

**Mariann Fischer Boel**

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Agriculture and Rural Development

**The Voice of the Mountains**

*Check Against Delivery*  
*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
*Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

"Forum Berglandwirtschaft"

**Brussels, 31 March 2009**

[Minister, ladies and gentlemen],

I'm very glad to have the opportunity to join you today.

Mountains are deeply embedded in Europe's landscape, history and image.

There have been many artistic portrayals of them over the centuries, and one of these came to mind when I received my invitation to this event.

I have to admit that I'm not thinking here of Romantic novels or poetry from the nineteenth century. I'm actually thinking of that favourite old film *The Sound of Music!*

I'm not saying that this film accurately portrays the reality of life in the Alps.

But I couldn't help thinking of the famous "yodelling song" which begins: "High on a hill stood a lonely goat-herd..."

I thought of it because there's an increasing danger that the goat-herd in question could get rather lonely in years to come if we don't take action. And if that happens, the consequences will be serious.

While I've been a European Commissioner, I've climbed some mountains and I've met with mountain farmers. I particularly remember standing on a 45-degree slope in Austria a few years back, watching a 75-year-old farmer hard at work. This farmer certainly didn't have an easy life! And yet his work was essential in many ways.

On the one hand, mountain agriculture operates in a market economy. "Ohne Profit geht's nicht." Mountain farmers produce goods which they sell to buyers – whether these are final consumers or other parties in the food supply chain. In this respect, they are subject to the disciplines of the market like anyone else. They must produce what their buyers want. And they have a very strong brand – I'll return to this point later.

On the other hand, mountain agriculture provides other sorts of goods, which are not paid for by the market.

Visitors to our mountain areas appreciate very much those wonderful meadows which break up the sea of trees, and which are home to such a rich variety of flowers. This beauty and this biodiversity have been made possible by decades or even centuries of grazing and careful livestock management.

Therefore, it's in part thanks to farming that our mountains are such a jewel in our cultural heritage – a heritage which we must preserve intact for our children.

Mountain meadows are also of huge value to many other businesses. Ski resort operators owe them a debt for cutting the risk of avalanches. And in many mountainous areas, tourism in general probably could not survive if the trees took over completely. This will happen without farming.

These landscapes, with their great economic and cultural worth, need to be maintained. And I don't see a better and cheaper way of doing so than through sustainable farming. Of course, we could pay for "landscape stewards" instead. But what we would get would be "postcard landscapes" - nice to look at but without any human or animal life, and extremely expensive.

Therefore, I think we all agree that the market alone will not deliver what we are looking for in these regions. This is one of the reasons why policy has an important role to play.

That leads me to my key question for this morning: Is our Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) doing enough for mountainous areas?

Let's begin from a positive starting-point: the CAP does contain quite a range of tools to help mountain farmers.

First, of course there's the Single Payment Scheme.

It's true that, under this scheme, some mountain farmers receive higher payments per hectare than other farmers. This is true especially in countries which use a "historical" model of the scheme.

But let's not forget that, under the CAP Health Check, Member States have the option of altering their chosen model. They can raise the value of direct payment entitlements for certain types of farming, if they wish: this is up to them.

Article 68 gives alternative options for redirecting money, and these provisions could be used in favour of mountain farming. And of course, Member States can also keep full coupling in the case of the suckler cow and sheep and goat premiums.

Secondly, many, many possibilities are on offer within rural development policy, for both farming and forestry.

There are payments for mountainous Less Favoured Areas (LFAs) – and I should remind you that these are not being questioned as we re-examine criteria for defining so-called "intermediate" LFAs. I assure you that nothing is happening to mountainous LFAs.

Then there's support for agri-environment schemes, for processing and marketing, for high-quality production, for economic diversification..... the list goes on.

Thirdly, our broader quality policy offers food producers various tools for creating a clear identity in the marketplace and achieving higher returns.

Therefore, the CAP does not overlook our mountain areas. But is it delivering what they need?

I don't know the answer to this question. But there are some worrying signs.

According to a recent study, in the last 20 years some 600 thousand hectares of grassland in the Alps have reverted to forest.

The same study reminded us how quickly mountain grassland is lost when grazing animals have gone. In one area kept under observation, within seven years, 20 per cent of the grassland had been taken over by shrubs and saplings, and 50 per cent had become overgrown with bracken. When we lose land in this way, it's very expensive to reclaim it, if possible at all.

So, I ask again: do we need to rethink our approach? As I say, I don't have the golden answer to this question – but I want to hear some answers as soon as possible.

As you know, politicians, analysts, lobbyists and citizens are already thinking ahead to what the CAP should look like after 2013. Our mountain areas must have a seat at the table for this discussion.

Therefore, the time for ideas is now. And I'm not just talking about long "shopping lists" of requests. There will certainly be plenty of these in decisions about the post-2013 CAP! I'm talking about good, solid analysis of the particular needs of this type of agriculture with well-argued, realistic proposals. If these come my way in the next few months, they will get my full attention.

In the mean time, I have a few reflections of my own. I emphasise: these are reflections, not proposals.

### **Let's start with the "first pillar" – direct payments.**

As you know, all sorts of questions are on the table concerning direct payments – questions about objectives, about mechanisms, about amounts of money, and of course about how the money should be shared out.

Obviously, there ought to be a close relationship between objectives and the sharing-out of funding.

For example, it's conceivable that direct payments will in the future be more closely linked to the provision of public goods and services – especially of an environmental nature.

There exists a link already – through cross-compliance. But it's not beyond imagination that we would create a closer link.

I'm using words like "conceivable" because the debate about direct payments is a big one, and it has only just got going.

But my point is this: If the level of direct payments to a given farmer reflected more closely the value of public goods and services that he or she provided, this really ought to work to the advantage of mountain farmers – as they do so much for our countryside.

### **What about the second pillar?**

A key question in this context is this: Do the various measures on offer work together as a coherent whole? At present, they're a patchwork. Perhaps this is not a problem; but perhaps it is.

As I say this, I'm certainly not talking about integrating parts of our rural development policy into regional policy. I've spoken before about the dangers that I see at the end of that road. I believe that a "rural" development policy absorbed into regional policy would probably no longer be "rural": the magnetic power of towns in regions defined as "rural" would attract too much of the funding. I'm at the firm conviction that Rural Development should stay in the CAP and I will fight for this.. This is not because I want more funding but because Rural Development policy must stay in the CAP.

On the other hand, it would be possible to work within rural development policy in such a way as to give more coherent support – and more solid support – to mountain areas.

It would be possible to reserve a special place for mountains in our rural development policy. Call it a "box", call it an "axis", call it what you like. It would group together all policy measures relevant to mountain areas – and quite possibly tailor them to the specific needs of these areas. We could even agree minimum levels of spending on this area of policy, just as we do at present for the various axes of rural development policy or for the new challenges we have defined in the Health Check.

Do these ideas sound radical? They are logical ways of ensuring that the voice of the mountains would not be drowned out by other, louder voices.

At present, mountain areas are relatively small competitors for funding under a number of rural development measures. We all have to live with the fact that we don't always get what we want in life. But if mountain areas find that one measure after another is not designed in their favour in a given rural development programme, these small individual defeats could add up to a serious problem. Separating off measures for mountain areas would eliminate this danger.

Beyond the first and second pillars, it's clear that the European Union's broader policy on agricultural quality will be essential to the future of mountain farming.

Some products from mountain agriculture are already strong brands, and many others have great potential.

A couple of weeks ago, in my local supermarket I saw a pot of honey labelled as *miel de montagne*. It cost nearly three times the price of a different jar of honey next to it. Even so, I wanted to buy it, because I immediately thought of clean mountain air, fresh meadows and a very healthy final product.

Research projects indicate that many consumers take the same very positive view of products from the mountains.

Mountain-based production has a great deal to offer, and many consumers will pay extra for it – if they're confident that a given product is really "the genuine article".

Helping to provide the accurate information necessary for this consumer confidence is an essential goal of our review of quality policy, and I look forward to pushing ahead with this.

For example, as I said at a recent conference in Prague, it might be worthwhile to put EU-wide rules in place for use of the term "mountain" on food labels.

It might also be possible to create other quality schemes which let consumers know about the high environmental value of some kinds of farming.

The next step on the road will be a Communication which the Commission will adopt in May.

Finally, I should make an obvious point: What policy can do for those who do business in mountain areas is important, but even more important is what they can do for themselves.

Farmers, food producers and other businesses which team up in mountain areas are often more successful than those who try to go it alone. And I'm sure there's potential to create new partnerships in the future.

They also have to find niches for products made on the farm, and they must diversify their income – for example, by offering accommodation and "wellness" treatment to the tourists.

There are already plenty of very good examples – we should share best practice and encourage young farmers in particular to be innovative. There are a lot of possibilities out there in the mountain areas!

### **Where do we go from here?**

I'm quite serious in my request for good analysis and ideas from your side.

My home country of Denmark is not exactly a mountainous place. You could climb Denmark's highest hill in a few minutes. But I've seen enough of mountain farming in Europe to understand the challenges and opportunities before us.

Those glorious landscapes in the Alps, or the Apennines, or the Carpathians, or so many other mountain ranges in Europe, are of course in one sense as solid as rock. And yet they are also delicate. Farmers work extremely hard to care for them. In doing so, they give us things of enormous value. We must use policy to reward farmers for that hard work. And we must also use policy to help unlock the potential of their products in the marketplace.

I say to anyone who has an interest in these issues: The window of opportunity for influencing policy is open now; seize that opportunity. Put ideas on the table while the time is right.

However accurate or inaccurate *The Sound of Music* may be in its portrayal of life in the mountains, it's essential that the "lonely goat-herd" doesn't get too lonely.

I hope he sees me as a friend; I will listen carefully to what he has to say, and I will respond with action: this much I promise. That's my part but I need your help. I'm sure you will take up the commitment to come forward with new ideas and in this way I'm sure you will contribute to the future of our mountainous regions.

Thank you.