of the CAP*², the EESC pointed to a number of possible ways of taking better account of environmental aspects in agricultural policy. The "second pillar" of the CAP gives Member States the opportunity to compensate farmers who succeed in reducing the risks involved in their use of chemical plant protection products. The action programme can also be funded under the Social Fund or through a harmonised levy on pesticides.

5.10 (4b) In the development of good farming practice it is important to respect the existing rules on the handling of pesticides. To devise a system of rules which the users, for technical or knowhow-related reasons, do not manage to comply with will result in criminalizing users and scarcely be conducive to a continuous drive for improvement, which presupposes their commitment.

5.11 (4c) An environmental charge levied on pesticides can be justified, partly to reduce their use and partly for collective funding of certain activities. Since many of the measures proposed by the Commission require funding, it is reasonable for the users of pesticides to meet part of the costs. It would therefore be conceivable to levy a very limited charge for every kilo of active substance used, with a view to financing some of the proposed measures, such as information and training. Even a modest harmonised levy would provide significant funds for the national risk-reduction plans. However, a limited charge would also further push up the cost of production in the

² CES 362/2002, OJ C 125 of 27.5.2002, p. 87-99

EU. To avoid a distortion of competition, the Commission should seek to ensure that corresponding charges are also introduced in other countries. The Committee thinks it important for the EU to have a global perspective in drawing up rules which aim to bring about environmental improvements. When corresponding measures are also introduced in other countries, measures to improve the environment can be taken while maintaining the competitiveness of European agriculture.

5.12 (4d) The Commission indicates that the Member States' rates of VAT on pesticides vary from 3% to 25%. The EESC considers that one prerequisite for an effective internal market with a level playing field is the harmonisation of VAT rates as well as levies on pesticides.

5.13 (5) It is necessary to have a suitable system for showing the results of measures taken, in order to be able to assess them and make improvements. It is therefore important that the indicators show the impact of the drive for improvement. To measure the change in residues in foodstuffs or in the blood of users, it is technically possible to carry out chemical analyses. As regards the monitoring of reduction of risks to the ecosystem and to water, the Committee supports the Commission's proposal to find indicators which do not focus on quantity used, but focus on the properties of the preparations concerned and of how they are handled in use.

5.14 (6) The measures proposed for the candidate countries are reasonable, and suitable funding methods need to be found for them. In addition, we must all be aware of the fact that modernisation of the candidate countries' agriculture is likely to lead to increased use of pesticides. The EESC takes the view that the Commission should prioritise monitoring of the evolution of the situation in the candidate countries. Systems should be developed for collection and rendering substances harmless.

5.15 (7) The EU should not allow a higher level of residues in imported products than in goods produced within the Community. This is not just a question of ensuring fair competition; major public health aspects are the primary concern. The EESC therefore supports the work the Commission is doing in this direction.

Brussels, 23 January 2003.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Roger Briesch

Patrick Venturini

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N.B.: Appendix overleaf

APPENDIX 1
to the European Economic and Social Committee's opinion

The following proposals for amendments, which secured at least one-quarter of the votes cast, were defeated during the Committee's discussions:

Point 4.5

Amend the second part of the first sentence of this point to read as follows:

"... food production can be maintained at a sufficiently high level (in terms of quantity and quality ~~and variety of crops~~), in order to guarantee the supply of food."

Reason:

The scope for using pesticides has made a major contribution to the genetic impoverishment of species and varieties.

Voting

For:	27
Against:	44
Abstentions:	11

Point 5.2

Amend the first sentence to read as follows:

"... the participation of farmers and their organisations, farmworkers, environmental conservation associations, consumer protection associations and the chemical industry."

Reason

It is essential to have wide-ranging participation of the social players in the organisations concerned when drawing up national plans.

Voting

For: 25
Against: 55
Abstentions: 3

Point 5.9

Insert the following new sentence after the second sentence of this point:

"... reduce both utilisation and risk. By means of a redistribution of financial aid, the 'first pillar' of the CAP must also be geared towards paving the way towards stepping up the reduction in the use of pesticides in agriculture in general. In its own-initiative opinion ..."

Reason

The way in which financial aid is distributed under the first pillar of the CAP has a decisive influence on the type of cultivation and crops selected by farmers. This pattern of distribution of aid therefore determines, to a decisive degree, whether or not pesticides are required at a later stage and how much is used.

Voting

For: 26
Against: 53
Abstentions: 5
