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## **Sugar farmers join protest at EC cuts**

David Gow in Brussels

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Thousands of European sugar beet farmers will today press EU ministers to water down proposals to slash prices by 39% and axe 25,000 jobs.

The demonstration, joined by sugar cane farmers from the Caribbean, comes as farm ministers meeting here face serious splits over European commission plans to end export subsidies and over-production.

The commission wants to cut the cost of the euros 1.7bn (pounds 1.1bn) support system for beet farmers by cutting prices by 39% over four years from 2006, offering 60% compensation to farmers to give up producing.

Developing countries, which want less drastic price cuts spread over eight years, have warned ministers that the proposed reforms will cause devastation for their economies, some of which rely on sugar for 70% of national output.

Last week Arvin Boolell, Mauritian agriculture minister, said the price cuts would cost his country euros 100m a year and urged ministers to adopt more generous compensation for developing countries' farmers than the euros 40m on offer.

**Robert Sturdy**, a Tory MEP and beet grower, said: "Farmers are coming together to say that this reform, which will benefit a handful of Brazilian sugar barons and multinational companies, is bad for consumers, bad for the environment and bad for farmers."

Brazil led complaints at the World Trade Organisation which last year ruled EU export subsidies illegal, but Mr Sturdy said the world's biggest sugar-producing country threatens to take over the EU market.

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