

Document 1 de 1

Guardian Unlimited

February 7, 2007 Wednesday

PRESS FORCES EU SUBSIDIES ISSUE

LENGTH: 994 words

The secrecy surrounding the biggest gravy train in the European Union - the ?100bn in subsidies given each year to farms, fisheries, food companies and big infrastructure schemes across 27 countries - will be abolished over the next two years.

The result is that print and media journalists will have a bonanza of stories on who benefits from the payouts that will cover everyone from the royal family to big multinationals such as Nestl'.

But before this happens, journalists across the EU have already started cooperating to force national governments - Britain included - to release the information in advance.

Journalists, voluntary bodies and thinktanks came together in Budapest on January 26-27 to draw up battle plans on how to handle this deluge of information, and to help colleagues in countries still fighting secrecy and obstruction by officials and politicians.

The conference was organised by farmsubsidy.org - an organisation set up by Jack Thurston, a former political adviser to Nick Brown, the former Labour agricultural minister; and Nils Mulvad, a Danish journalist who won the 2006 European journalist of the year in the European Voice awards.

Mulvad won the award for forcing the Danish government to reveal all the EU subsidy payments in October 2004, the first EU country to do so.

Thurston was helpful in putting pressure on ministers and officials to release the EU subsidies paid to English and Northern Irish farmers, which the Guardian revealed in March 2005.

Farmsubsidy.org promotes the publication of all the information - by putting all the details on its website - and publishing articles showing how the information has been used by journalists in different EU countries to reveal hidden grants.

One extraordinary example was the exposure by Brigitte Alfter from the Danish newspaper Information on how the dairy multinational, Arla, which owns Express Dairies in the UK, was claiming EU subsidies from four countries - Denmark, the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands - and getting more cash than its annual profit.

This led to a disclosure on how the firm was getting export subsidies to send milk powder to Bangladesh and the Dominican Republic because it could not find markets inside the EU.

The website will play a key role in the development of co-operation between journalists across EU countries.

At the Budapest conference, web designers Stefan Magdalinski and Richard Pope from Theyworkforyou.com - a website which provides a quick guide to MPs' voting records - were called in to redesign the site.

One of the key proposals is to enable users to easily add up how much individual companies receive in multiple subsidies across different EU countries.

The result is that for the first time the big multinationals will have to reveal how much subsidy they get.

The next step for any investigative journalist will be to find out where the money goes.

Similar areas to be targeted include grants to projects that never appear to materialise.

Journalists are likely to descend on Sicily to find out who got all the cash for unfinished motorways and for replanting prickly pears in expensive terraces sculpted out of the mountainside.

Some unusual stories are likely to come from uses of the statistics.

Ariel Brunner, a policy officer for BirdLife International, plans to use the release of all the EU subsidies to find out whether the decline in European birdlife can be directly linked to the level of farm subsidies across the EU.

In the meantime, Farmsubsidy.org plans to help journalists where officials are trying to block the release of information.

Typical examples can be seen in Poland and Bulgaria where the governments are not keen to release information.

Andrzej Krajewski, a freelance journalist in Warsaw, plans to take the authorities to court to reveal more information.

He has already exposed a scandal surrounding a Polish senator, said to have received ?1.5m in EU subsidies. The politician was accused of trying to bribe tax officials to cut his tax bill, and then trying to bribe the judge who was hearing his case. He is now on the run somewhere in South America, according to Krajewski.

In Bulgaria, former BBC World Service journalist Konstantin Ivanov, now the chairman of the Bulgarian Media Institute, is being hampered by huge charges for the newly computerised land registry. These make it impossible for him to find out who will get what.

Farmsubsidy.org plans to raise money for the Polish court case and to help purchase Bulgaria's land registry.

One of the most long-standing misconceptions held by the British public is likely to be shattered when full figures are released by the French authorities.

Pierre Henri Boulanger, a researcher with the Groupe d'Economie Mondiale à Sciences Po (GEM) in Paris has managed to obtain the first figures on the closely guarded French subsidies.

These show that, just like the UK, the biggest French companies get the lion's share of the cash.

The myth that all the cash goes to a French farmer with two cows and 20 chickens is about as wrong as the idea that it all goes to poor hill sheep-farmers in Britain.

I suspect that this will be the first of many myths to be dispelled.

Sarah Hall, from the Washington Post, told the Budapest conference that she had found massive wasted expenditure - estimated to be \$12bn a year - in the US on farm subsidies.

Many of the people claiming the cash were "hobby farmers" living in US cities or expensive Beverley Hills apartments.

The good news was that public exposure of the grants has led to many wealthy Americans declining to take the money.

Even George Bush, as an owner of a Texas ranch, had been shamed into not claiming the cash.

- To contact the MediaGuardian newsdesk email editor@mediaguardian.co.uk or phone 020 7239 9857. For all other inquiries please call the main Guardian switchboard on 020 7278 2332.

- If you are writing a comment for publication, please mark clearly "for publication".

LOAD-DATE: February 7, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

ACC-NO: A200702071F-13C53-GNW

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Other

JOURNAL-CODE: WGUU

Copyright 2007 Financial Times Information
All Rights Reserved
Global News Wire - Europe Intelligence Wire
Copyright 2007 Guardian Unlimited Source : Financial Times Information Limited