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Dairy systems in the European regions of the Atlantic Area:
A discussion of the economic characteristics to complement the « Green Dairy » project

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Introduction

The eleven regions participating in the « Green Dairy »³ project are responsible for about a quarter of the dairy production of the European Union (EU 15). Although situated in the same bio-geographical area facing the Atlantic Ocean, the diversity of environments and, in particular, of climates is still great. The summers are hot and dry in the South justifying irrigation whilst they are mild with a relatively high rainfall in the North and thus favourable to grassland and grazing. The role of dairy production in the total farming production context varies according to regions, going from less than 10% in Aquitaine and in Scotland to more than 30% in Brittany, Galicia and Ireland. This regional diversity of the dairy sector is also to be found at the farm scale, in terms of the level of specialisation, intensification (animal and forage) or special feed systems.

To define this diversity, to account for the variations internal to each region and to place the farmers' groups of the pilot farms of the "Green Dairy" project in perspective, individual data from the European Farm Accounting Data Network (FADN) for the years 1999 to 2003 were processed. This discussion is structured around three sections: the first presents some methodological approaches taken to understand the results presented; the second deals with the dynamics of the structures at the level of work productivity and the feeding systems adopted; and the third centres on the level of production costs, the economic results of the holdings and the collective dynamic internal to each region. The concluding comments discuss the principal strengths and weaknesses of the systems studied compared with the challenges of the future: the probable end of milk quotas, the accelerated expansion of the market, the increase in the price of energy, and more restrictive environmental regulations.

³ The « Green Dairy » European project compares the environmental impact of dairy systems of the European Atlantic Area (Pflimlin et al, 2006). Two networks for information exchanges have been set up: one on the environmental assessment (flows and losses of nitrogen and phosphorus...) of complete systems managed in experimental stations in the different partner countries; the other on the opportunities for progress recommended for dairy holdings.