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Giving a voice to the future of farming in the EU



European Young Farmers' Day

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Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, let me echo the welcome that you have already heard from our chairman. I have been looking forward to today's event for a long time, as I hope you have. It's a big occasion: almost all Member States are represented today, and the world will be watching on the internet. So I would already like to thank my staff and everyone else involved in organising this "day of dialogue".

The dialogue is mainly about giving you a voice – giving a voice to the future of farming in the European Union. It's not primarily a chance for me to talk: I do plenty of that anyway in my job!

Nevertheless, I would like to say a few words to set the scene.

The "scene" is a situation in which we have some decisions to take about the future of the CAP.

It's true that we have already taken some very big decisions in the last few years – in particular, through the cycle of CAP reforms which began in 2003. But that has not put an end to the decision-making process.

Since 2003, we have been gathering experience at implementing these reforms. We have seen which elements are working well, and which are working less well. Also, the context of the reforms has been shifting: because the European Union has grown from 15 Member States in 2003 to 27 today, and because international markets are changing all the time.

For these reasons, now is a good time to take out the doctor's stethoscope and give our reformed CAP the "Health Check" that you have probably heard about.

I hope the message has now got through that the doctor does not expect to find any serious diseases. We want to ensure that the CAP is meeting its current objectives as well as it could, and we will make adjustments to achieve this, before 2013. This is not a moment for radical cures.

With regard to timing: We will launch a broad consultation this year, with a view to making proposals that will take effect in the period 2009 to 2013, the second half of the current Financial Perspectives.

Beyond the Health Check, we should also start doing some more fundamental thinking about the CAP after 2013.

This is not about change for its own sake. It's about having our say, early on, in debates which will take place with or without us. When European Union heads of state and government agreed the current Financial Perspectives in December 2005, they also agreed that there would be a mid-term review of the overall budget. And it was stated explicitly that this would include reflections on the CAP of the future.

In view of this, we have a choice. We can either do some constructive thinking ourselves, and do it soon – making choices, and justifying them with good arguments – or we can hand the initiative to others, and perhaps find that the voice of the countryside is drowned out when Europe's priorities and budgets are set for after 2013.

It seems to me that this choice is no choice at all! So I have decided to start preparing for the Budget Review now – though formally, most of our analysis will take place in 2008/2009.

Today's "dialogue" will make an essential contribution to the process of consultation over the Health Check and the Budget Review.

We have some very interesting plenary presentations ahead of us, and three parallel workshops on well-chosen subjects. I will try to spend some time in each workshop, because I have questions in my mind about each of the themes.

The first workshop is about competitiveness. We probably all agree that this is important.

European agriculture has to follow more and more the marked signals instead of being put in to a reglementory corset.

More market orientation requires competitiveness in order to ensure that our domestic production can survive on more and more open markets.

Competitiveness doesn't come overnight; it needs a stable and predictable political and economic framework.

Only if the policy and the economic parameters are set for a reasonable time period, investments will be carried out and will contribute to stronger competitiveness.

So let's us discuss which ingredients are needed to achieve better competitiveness for European Farming.

The second workshop is about public goods. Here again, I think we agree on something: that agriculture provides essential things to society which are not sold in packets on the supermarket shelf. But have we defined them to everyone's satisfaction? How can we place a value on them, and meet the cost of providing them?

The third workshop is about new opportunities for the farming sector. Young farmers are especially switched on to possible innovations. Are there new ways in which public and private partners could work together on our farms and in our rural areas? Are there obstacles to taking new approaches?

I have no doubt that these workshops and our plenary discussions will throw up some very valuable points. But they will do so on one condition: that you are honest and open with your comments.

This event is about what you really think, not about "saying the right thing". You are here in your own right as young farmers so that you can give us some of the fresh thinking of youth, without inhibition.

Fresh thinking could mean new perspectives on existing ideas, or of course completely new ideas.

Think of this venue as being a little like Hyde Park Corner in London, where anyone can say anything – all I ask here is that you be polite!

This is all I have to say to start the day off. It's time to give you your voice. And I'm sure that there are some good voices among you – there usually are among farmers – so please use them!

Thank you.