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Commission of the European Communities,
Rue de la Loi 200 - 1049 Brussels - Belgium
Tel 2351111 - Telex: 21877 COMEU B

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AGRICULTURE: Biotechnology in the service of agro-industry

The European Commission proposes an ECU 80m. R&D programme called ECLAIR.

An ECU 80m.* 6-year (1988-93) research programme in biotechnology, prepared by the European Commission, aims at improving existing agricultural produce, developing alternative crops to meet the needs of industry, creating products that are biodegradable and adapting new technologies to farming. The programme, called ECLAIR, has been conceived in order to encourage new developments based on the life sciences and biotechnologies. It seeks to increase the overall efficiency of the agro-industrial sector by putting together specialists and equipment within the framework of a Community-wide activity.

In drawing up its proposal, the European Commission has taken into account the changes in the European Community's agricultural markets, on the one hand, and the demands of industry on the other. The fact is that industry has a growing need for raw materials which are easier to handle, thus reducing production costs, and are readily available. Hence the interest in the renewable resources which agriculture offers.

The United States, for example, have adopted a bill which provides for a similar programme, covering both crops and new and alternative products, together with a proposal for an annual expenditure of \$75m. a year for 20 years. It is clear that only a coordinated effort at the Community level will allow the EC to meet a challenge of this nature and make a substantial contribution to its industrial competitiveness.

The ECLAIR programme will focus on three areas. The first is agriculture itself, in order to improve existing produce and develop alternatives, capable of being adapted to the needs of industry, such as flax, sunflower and rape. This will open up new outlets for agricultural production.

The second area of activity covers the development of industrial products to be used in agriculture. Examples include the development of biodegradable plastic sheeting to protect plants and fertilizers which are absorbed by plants with a minimum of loss.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78

(Contd.)

The programme's third area of activity relates to integrated projects as, for example, the harvesting of the entire plant. In this case a new species of plant would be grown and harvested, using new techniques. It would be transported whole to the processing plant, where each part of it would find a use. The adaptation of new technologies to farming represents yet another way of applying the Commission's new programme, which provides for the use of advanced informatics, automation and the integration of new mechanical processes controlled by computers.

To complete the ECLAIR programme, the Commission will put forward a proposal dealing specifically with the technologies related to the food industry.

HEALTH: Towards a single market in medicines

The Commission proposes Community directives aimed at bringing national laws on the marketing of medicinal products more into line with each other.

The marketing of medicines in the European Community is still largely unexplored territory. This has prompted the European Commission to adopt four draft directives aimed at bringing order to this particular sector of the market by bringing the various national laws and regulations in the sale of pharmaceutical products into line with each other.

These proposals round off the Community directives already in force in this sector and extend their scope to immunological preparations (vaccines, serums, toxins, allergens, etc.); medical products derived from human blood; radiopharmaceuticals and non-proprietary medicinal products.

Another aspect of the directives deals with information for patients about medicines, in order to help them find their way more easily. The standards for the manufacture of pharmaceutical products to be exported to developing countries are the subject of a new regulation.

UNEMPLOYMENT: Falling - but not everywhere

1.8% fewer unemployed over a 12-month period.

The number of people out of work in the 12-nation European Community stood at 15.9 million at the end of last November. The figure was slightly down over October - and considerably lower than in November 1986. Unemployment in the Community as a whole has fallen by 285,000 in a year, according to Eurostat, the EC's statistical office. But it is still rising in several member states and among women.

While male unemployment fell by 4.4% in the 12 months to November 1987, female unemployment rose by 1.5%. The increase was as much as 7% for women of 25 and over, as compared to a fall of 0.5% for men in the same age group.

The average number of registered unemployed in the EC was roughly the same in 1987 as in 1986, according to Eurostat. However, youth unemployment fell by more than 4% in the 12 months to November 1987, and by as much as 6% in the case of men under 25, but only 2% in the case of young women.

The situation differed sharply from country to country. In Britain unemployment fell by more than 500,000 - or 16.5% of the total - over a 12-month period. However, in Spain and Italy it rose by 4.6% during the same period. An 18% fall in the number of jobless in Portugal was matched, so to speak, by an 18% rise in Luxembourg.

INFLATION: Moderate in November ...

... but gaining ground during 1987 as a whole.

Prices rose a modest 0.2% last November in the 12-nation European Community, after rising 0.5% in October. Even so, the rate of inflation for 1987 was 3.4%, as compared to 2.9% in 1986, according to Eurostat, the EC's statistical office.

The November 1987 price rises were modest in nearly all Community countries. Prices were stable in Germany and Spain and even fell in Belgium and the Netherlands. However, Britain and Greece recorded price increases of 0.5% and 0.7% respectively.

Prices rose 3.4% in the 12 months to November 1987 in the Community as a whole. Eurostat feels this represents the inflation rate for 1987.

YOUTH: European cash for youthful initiatives

The EC backed more than 250 projects in 1986 and 1987.

Information centres, cooperatives, training courses for jobless youngsters are among the more than 250 projects launched by young Europeans, thanks to the financial backing they have received from the European Community. With just ECU 2.5m.* the EC helped 73 projects in 1986 and 188 last year, the maximum for any project being ECU 10,000.

At the end of 1985, the Community decided to finance activities which aimed at helping disadvantaged youngsters as they reached school-leaving age. It would put up money for projects run by young people for other young people, which sought to create jobs, give training, supply information and undertake social and cultural activities.

The European Commission received nearly 2,000 proposals in 1986 and 1987, but could only finance 261 projects. In numerous cases, a grant from the Community prompted other bodies to contribute to the same project. The Commission will continue its financial support because the EC Council of Ministers agreed at the end of 1987 to an action programme which will prepare young people for an active adult life.

The EC has helped finance the production of television programmes for the young in Odense (Denmark); a cafeteria in Amsterdam, run by former drug addicts for others like themselves; centres for information and advice on housing in Paris and Aschaffenburg (Germany) and a workshop producing wooden toys for nursery schools with people who were jobless.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78.

CONSUMERS: Their advice is sought on technical standards

The European Commission asks experts to let the man-in-the-street have his say.

Consumers will be able to contribute to the impressive number of technical standards which are being drawn up in preparation for the single market in 1992, if the European Community's experts accept the recent recommendations of the European Commission.

It has asked all national authorities to include representatives of consumer associations in the delegations they send to meetings organized at the Community level. So far, consultations on European standards have taken place with manufacturers for the most part.

REGIONAL AID: The ERDF provides another ECU 570m. for 1987

The European Commission adopts a series of programmes and projects.

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) has just given a helping hand to a number of regions in the European Community, from Denmark to southern Portugal and from the west of Ireland to the eastern regions of Germany. The European Commission adopted in early January a series of investment programmes and projects the ERDF will help finance in all the Community countries except three - Belgium, Luxembourg and Greece. Some of the infrastructure investments concern public facilities, others private enterprises, especially small and medium-sized ones.

The funds now made available by the Commission represent the seventh ERDF allocation of grants for 1987. They form the largest allocation of all, financially speaking, amounting to ECU 569.1m.*

Nearly ECU 511m. of this has been earmarked for infrastructure projects and more than ECU 58m. for industrial investments. The latter are concentrated in three countries: Ireland, the U.K. and Italy. The money from the ERDF should help create nearly 7,600 jobs and save another 2,000.

The investments in infrastructure will finance roadworks in Spain, the modernization of the telecommunications network in Ireland and a varied series of projects in France, the Italian Mezzogiorno, Portugal and the U.K.

The European Commission has also agreed to co-finance actions in favour of small and medium-sized enterprises in 13 regions, 10 of them in France, two in Ireland (the north and northwest) and one in the Netherlands. The aid is aimed at providing these enterprises the services they need in order to expand and secure access to the new technologies and improve their chances of obtaining finance.

Finally, the Commission approved 10 regional action programmes. Five of them have been launched by national authorities, including the Irish and British (covering Birmingham and West Lothian). The other five programmes, for which the European Commission took the initiative, seek to revitalize declining industrial areas located in Italy (steel and textiles) and Germany (textiles), as well as the border regions of Ireland.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78.

FISHERIES: Money for boats and aquaculture

Community funds will help modernize the Community fleet.

Hundreds of fishermen and fish breeders in the European Community's 11 maritime countries will be able to equip or modernize the tools of their trade, thanks to aid amounting to some ECU 94m.* released by the European Commission in early January.

It will help finance the construction of 271 new fishing boats, including 23 in Britain and 2 in Ireland. In selecting the projects to be aided, the Commission has tried to see to it that the number of vessels is in line with the size of fish stocks, so as to ensure the conservation of marine resources.

The Commission has also selected 272 projects for the modernization of vessels, including 38 in the U.K. and 20 in Ireland.

Another 137 projects relate to the rearing of saltwater fish and shellfish. The menu is a varied one. It includes salmon (Britain and Ireland), eels (Denmark), oysters (France and the Netherlands) and clams (Spain).

AGRO-INDUSTRY: European cash for slaughterhouses, markets, etc.

ECU 175m. to improve the processing of agricultural products.

Several hundred firms processing agricultural products for the market will be able to build or modernize their installations throughout the 12-nation European Community, thanks to aid amounting to ECU 175m.* which the European Commission made available in early January from the Community's Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund.

No fewer than 494 projects will share the aid, including 128 in Spain, 84 in Portugal and 60 in France. The fact is over half the aid has been earmarked for the Community's four southern members: Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal.

The emphasis is on food processing firms and fruit and vegetable markets in France, Italy, Spain and Germany. Meat processing plants dominate in Britain, Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands. Grain storage comes first in Italy and Luxembourg and olive oil production in Greece.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78.

TELEPHONES: One telephone card for the entire Community?

The standardization of magnetic telephone cards continues to pose numerous problems.

Imagine being able to telephone anywhere in the 12-nation European Community with the same magnetic telephone card. It's out of the question at present, of course. And with the passing of time it will become increasingly difficult to produce a card that telephones throughout the Community will accept.

This is a matter of some concern to the British Euro-MP, Andrew Pearce, who has questioned the European Commission not once but twice on this subject. He accuses the Commission of being negligent, in fact, in handing the responsibility for proposing European standards to outside bodies.

The European Industry Commissioner, Karl-Heinz Narjes, has defended the Commission. He has pointed out that, in keeping with the opinion of the European Parliament, the Commission felt it was for the competent technical bodies to draw up the detailed specifications needed in order to achieve standardization. The harmonization of magnetic telephone cards remains a matter of direct interest to national telecommunications administrations. The problem is being studied by a working party set up by the CEPT (European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations). Its findings, hopefully, will form part of the work being done to standardize payment cards in general. Because telephone cards are a specific example of cash and credit cards, the standardization of all such means of payment would be preferable from the customer's point of view.

The fact remains that standardizing telephone cards requires the solution of complex administrative problems, similar to those related to the introduction of a single harmonized European postage stamp, plus a series of complex technological problems regarding specifications.

SPORT: Well-behaved spectators to be rewarded

An initiative of the European Commission to fight violence at football grounds.

The European Commission has joined forces with the European Parliament and Council of Europe to find ways of ending the violence which mars some football matches. The news was announced in Brussels by the European Sports Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana.

Public opinion had to be mobilized against the hotheads, he told the press. It was not a question of stirring up a wave of indignation but of creating the conditions which would act as a restraint on the hooligans, not to say criminals, responsible for the violence. The Commission in fact has proposed a prize for the team whose supporters are the most well-behaved, both at home and away matches.

The prize should be awarded from next season. The European Commission will be asking the football associations in the 12 European Community countries to let it know which group of supporters behaved best during the first division championships in 1988-89. Representatives of the groups that have been designated will be invited to Brussels, together with their teams, for the prize giving ceremony.

They will take part, at the same time, at a symposium on violence at sports grounds. While violence is not limited to football grounds, it is here that it has reached intolerable levels. It is up to the team's supporters to get rid of the hooligans in their ranks.