Futures and Commodity Market News

DJ EU Farm Subsidies Scheme Must Allow for Development Concerns - UN Food Analyst

Jan 17, 2013 (Dow Jones Commodities News Select via Comdex) --

By Michael Haddon

European Union lawmakers must take account of development concerns when reforming the bloc's farming subsidies scheme, the United Nations' top food analyst said Thursday, ahead of a key vote on the issue.

"Development concerns should be made an essential part of Common Agricultural Policy reform and the window of opportunity for doing so is rapidly closing," said Olivier de Schutter, the U.N.'s special rapporteur on the right to food.

Fierce debate over the future of the bloc's farming subsidies scheme is expected during the first few months of 2013, as several milestones approach.

The Common Agricultural Policy, or CAP, makes up around two-fifths of the EU's annual budget, so farmers and countries reliant on the money are fighting to keep as much of it as possible.

However, members of the European Parliament "must not squander the opportunity they now have to bring the proposals into line with the requirements of the human right to food and the EU's development promises," Mr. de Schutter said.

The first major step in the process comes at the European Commission agriculture committee vote on Jan. 23-24, when numerous amendments will be assessed. Development concerns have been relegated in importance at this stage and require majority approval to be added into the committee's take on CAP reform.

However, even if this doesn't transpire, Mr. de Schutter hopes lawmakers will demand their re-inclusion when the committee takes its position to the parliament as a whole in March.

"We must undertake detailed monitoring of the impacts of EU farm exports and imports on developing countries, consult developing world farmer organizations and conduct a proper assessment of the impacts on the right to food," Mr. de Schutter said.

There are plans to make the CAP more environmentally friendly by setting aside more arable land to ecological focus areas, such as forests or buffer strips, retaining areas under permanent grassland and introducing crop diversification.

The requirement for farmers to grow a minimum of three crops has attracted particular criticism, but Mr. de Schutter called on lawmakers to ensure mandatory rotation and support for particular protein crops.

"The EU's massive dependency on soybean and corn imports to feed livestock drives habitat destruction, natural resource depletion and unsustainable production patterns in the developing world that benefit large corporations rather than poor farmers," he said.

Write to Michael Haddon at michael.haddon@dowjones.com or on Twitter @MichaelHaddonDJ

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01-17-13 0732ET

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