

WRITTEN QUESTION E-3725/07

by Andres Tarand (PSE)
to the Commission

Subject: Payments of area-related in Estonia woodland pasture

Since 1 May 2004 Estonian farmers have been able to use area-related-aid among other support schemes provided on the basis of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In preparation for accession, the data on arable lands, including that for woodland pasture, was collected by the national agricultural register. Data was contributed by landowners based on Article 8 of EU Regulation (EC) No 796/2004¹ and Article 51 of (EC) No 1782/2003² (according to which there is no differentiation between the species of trees and bushes growing on grassland, the only requirement being the agricultural use of woodland pasture). Based on the data collected, the Estonian Agricultural Registers and Information Board (ARIB) distributed maps to farmland owners for applications for arable land support in 2004 and 2005.

More than a thousand landowners, mostly in Western Estonia and on the Baltic Sea islands, submitted area aid applications for grasslands or woodland pasture and were granted such support by the ARIB. It appears, however, that after financial support was granted and paid out to the landowners by the ARIB, the Minister of Agriculture changed its definition of woodland pasture in March 2006. As a result of the changed definition, the area of natural grassland decreased. Consequently, hundreds of landowners were charged by the ARIB for submitting false data and asked for repayments worth triple the amount of area-related-aid provided by ARIB for 2004 and 2005. According to national legislation, the ARIB was obliged to check the data collected from farmland owners but it failed to do so.

I would like to ask if the Commission finds it acceptable that Estonia retracted its initial rules concerning area-related-aid for farmers? The ARIB's call for subsequent repayments of aid has caused widespread anger and distrust against the European Union and the CAP among farmers and the general public.

Secondly, what advice would the Commission give to Estonian farmers who are being fined for mismanagement by the Estonian Agricultural Registers and Information Board?

¹ OJ L 141, 30.4.2004, p. 18.

² OJ L 270, 21.10.2003, p. 1.