

Abstract

Dno:314/54/01

Negligent farming

- problems in monitoring good agricultural practice

Finland's accession to the European Union changed agricultural price relations so that it was no longer profitable to raise crops on poor farmland. At the same time agricultural aids changed from price support to direct income support based on field size. In order to receive income support it is worthwhile for farmers to continue production with minimum inputs or to engage in negligent farming. To prevent this, aid is conditional on the following of good agricultural practice, including soil cultivation, fertilization and plant protection.

The audit indicated that the majority of farmers still try to achieve good crops. According to most agricultural departments, which monitor compliance with regulations, negligent farming is on the rise, however. On the basis of information collected in 2000, about 4% of farms engaged in negligent farming on one or more parcels of land. Most of these parcels were located in central and northern Finland, but in terms of size and the age of the farmer, they did not stand out from average farms. Negligent farming was also found on large farms.

On the basis of the audit it can be estimated that negligent farming, according to current criteria, is practised on about 0.5-1% of total farmland in Finland. Unearned support amounts to tens of millions of marks a year. Up to now, measures have only been taken in cases of gross negligence, however. The approach taken by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has allowed a small degree of negligent farming, which means that farmers have not had to pay for normal inputs. Consequently it is impossible to say on the basis of farm control how common negligent farming actually is.

Controlling agricultural practice is difficult and control officials can come to different conclusions in evaluating the same crop. This can lead to unequal treatment of farmers. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the present definition of good agricultural practice is too open to interpretation. As a result, producers farming poor fields can take advantage of the system and maximize the support they receive through negligent farming. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry should examine the content of good agricultural practice as well as concrete production targets and inputs. The ministry should also investigate possibilities to minimize the problem of negligent farming with the help of production agreements.