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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	A new role of farmers for vital and sustainable rural areas <i>- Information from the Italian delegation, supported by the Austrian, Finnish, French, Greek, Latvian, Polish and Romanian delegations</i>

With a view to an 'Any other business' item at the Council ('Agriculture and Fisheries') on 20 November 2023, delegations will find in the Annex a note from the Italian delegation, supported by the Austrian, Finnish, French, Greek, Latvian, Polish and Romanian delegations, on the abovementioned subject.

A new role of farmers for vital and sustainable rural areas**Note from Italy with the support of Austria, Finland, France, Greece, Latvia, Poland and Romania.**

1. Taking into account article 174 of the TFEU on the importance of economic, social and territorial cohesion and the Communication of the European Commission on the long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas, we would like to underline the important role of farmers in safeguarding vital rural areas and enhancing biodiversity. In particular, sustainable farming practices such as small-scale farming, organic farming, mountain pastures or sustainable forest management are contributing to a very high extent to the sustainable management of the environment in the rural areas. We call on EU policy makers to strengthen the farmers' and foresters' role when implementing the long-term vision for rural areas in line with the EU Green Deal and therefore proclaim a new Deal for a Strong and Sustainable Regional and Agricultural Policy.
2. The EU's rural areas are a core part of the European way of life. They are home to 137 million people representing almost 30% of the EU's population and over 80% of its territory, considering all communes and municipalities of the EU with low population size or density¹. They are widely recognised and valued for food production, management of natural resources, protection of natural landscapes, as well as recreation and tourism. Many of our traditions, and culture are rooted in Europe's rural areas. As emphasised by the European Commission's President, Ursula von der Leyen, 'Europe would not be whole without its countryside'².

¹ According to the 2018 LAU (Local Administrative Unit) level modelling by the JRC Eurostat demography data. Atlas of demography: <https://migration-demography-tools.jrc.ec.europa.eu/atlas-demography/>

² Webinar - A vision for rural Europe - Harnessing the potential of rural areas to contribute to a sustainable & prosperous Europe.

3. Additional efforts in further developing and preserving these very valuable rural areas and their special characteristics are needed. In particular, the agricultural policy (CAP) and cohesion policies play an important role in reducing the declining and ageing trend of the population in rural areas. Depopulation is a serious threat to the socio-economic stability and environmental balance of the territories, strongly affecting many areas in Europe. It also means that territorial development strategies should address rural areas according to their individual characteristics and in relation to their environment. We strongly believe that the CAP and cohesion policy provide an essential foundation in this regard but cannot comprehensively address all challenges. The prosperity of rural areas also requires a viable network of non-agriculture small and medium-sized enterprises. The three pillars of sustainability, namely economic, social and environmental aspects, must be equally taken into account in order to guarantee a stable, resilient and prosperous European Union.
4. The EU agricultural sector is currently facing many challenges and confronted to adapt to increasingly ambitious climate, environmental and animal welfare standards. In this context, it is essential to adequately support and accompany farmers in meeting these requirements, while at the same time guaranteeing a level playing field and global competitiveness. Additionally, in some rural areas, e.g. mountain pastures, farmers face the impact of large predators, especially wolf attacks on livestock. The status of protection of wolves under the current European legislation, including the FFH-Directive, has to be reassessed to ensure consistency with the evolution of the wolf population. In this regard, we have taken note of the recent statement made by the President of the Commission regarding the concentration of wolf packs in some European regions, and therefore call on the Commission to timely assess the situation and provide concrete and coherent EU-wide/cross-border measures.

5. Furthermore, it must be recognized that the EU Green Deal legislation is a great challenge for European agriculture whereas the reformed CAP has already addressed a high level of ambition in terms of environment and climate action. Agricultural emissions largely arise from natural processes, which clearly lowers the reduction potentially. The EU agricultural sector needs balanced requirements to fulfil the European demand for food production and food security, while at the same transitioning towards sustainable food systems. The goal of the EU's strategic autonomy concerning food security can only be reached by targeting the decrease of dependencies and vulnerabilities of the EU in order to accelerate its transition towards its long-term sustainability. Reciprocity of standards is key in order to achieve both objectives.
6. Biodiversity and the environment, as well as the important and diverse rural areas in Europe, need to be protected and developed in a sustainable way. In this context, farmers play a very important role for which greater awareness must be raised. Measures should be taken that enable farmers to continue to fulfil their important role for rural areas in the future.

With regard to the context described above, we call on the European Commission to:

- a) strengthen the role of farmers considering them as key-players for food security and biodiversity and the sustainable management of the environment in the rural areas;
- b) urgently tackle the challenges currently faced by agriculture and seek pan-European solutions that take into account the different characteristics of rural areas, even if this may require a review and updating of the status of protection of wolves under the current legal framework in some fields, such as of the current regulatory framework Directive 92/43/EEC (FFH-Directive);
- c) provide and continue adequate funding of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) for keeping agricultural and agricultural related activities in the rural areas (e.g. livestock farming, agro-food processing, tourism, restauration of habitats, diversification, etc.) and recognise the need to keep the overall agricultural land in production, including areas with natural constraints;
- d) carry out a comprehensive stock-taking exercise on the Green Deal legislation and its impact on EU-agriculture, as well as on the Union's strategic autonomy and food security.