

# The European Community and the environment

## European File

The natural environment and the man-made environment — two distinct but in reality interrelated areas — are seriously under threat in Europe.

### **Disturbing increase in pollution**

The natural environment is at risk most of all : rivers, lakes, the atmosphere, wild-life, vegetation — all are under attack by pollution. Particularly on account of :

- The quest for quick profit. Factory owners find it less expensive to dump their toxic waste into rivers rather than pay to have it disposed of safely. Motorists prefer to have less expensive cars even though they may emit more dangerous exhaust fumes. Power stations may prefer to discharge their cooling water directly into rivers, even though this raises the river temperature and kills off the aquatic life.
- The indiscriminate use of some modern technologies without prior investigation into their indirect impact on the environment. For example, the indiscriminate use of agricultural pesticides can lead to the death of valuable animals. Fertilizers and herbicides used in intensive farming can have undesirable secondary effects and, for example, contaminate water supplies, break down the soil structures etc.

This is basically the result of the mis-management of our natural resources and certain of our more precious non-renewable resources : air and water.

In the man-made environment the situation is just as bad. The European Community is one of the most densely populated regions of the world. The percentage of the population living in cities rose between 1950 and 1970 from 61% to 69% of the total. The next twenty years or so could see the creation of a giant urban agglomeration stretching from the Ruhr in West Germany through 'Randstad Holland' and the industrial crescent of Antwerp-Brussels-Lille to Paris, and spreading across the Channel as far as London. Such concentrations of industry and people invite pollution :

- Living and working conditions deteriorate through noise, poor air quality, filth, congestion and often through just the ugliness of the urban industrial landscape;
- Cities which have supported the development of the European culture are also menaced as their parks and green belts are whittled away, offices and cars proliferate, and urban development schemes continue to take too little account of the human dimension;
- The social cost of all this is difficult to evaluate but in purely economic terms, the price is already very high, particularly in terms of time, energy and money lost through traffic congestion. More serious than this, the urban explosion, if it continues unchecked, could cause the destruction of what we value in our culture, our heritage and our society. The re-emergence or the growing violence in our cities is perhaps just one of the signs of this.

Natural and man-made pollution are interdependent. Man-made pollution finds its way into the natural environment and invariably finds its way back to man one way or another. Toxic wastes discharged by modern agriculture and industry contaminate micro-organisms and find their way by complex and ill-understood pathways into the food chain. Atmospheric pollutants are dispersed by the wind and are returned to the soil by the rain. Agricultural and industrial effluents are transported by rivers and streams to the sea — the holiday playground for over 30 million Europeans. In this way pollution levels in parts of the Mediterranean, particularly in the west, have reached danger point. Though the ocean has the greatest capacity to neutralize pollutants, the English Channel's coastal regions are constantly menaced by the risk of oil tanker accidents. Finally, rivers like the Rhine and the Scheldt carry waste right across the industrial heartland of Europe.

### **Why is the environment a Community concern?**

The needs for a Community environment policy was formally recognized by the EEC leaders at the summit conference in Paris, October 19-20, 1972. In 1973, the Nine adopted the first joint action programme presented by the European Commission. A second programme was subsequently drawn up for the period 1977-1981.

Why must the environment be dealt with at the European level?

- Because pollution does not stop at national frontiers. Several of the examples mentioned above testify to this. The Rhine flows through Switzerland, Germany, France and the Netherland. 80% of Europe's lakes and rivers are shared by more than one country. Air polluted by sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) travels through the whole of Europe. A country may well waste its time trying to protect migratory birds if their neighbours simply massacre them.
- Because Community countries have formed a common market in which industrial and agricultural goods can move freely.
  - Each country tries to reduce as far as possible the quantity of pollutants needed in certain goods (for example washing powder) to make them effective. To enable these goods to be freely traded throughout Europe, the levels of permitted pollutants must be harmonized at the European level.
  - The fight against pollution forces industry to change — sometimes at great cost — their products and also their production methods. Production costs are consequently a little higher. If the same requirements and regulations are not applied in all Common Market countries, competition will be distorted and some countries may benefit whilst others lose jobs. The costs of the anti-pollution campaign have to be shared fairly amongst all European manufacturers and according to common rules.
- Because a great deal of research is required to define environmental regulations and develop anti-pollution equipment. It is in the interest of European laboratories to cooperate, share the work and save both time and money.
- Because in the Treaty of Rome Community countries have agreed that 'the essential objective of their efforts should be the constant improvement of the living and working conditions of their peoples'.

Today it is recognized that economic progress is only worthwhile if it can bring improvement in the quality of life which is more than just a question of goods produced and consumed. Whilst Europe has achieved a level of prosperity unparalleled in its history, which is partly the result of the formation of the Community and the opening up of frontiers, the economic crisis has forced us to rethink our attitudes and generally put the accent in the future on the quality of life. Policies which aim to promote manufacturers' interests should be offset by policies to ensure the protection of consumer interests and the environment in which we live.

We now recognize — particularly as a result of the work of the Club of Rome — that natural resources are limited and that growth can no longer be based on a continuous increase in the consumption of non-renewable resources. Less preoccupied than national governments by short term management problems, the Community is well placed to take a long term view of things. Its power to take legislative initiative enables action to be taken against pollution before it becomes a major threat to the environment and to human health.

## What does the Community do?

The Community's environmental protection programme is composed of three broad sectors of activity covering action against pollution, the improvement of the environment and international cooperation.

### a) The fight against pollution

- Preventing and reducing water pollution* : the Nine's Council of Ministers has adopted several directives which define for Member States the quality required of water intended for human consumption, the quality of bathing water as well as the quality of waters intended to support fresh water fish. One very important directive establishes a system of prior authorization for discharging dangerous substances into the aquatic environment and sets down quantitative limits and quality objectives for substances which are included either on 'black' or 'grey' lists (according to their toxicity). A special directive has been adopted covering titanium dioxide. In addition to prior authorization requirements and ecological monitoring, it invites Community countries to draw up and introduce by 1 July 1987, programmes for the progressive reduction of pollution caused by liquid, solid and gaseous wastes from the titanium dioxide industry. Moreover, the *Amoco Cadiz* catastrophe has drawn attention to the ecological, social and economic consequences of marine pollution caused by oil tankers. Following a decision of the European Council and a 'communication' from the Commission, the Council of Ministers has adopted an action programme to control oil spills.
- Fighting atmospheric pollution* : the provisions of the 1974 directive on the reduction of pollution from motor vehicle exhaust gases were further strengthened in 1977. Other directives cover the sulphur content of certain liquid fuels and the lead content of petrol — the maximum permitted level will be 0.4 grammes per litre after 1 January 1981. Biological standards for lead have also been fixed. Finally a common information exchange procedure has been set up between the national networks which monitor pollution caused by sulphur and suspended particles in the air.
- Noise reduction* : European directives have been adopted specifying permissible noise levels for cars, lorries and motor bicycles. Another directive harmonizes Member State legislation covering the sound levels of equipment used in the construction industry.
- Waste disposal* : three directives have been adopted concerning the disposal of waste oils. The Nine have also adopted a joint programme on the management and storage of radioactive waste.
- The impact of chemicals in the environment* : two European directives have been adopted, one covering detergents and the other their biodegradability. The classification, packaging, labelling, marketing and use of certain dangerous substances and preparations has also been dealt with by other directives and

the European Commission is proposing to add to this a common notification and screening system covering all chemicals placed on the market. Finally, the Council has adopted a recommendation on the fluoro-carbons problem and the Commission is drafting a directive on the subject.

- *The polluter pays* : in 1975 the Nine adopted the 'Polluter Pays' principle according to which costs incurred by the prevention and elimination of environmental nuisances should be the responsibility of the polluter. Exceptions, however, can be permitted in certain cases as long as they fall in the framework of European rules which are defined in the March 1975 recommendation to the Council. A second recommendation (December, 1978) deals with the methods of evaluating the cost of pollution control to industry.
  
- *Encouraging scientific research* : to effectively fight against pollution, we have to properly understand it. Various environmental research programmes have been implemented by the European Commission.
  - The first programme carried out between 1973 and 1976 at the Joint Research Centre at Ispra in Italy, involved some 15.9 million units of account.<sup>1</sup> Its main elements were the analysis and monitoring of pollution (including the development of related equipment), a study of the consequences of pollutants, developing analytical methods covering aquatic and atmospheric pollution as well as theoretical studies on thermal pollution and catalytic oxidation of water pollutants.
  
  - Another programme involving outside help was carried out between 1973 and 1975 at a cost of 6.3 million u.a. Subjects dealt with range from the toxic effects of lead and micro-pollutants to the creation of a data bank on chemicals, not to mention the epidemiological analysis of the effects of atmospheric and water pollution, the ecological analysis of the effects of water pollution and the measurement of air pollution.
  
  - A new programme is under way covering the period 1976-1980 and is endowed with some 16 million u.a.
  
  - Following a decision of the Council of Ministers in 1975, it has been possible to draw up and constantly update an inventory of sources of information on the environment.

## b) **Improvement of the environment**

It is necessary not just to fight pollution but, more generally, to improve the environment through other actions relevant to Community policies, particularly in the areas of agricultural, social, energy, transport policy etc. The Community can thereby help to :

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<sup>1</sup> 1 unit of account (u.a.) = approx. £0.42.

- *Safeguard the countryside and inhabited rural areas* : in April 1975 the Nine adopted a directive on aid to mountain and hill farming in certain less-favoured areas where it is necessary to stem the depopulation trend. Also, studies have been made or are about to be undertaken on the uses of animal wastes, the plant-protection products used by fruit growers and the use of toxic substances in agriculture. Other studies are being undertaken by the Commission on the ecological management of coastal areas and on the growth of large urban concentrations.
- *Protection of wildlife* : the Commission has requested all Member States to sign the international conventions on the protection of birds and on the conservation of wetlands. In December 1978, the Nine adopted a directive on the protection of birds (species and habitats to be protected, prohibited hunting methods, etc.).
- *Studying natural resources* : studies have been already undertaken, for example, on cadmium, relating to the production and use on the one hand, and its toxicity and antidote measures on the other, as well as the recycling of non-ferrous metals.
- *Countering threats to the environment* : the Commission is examining ways of evaluating the environmental effects of major industrial or infrastructure projects.
- *Improving living and working conditions* : a European Foundation was set up in Dublin in 1975 to assist in this area. Three main study areas are being dealt with by the Foundation : the humanization of working conditions; problems specific to particular categories of workers such as young people, immigrants, those of retirement age; finally subjects relevant to both work and play such as the relationship between free time and working hours.
- *Educating and informing the public* : various actions are being undertaken in collaboration with non-governmental organizations, in particular the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) and a network of pilot primary schools, to sensitize the public, particularly young people, to environmental problems.

### **c) Cooperation with non-Community countries**

Technical cooperation and information exchange agreements have been established between the European Commission and the American, Canadian, Japanese, Swedish, Swiss and Austrian governments. A certain amount of environmental research has been jointly undertaken with other western European countries.

The Community has signed the Paris Convention on the prevention of marine pollution from land-based sources, as well as the Barcelona Convention for the Prevention of Marine Pollution in the Mediterranean. The Council has also approved the Community's accession to a further protocol to this Convention on cooperation in dealing with various forms of pollution, particularly disasters of the *Amoco Cadiz* type. Negotiations are currently being conducted on possible Community

accession to the convention on the Protection of the Baltic Sea against Pollution. The Community has also decided to sign the convention on the Protection of the Rhine against Chemical Pollution.

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The quest to improve the quality of life in Europe is a long term affair. The Community's role is, however, fundamental. The Community needs to protect and promote the interests of all its citizens, but the battle cannot be won if the Community fights alone. Certain problems have a world dimensions (e.g. man's effect on the climate and the dumping of certain toxic substances). Other problems have less of a public impact. Action has to be taken on a situation by situation basis at the most suitable level : international, Community, national, regional, local, even individual. At the end of the day, we are all responsible for the quality of our environment ■



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