REX/120

Provisions for dealing with exceptional natural disasters in applicant countries

Brussels, 24 October 2002

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on the

Proposal for a Council Regulation amending Regulation (EC) No. 1268/1999 on Community support for pre-accession measures for agriculture and rural development in the applicant countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the pre-accession period

COM(2002) 519 final

Procedure

On 18 October 2002 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

> *Proposal for a Council Regulation amending Regulation (EC) No. 1268/1999 on Community support for pre-accession measures for agriculture and rural development in the applicant countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the pre-accession period.*

The European Economic and Social Committee decided to appoint **Mr Adalbert Kienle** as rapporteur-general to prepare its opinion.

At its 394th plenary session on 24 October 2002, the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by a majority vote with one abstention.

1. The European Commission's proposals

1.1 The floods in mid August 2002 also caused considerable damage in several applicant countries. The Czech Republic and Slovakia were particularly affected.

1.2 The Commission thinks that, inter alia, the SAPARD pre-accession instrument set up by Council Regulation (EC) No 1268/1999 should be used to respond to exceptional natural disasters in applicant countries. The objectives of SAPARD include "solving priority and specific problems for the sustainable adaptation of the agricultural sector and rural areas in the applicant countries."

1.3 The Commission is therefore proposing higher ceilings on aid for rebuilding measures in rural areas hit by exceptional natural disasters. The ceiling on public aid is to be raised from 50% to 75%, and the Community may contribute up to 85% of the total eligible public expenditure instead of 75%.

2. The European Economic and Social Committee's comments

2.1 The Committee approves the proposal, which it regards as a sensible adjunct to the Commission proposal establishing an EU Solidarity Fund to deal with natural disasters.

2.2 The fact that the proposal will not affect the Community budget makes the Committee's decision to give its approval that much easier.

2.3 On the other hand, the Committee regrets the enormous start-up problems and administrative difficulties involved in implementing SAPARD. To date it has not been possible to deploy anywhere near the **€550 million provided each year from the Community budget for the** 10 applicant countries. The Committee thought in its opinion CES 70/99 that given the serious weaknesses in agricultural structures and the huge problems of adjustment facing the agricultural and food sectors the funding would be inadequate to prepare successfully for accession.

Brussels, 24 October 2002.

The President of the European Economic and Social Committee	The Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger Briesch	**Patrick Venturini**