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REGIONAL AID: ECU 350 million* for over 1,200 projects

No fewer than 1,208 investment projects can be launched in the European Community's problem areas, thanks to a contribution of ECU 349m. from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This sum represents the 8th and 9th allocations for 1986, and was authorized by the European Commission last month.

The 8th allocation, amounting to just over ECU 22.5 million, will help finance seven major infrastructure projects in the area of Naples, in Italy.

The ECU 325m., which represent the 9th allocation, will be used exclusively to finance projects whose total cost does not exceed ECU 5m. Every member state, except Luxembourg, will benefit.

Some ECU 32m. have been set aside for investment projects in industry, craft industries and services and will either create, or save, over 9,000 jobs. The main beneficiaries are Ireland (ECU 9.5m.), the U.K. (ECU 7.6m.), France (ECU 6.9m.) and Germany (ECU 6.7m.).

The balance, amounting to nearly ECU 315m., will finance infrastructure investments in some of the Community's poorest areas. The two major beneficiaries are the U.K. (ECU 114m.) and Italy (ECU 73m.).

The ERDF funds will help finance the construction of a factory in Wales for the treatment of waste, thus preventing public dumps from springing up in tourist areas. Portugal will use the money from the ERDF to improve transport and the water supply.

In Greece the ERDF funds will help finance the construction of three centres for testing the roadworthiness of cars. France will use the ERDF's contribution to develop tourism in the southern Massif Central through improvements to roads.

The nine allocations authorized by the European Commission for 1986 have totalled over ECU 2,200m. Nearly ECU 2,000m. of this have been devoted to infrastructure projects and ECU 234m. to investments in industry, craft industries and services. The lion's share has gone to Italy (ECU 617m.), Spain (ECU 594m.) and Portugal (ECU 352m.).

* 1 ECU = £UK 0.74 or IRL 0.76.

FISHERIES: Towards a modern, efficient fishing industry

In the European Community the fisheries sector faces numerous problems, but the Twelve seem determined to resolve them. During their last meeting in 1986 the Community's fisheries ministers adopted a series of measures aimed at modernizing the sector and adapting it to present-day realities. This is to be carried out over a 10-year period, with the Community providing ECU 800 million* over the next five years.

During their meeting in December 17 and 18 the ministers formally adopted, after Parliament had given its opinion, the new European regulation which sets out measures to control fishing and prevent overfishing (see Euro-focus No 40/86). The Commission, which contributed largely to the agreement among the Twelve on several difficult points, saw, at the close of the meeting, a promising future for the common fisheries policy.

A large part of the ECU 800m. the Community has agreed to make available will be used to modernize fishing fleets. This will involve the transformation of certain vessels and the acquisition of new ones. The fleet must adapt itself, at the same time, to the limited quantities of fish available in the fishing grounds within easy reach - which is why some of the aid will have to be used to enable certain vessels to be taken out of service, either temporarily or for good.

In order to dispose of adequate stocks, the Community will continue to support fish farming and encourage the development of coastal regions. In addition, it will subsidize the exploration of more distant waters and back the establishment of joint ventures between companies from the Community and third countries.

The "structural" aid will help improve port facilities, especially the refrigerated warehouses and ice-making machinery - as well as the system of auctions. Finally, the Community will help meet the cost of market studies aimed at finding new outlets for species of fish which are either in surplus or under-utilized.

The regions which are highly dependent on fishing will receive preferential treatment.

* 1 ECU = £UK 0.74 or IR£ 0.76.

AGRICULTURE: Incomes slightly higher in 1986

For Europe's farmers, 1986 was better than 1985 on the whole. Farm incomes rose by 1.6% on average in real terms, as against a fall of 5% the previous year, according to Eurostat, the European Community's statistical office.

It has attributed this improvement to higher production in the first place: output was up 1 to 2% in volume and over 2% in value. Producer prices rose slightly, with the 2% fall in prices for animal products more than offset by a rise of some 4% for crop products.

Farm incomes moved very differently in the different member states, however. They rose sharply in Germany (by 9.3%), Spain (7.6%) and, although by not quite as much, in the U.K. (4.1%). In the Netherlands and France incomes rose by 1.7% and 0.8% respectively, which was close to the Community average. Elsewhere in the 12-nation Community farm incomes declined last year.

Even so, the decline was limited in Italy (1.3%) and Greece (2.9%). But it was 4% in Luxembourg, 5% in Denmark, 6% in Belgium and as much as 9.5% in Ireland. In parts of North Italy and Ireland the fall was due in part to bad weather.

PESTICIDES: To be sprayed - or chewed?

Pesticides can be sprayed to protect farm animals - or be fed to them. Tests are already being carried out in the Netherlands and France, but a Dutch Euro-MP, Eisso Woltjer, has suggested a ban on them.

The European Commission takes a different view. In its reply to Mr. Woltjer it has pointed out that adding insecticides to animal feed could be a simple, effective and cheap way of dealing with flies. As for any threat to the health of the animals themselves - or the humans who eat their meat - the tests now taking place will provide the answer, in the Commission's view.

There is no ban on such tests at present.

MOTORING: One "normal" speed limit for all 12 countries?

More meddling by the Eurocrats in Brussels is how many European Community motorists are likely to view the European Commission's attempts to harmonize national speed limits. But there are compelling reasons for Community limits throughout the 12 member states, according to Stanley Clinton Davis, the European Commissioner responsible for both transport policy and the environment.

"Stricter limits", he maintains, "would save lives and reduce the burden of pollution". Research has shown that if the average speed is reduced by 1% fatal accidents are reduced by 4% and personal injury by 3%.

Lower speed limits also mean a lower level of vehicle emissions, especially of nitrogen oxides (NOX), which are among the pollutants responsible for the death of forests, according to many scientists. If average speeds are reduced to 62 m.p.h. (100 km/h), studies show that NOX emissions would fall by 300,000t. or 10% of car emissions. That this need not effect sales of high performance cars adversely is clear from the level of sales in the United States, a country with low speed limits.

The Commission envisages a "normal" speed limit of 75 m.p.h. (120 km/h) for motorways. But the legally enforceable limit could be higher on motorways with a good safety record - and lower on those which run close to or through urban areas or woodland. Coaches and heavy lorries would be subject to appreciably lower limits than cars and motorcycles.

Speed limits on all other non-urban roads would be lower than the "normal" limit for motorways. The present differential between motorways and other non-urban roads is 19 m.p.h. (30 km/h) in most Community countries. The speed limits in built-up areas would be maintained.

Speed limits in the Community range at present from 62 to 87 m.p.h. (100 to 140 km/h) on motorways and from 50 to 68 m.p.h. (80 to 110 km/h) on other non-urban roads. These are the limits for cars. They are lower for busses and heavy lorries, ranging from 37 to 62 m.p.h. (60 to 100 km/h) in all member states except the U.K., where the limit on motorways is 70 m.p.h. (112 km/h).

Legally enforceable limits apply everywhere except on German motorways, which have a recommended maximum speed of 80 m.p.h. (130 km/h) for cars and motorcycles.

So far the European Commission has only set out the case for Community speed limits in its paper to the EC Council of Ministers. It will follow this up with detailed legislative proposals.

ARMS: Commission proposal would dispense with checks at internal borders

Can terrorists, gunmen and others of their ilk rub their hands with glee at the European Commission's latest proposal? It is that the European Community's 12 member states abandon police checks for arms at the Community's internal borders by 31 December 1992. The Commission is not behaving irresponsibly, of course. Its initiative is dictated by the fact that the Community's internal frontiers are set to disappear by the end of 1992, when the single internal market will replace the present 12 national markets.

In the single internal market not only goods but also people can move freely. But this freedom of movement confronts the member states with a major problem - how to ensure that travellers are not carrying weapons or other dangerous articles. It is this problem which the Commission's proposal seeks to answer.

The directive the Commission wants the EC Council of Ministers to adopt would make it illegal for people travelling between member states to carry arms. Those with legitimate reasons for doing so would need the authorization of the member state they were leaving - and the consent of the state they were going to.

The Commission directive has a simplified procedure for people taking part in hunting or shooting events. They would need a declaration from the authorities of their country of residence, stating that they were in conformity with the relevant national legislation, and listing the events they were going to take part in. Similarly, those wanting to buy a gun in a member state other than the one they live in would need the latter's authorization.

The Commission has pointed out that its directive, which covers the arms ordinary citizens may legally own, does not seek to harmonize existing national legislation. Its aim, rather, is to lay down the rules which should allow the Twelve to do away with checks at their internal frontiers. (The present practice of searching passengers boarding aircraft would not be effected, however).

The directive would place on arms dealers throughout the Community the responsibility for making sure that sales are legally conducted and the arms, including sporting and target weapons, reach their rightful destination. Under the directive, the dealers will have to keep a record of all sales.

HEALTH: Community's major role in nuclear accident protection and prevention

The European Community plays a major role in research into radiation protection and the safety of nuclear reactors, through the programmes operated by the European Commission. These programmes in fact cover between 35 and 45% of the research in the Community on radiation protection, and about 40% of the work on accident prevention in nuclear power stations.

This is one reason for the high standard of plant reliability and safety in the Community, according to the European Commission. And as there is no such thing as absolute safety, it will continue its work on radiation protection and nuclear safety.

The Commission gave this assurance recently to a Danish Euro-MP, Jens-Peter Bonde, who had expressed faint surprise at the scale of its operations - 100 research staff and 800 technicians working in the field of radiation "when nuclear power stations in the Community are already completely safe".

The Commission pointed out that Community research is conducted under the EURATOM Treaty and focusses on safety and health protection. The radiation protection programme covers all aspects of the effects of ionizing radiation and radioactivity from natural and artificial sources. In view of its wide-ranging nature, the work involves the participation of some 1,500 scientists and 800 technicians in research institutes throughout the Community.

Much of the work on reactor safety is being conducted at the Community's Joint Research Centre. It includes studies on accident prevention and the effects of hypothetical accidents in nuclear power stations.

SOCIAL WELFARE: First Community-wide scheme for blind railway travellers

Most European Community countries grant the blind special fares on public transport. This is especially the case as regards travel by rail, as the European Commission recently told a Belgian Euro-MP, Willy Kuijpers. He was particularly concerned to know whether the facilities granted by one member state were recognized, and extended, by the others to blind people travelling between member states.

The Commission's reply indicated that a start has been made. In 1985 the railways introduced, at the Commission's suggestion, a Community-wide scheme under which an attendant, or guide dog, accompanying a blind person travels free, although the latter must pay the full fare in such cases.

INVESTMENTS: Financing small businesses, technology and large-scale projects

The 12-nation European Community needs large sums of money in order to end unemployment, restore competitiveness to its industry and modernize its infrastructure. At a time when member states are cutting back on public expenditure, the European Commission is looking for new ways of tapping private capital at the Community level, using what it terms "financial engineering".

Last month it sent the Twelve a paper in which it set out the possibilities offered by financial engineering when employed on a European scale. The Commission wants to use it to raise funds for small and medium-sized businesses on the one hand and, on the other, to finance large-scale projects of interest to the Community as a whole, in civil engineering as well as high technology.

The Commission has announced it will increase its borrowings in order to put larger sums at the disposal of small and medium sized companies. It will also encourage the creation of service institutions which will provide these companies not only finance but also advice and, if required, business partners. The Commission hopes the Community can also help small businesses who cannot hope to obtain credit through established channels to secure the funds they need.

According to the Commission financial engineering could also be used to finance technological projects which, although beyond the stage of R&D, are still far from being a commercial proposition. To this end, it envisages the creation of finance companies, "Eurotech Capital", with 100% private capital but guaranteed by "Eurotech Insur", whose funds would be provided by both the public and private sectors.

The Commission would like the first practical application of financial engineering to be the funding of such a large-scale civil engineering project as the high speed rail link between Paris and Cologne. Hence its request to the EC Council of Ministers last month to approve the broad outlines of Community action in this field. The Commission believes the Twelve can encourage such large-scale infrastructure projects by financing a part of the preliminary studies, helping launch the funding of the projects themselves and declaring some of them to be a "European utility". The Commission has also proposed that certain loans be guaranteed by the Community budget and that one or more European "Infrastructure Agencies" be set up to launch, finance and manage such projects.

SPORTS: EC/US rivalry moves to the high seas

For at least one month this year the European Community and the United States will be engaged in a very different kind of rivalry than that of the market place. On May 16 some 14 yachts will leave Nieuwpoort in Belgium for Philadelphia (Cape May), the historic capital of the United States.

They will be taking part in a transatlantic sailing race to mark two historic events: the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Rome Treaties, the EC's foundation stone, and the 200th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution.

The 14 series-built monohulls taking part in the Constitution Race will fly the flags of the European Community, the City of Philadelphia and each of the 12 Community member states. The race, which has the blessings of the European Commission, Council and Parliament, is being organized by the Sail for Europe Association*. Its patrons include the former British prime minister, Edward Heath, and former Commission President, Roy Jenkins.

* Sail for Europe asbl, 3 champ du Vert Chasseur, 1180 Brussels, Belgium.

HIGH TECHNOLOGY: Halting the brain drain to the United States

The developing countries are not the only ones hit by the brain drain to the United States; the 12-nation European Community is also losing scientists and engineers to the Americans. An Italian Euro-MP, Giovanni Starita, has urged the European Commission to take steps to halt this loss of European talent, citing the case of an Italian research team which left for the U.S. after it failed to secure backing in Europe for the X-ray laser it has perfected.

The Commission believes the creation of a European Technology Community can help, as it would strengthen Community R&D. Hence the importance of the Community's 1985-88 Stimulation Plan, which seeks to lay the basis of a "research workers' Europe".

The Plan encourages teams of researchers from different member states to work together. Since its adoption in 1985 the Plan in fact has brought together over 750 laboratories, engaged on 235 different projects. Demand for Community backing, the Commission has pointed out, greatly exceeds the resources available under the Stimulation Plan (ECU 60 million*).

The 1,388 scientists and engineers who emigrated to the U.S. in 1984 from the 12 member states accounted for some 14% of the total, according to the American National Science Foundation.

* 1 ECU = 1 UK£ 0.74 or IR£ 0.76.