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DAIRY PRODUCTS: Commission's emergency plan would roll back the milk tide

What do you do with a mountain that has grown by over a third in size since the beginning of the year? Feed it to the pigs, is one answer. And it is being tried. For the mountain in question is made of the butter which the European Community has bought in under the common agricultural policy (CAP). By the end of August the butter mountain had grown to over 1.5 million tonnes, while the skimmed milk powder (SMP) mountain had doubled in size to just over one million tonnes.

To help the Community's agricultural ministers tackle the problem effectively the European Commission has drawn up emergency measures for their consideration. It notes that the programme launched a year ago - which included an expanded welfare programme as well as the sale of 110,000 tonnes of old butter to the Soviet Union - had failed to turn the tide.

The Commission also points out that despite the introduction of milk quotas in 1984 the flood has continued. Last year's milk surplus was estimated at some 8 million tonnes. Through the mechanism of the CAP, surpluses are converted into butter and SMP. During the first four months of this year SMP production was nearly 20% higher than a year ago. Meanwhile consumption, both at home and abroad, is declining and competition on world markets rising.

The Commission's proposals seek to tighten up the operation of the quota system, on the one hand, and to make the intervention arrangements, under which the surpluses are bought in by the Community, more flexible and more closely related to market conditions. Thus the Commission is seeking powers to suspend, in exceptional circumstances, the buying in of butter. SMP would be bought in only from 1 April to 30 September, but here also, in exceptional circumstances the Commission would have the power to suspend buying in temporarily.

The Commission believes that the system of inter-regional off-setting of quotas, introduced in 1984, is partly responsible for the surpluses: it has severely weakened the deterrent effect of the additional levy. It is therefore proposing that the system be discontinued.

The Community's agricultural ministers, meeting in Brussels, were appreciative of the Commission's efforts, as outlined to them by the Agricultural Commissioner, Frans Andriessen. Although the proposals themselves got a mixed reception, the battle over them has only been joined, so to speak.

HEALTH: Fighting drugs at their source

To fight the trade in narcotics effectively, it is necessary to go to their source and cooperate with the Third World countries which produce them. This is the focus of the European Commission's proposals to the 12 European Community countries, so that the European Community can join in the international fight against drugs.

The drugs problem, which has been preoccupying most Western governments for several years, interests the United Nations also. It is organizing an international conference on drugs and the illegal traffic in narcotics, to be held in the Austrian capital, Vienna, from 17 to 26 June, 1987.

The European Commission has drawn up an action programme in the light of this Conference and the international campaigns envisaged by the U.N. General Assembly. It particularly wants the Twelve to help Third World countries develop their backward regions otherwise than through the cultivation of poppy and cannabis. The Commission points out that the developing countries concerned have themselves repeatedly sought the Community's aid in this matter.

The Commission's proposal provides for the establishment of new agricultural and industrial activities in the rural areas of developing countries, as well as improvements to their infrastructure. The Commission feels that the money needed for this purpose should come from a special fund for aid to the developing countries in which the narcotics originate.

The Commission also favours agreements between producing and "consuming" countries for closer cooperation between their customs services. It believes developing countries could also profit from the Community's experience in the treatment and rehabilitation of drug addicts.

The Commission intends making specific proposals shortly to deal with the problem within the Community itself. It is in fact drafting a Community-wide programme aimed at preventing drug addiction.

EMERGENCY AID: ECU 250,000* for victims of forest fires

The victims of the forest fires which have raged in southeast France and Corsica these last two months are to receive a total of ECU 250,000 from the European Commission.

The Commission took the decision on September 15, in order to help families meet their immediate needs. Four persons died and 200 were injured this summer in the fires which destroyed homes as well as several thousand acres of forest.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.69 or IR£ 0.76.

WINES AND LIQUEURS: New wines under Old World labels

Whiskey connoisseurs are unlikely to have heard of Suntory red special - any more than amateurs of good wines of Chateau Montcin and the aperitif Monde Napoleon. However, all three are readily available in Japan, where they are brewed and bottled - a fact most Japanese are unaware of, as was revealed by a survey carried out in four cities by representatives of the European Commission.

Some two-thirds of the nearly 200 people who were polled thought that Monde Napoleon was imported. Nearly two-fifths of them believed it to be French in origin, either because of the word "Napoleon" or the use of French on the label.

A third felt Suntory was of Scottish origin. The label carries the words "malt and grain", but 85% had no idea what they meant.

For the European Commission, whose representatives met the Japanese this summer, the survey points to the existence of a labelling problem. European exporters find themselves penalized because barflies in Tokyo and Yokohama buy Japanese drinks under the mistaken impression they are buying European products.

Taxes add to the problem. In Japan, imported whiskey and liqueurs are at a disadvantage because of prohibitive taxes on the more expensive wines and alcoholic beverages. But for the Japanese government the problem posed by "imitation" labels simply does not exist, while the country's tax structure is due to historic reasons. Not surprisingly, European exporters are quite dispirited.

SHIPBUILDING: European Commission outlines aid strategy after 1986

Few basic industries in the 12-nation European Community have been as hard hit by the economic recession as shipbuilding. Both jobs and capacity have been halved since 1975, largely because a high proportion of the world's merchant fleet is laid up. Speculative ordering of new ships has only deepened the crisis, for it has pushed the surplus to an estimated 150 million dwt, equal to six years' production of the world's shipyards.

In a position paper to the EC's Council of Ministers the European Commission has warned that it is unrealistic to expect any lessening of the crisis. Concerted action at the Community level is needed, in fact, if the shipbuilding industry is to survive in the long term. And as most yards will remain open only if helped financially, any such action must involve further aid to the industry.

The Commission's paper discusses the aid strategy to be followed after the expiry, at the end of this year, of the Fifth Directive, which has governed aid to the industry since 1981. The present crisis, it notes, is structural rather than cyclical; in place of the recovery expected by 1987 the situation has worsened. In the Commission's view, it would be short-sighted, therefore, to remedy it by multiplying the volume of operating aids.

What it is proposing to the member states is a differentiated approach to the two basic types of aid, production and structural. Production aid would be aimed at helping Community shipyards concentrate on the more technically sophisticated and non-standardized vessels, for it is here that they can offset their cost disadvantages by their greater know-how and experience. However, no specific type of vessel would be ineligible for aid.

There would be a common maximum ceiling, so as to encourage fair but uniform conditions for intra-Community competition. The ceiling would be fixed by the Commission, on the basis of the relative cost position of the most efficient Community yards, compared to the price levels and sale conditions of the leading Far Eastern yards, for those categories of ships for which the former are relatively more competitive.

In order to speed up the necessary structural changes, the Commission proposes aid to cover the costs of total or partial closures, on the one hand and, on the other, investment costs related to specialisation and innovation, provided this does not result in increased capacity. There would be no ceiling on such aids when structural adjustments are needed to allow yards to make full use of production aids. The new rules would apply until end 1991.

REGIONAL AID: Two million for a signboard

Whenever a dam or a stretch of road is built with help from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), those living nearby are not always aware of the Community's contribution to it. In practice, if the project in question costs more than ECU 2 million*, a special signboard is almost certain to advertise the fact, as the European Commission has indicated in its reply to a question from the Irish Euro-MP, Thomas Raftery.

When the ERDF was set up in 1975 the Commission proposed to the member states that special signboards be put up at the site of all projects costing more than ECU 500,000. But several of them thought the figure too low. As a result, the threshold, so to speak, varies from ECU 500,000 to ECU 2 million, depending on the country.

On-the-spot checks by the Commission's representatives have revealed that the signboards do not always go up as they should. But checking to make sure is not easy, as publicity for the help given by the ERDF is the responsibility of the member states, "in agreement with the Commission".

While the signboards are in the language of the country, all carry the European emblem, the letter "E".

Once ERDF-aided projects are completed, a plaque can be put up to indicate the Community's contribution. But the Commission does not want to make such plaques compulsory, as they are not suitable in every case.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.69 or IR£ 0.76.

HEALTH: One infant in 10,000 has only one eye

Of every 10,000 births, including still births, in the European Community, between 0 and 1.3 suffer from anophthalmia - that is to say, are one-eyed. Depending on the region, between 0 and 3 infants out of 10,000 are afflicted by microphthalmia; their eyes are unusually small.

These figures, drawn from the European Register of Congenital Abnormalities for the years 1980-83, were published recently by the European Commission in its reply to a question from the Euro-MP Alexander Falconer. In Mr Falconer's Scottish constituency, four infants were born with one eye and one with very small eyes over a 4-month period last year. A survey covering all of Scotland is now being undertaken.

BUSINESS: Helping small businesses can mean more jobs

The European Community's small businesses can make an important contribution to job creation. Earlier this year the European Council stressed the fact that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are a major source both of jobs and economic growth. And now the European Commission is seeking the approval of member governments for a Community-wide Action Programme which would add a European dimension to the efforts being made at the national level.

Studies carried out by the Commission and independent research institutes have identified the three chief needs of SMEs. The first of these is for a simple, open administrative environment; the second, for easier access to capital, to allow the rapid introduction of new techniques, and the third for the preservation of their flexibility, so that SMEs can respond quickly to the competitive challenge of the market.

The Action Programme has been conceived in two parts, one of which deals with the measures needed to provide a favourable environment for the creation and expansion of SMEs, the other with ways of providing them with direct help. In the Commission's view promoting a favourable environment includes measures to encourage the spirit of enterprise, especially among young people. To this end the Commission envisages European training programmes aimed at priority groups, such as vocational training schools and universities.

Training, both vocational and management, is also included in the second part of the Action Programme; it is one of the six projects the Commission would like to see integrated into existing Community and member state programmes. Some training schemes to help SMEs are already eligible for aid from the European Social Fund. The Commission wants ESF-funded schemes to give priority to the retraining made necessary by the introduction of new techniques, in both management and production.

Exports are not usually associated with small businesses. The Commission however wants SMEs to enter the highly developed markets of the United States, Japan and other Far Eastern countries. SME managers wanting to export would be given bursaries to enable them to follow courses in Japan and the U.S., and the firms themselves encouraged to take part in trade fairs on a group basis.

The Commission hopes the EC Council of Ministers will approve its Action Programme as an integral part of the Community's economic policies for growth and employment.

EDUCATION: Who has the longest school holidays in the Community?

French schools clearly believe in the old adage that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. French schoolchildren in fact are on holiday some 200 days a year. Schoolteachers in Germany are made of sterner stuff, however, and limit holidays to a mere 140 days or so.

Elsewhere in the European Community* children are on holiday from 150 days (Italy, Luxembourg) to around 185 days (Belgium, Greece and Ireland). Most of the other member states have set the number of school holidays roughly midway between the French and German figures.

Schoolchildren in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are on holiday a maximum of 175 days a year, although in Scotland this figure falls to 165. In both Denmark and the Netherlands, schoolchildren can look forward to spending around 170 days outside the classroom.

The number of hours spent in school each week, especially by smaller children, varies a good deal also. German children spend 28 hours a week on average in primary school, with French children working almost as hard. They spend 27 hours a week in primary school, as do their Danish comrades.

Nearly everywhere else primary schools are less demanding. In both England and Ireland, for example, children are in school some 23 hours a week, although in Scotland the maximum rises to 25 hours - and to as much as 30 hours in Greece.

* The European Commission's answer to a question from a Euro-MP, covers the Community without Spain and Portugal.

COMPUTERS: Commission looks at ways to protect users against fraud, breakdowns

The breakdown of its computer cost the American banking group which owns it a cool \$5 million for the 24 hours it was out of operation. So vulnerable is today's computerized society that the European Commission has just launched seven projects aimed at protecting computers against breakdowns and white-collar fraud.

The projects include publication of a data protection guide for European users, giving details of the relevant legislation in force in European Community member states. Half the cost of these projects is being met by the Community, which has set aside 1 million ECU* for this purpose.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.69 or IR£ 0.76.

SPORT: A European cycle race

For the first time in its 25-year history, the start of the popular French bicycle race, the Tour de l'Avenir, was signalled by the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors. This was because this year's race is being sponsored by the Commission and the European Parliament.

The British team, like the six others from different Community countries*, sported the Community flag - a circle of twelve gold stars against a blue background - in addition to their own.

If the Tour de l'Avenir, regarded as one of the great bicycle races, alongside the Tour de France, has now acquired a European complexion, it is largely because of Jacques Delors. The Commission's President is also an ardent cyclist.

However, in sponsoring the Tour de l'Avenir the Commission is also implementing one of the findings of last year's European summit in Milan, which saw in the creation of European sporting events an effective way of bringing the construction of Europe home to the man in the street.

The Tour this year left Porto, in northern Portugal, on September 11. Before reaching Turin, in Italy, on the 22nd, it will have crossed northern Spain and the south of France.

Taking part, in addition to the seven European teams, are cyclists from the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan and Colombia.

* Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.