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COMPETITION: A watchword in the countdown to 1992

The European Commission publishes its 17th report on competition policy.

The need to ensure free competition within the European Community, as guaranteed by the Treaty of Rome, has become more urgent as the date for completing the single European market has drawn closer. This was underlined by the European Commissioner for competition policy, Peter Sutherland, when he released the European Commission's latest annual report on the subject.

The report confirms that European companies are getting ready to take advantage of the single market. But of the growing number of mergers, most are still at the national level.

For Mr Sutherland "the competition rules are an essential part of the foundations of the internal market structure". He believes the 12 European Community governments are showing a growing appreciation of the importance of healthy competition within the Community. But he has also reminded them that unjustified state subsidies harm both the companies which are not receiving them and consumers, who must pay higher prices for less efficiently produced goods.

As in previous years, the Commission's report analyses the incidence of mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures in the industrial, distributive and financial sectors. The number of such operations jumped by 27% in 1986/87, as compared to a 17% increase in the previous year, rising from 561 to 708.

However, national mergers dominated even more than in previous years. They accounted for 41% of the total in 1986/87, as against 34% in 1985/86. They outnumbered cases involving companies from several Community countries by over 3 to 1 and international operations involving foreign companies by over 4 to 1.

The number of mergers in industry increased by 34%, which was far more than in the previous year. Mergers involving companies from the same country rose by 46%, while those involving companies based in two or more EC countries rose by 45%. However, mergers which involved at least one company from a third country fell by 43%.

Of the 303 national, Community and international mergers listed, 90 were in Britain, 69 in Germany and 63 in France. The sectors most frequently represented were chemicals, food and drink, and electrical and electronic engineering.

ENVIRONMENT: Fertilizing the seas

The European Commission envisages a series of measures to prevent modern farming practices from polluting the seas - and much else besides.

The rivers that flow into the North Sea are turning it relentlessly into a broth of man-made nutrients, with the nitrates and phosphates they have picked up as they flowed through green fields. One result is the recent spectacular, and worrying, growth of algae. Nor is the North Sea alone in being polluted; it is happening to the northern reaches of the Adriatic also.

These are among the undesirable consequences of the technological revolution in agriculture, and the more intensive farming methods it has bred. Chemical fertilizers and animal manures have made the land much more productive, but at a price. The fact is their misuse, or overuse, leads to eutrophication, with the spectacular results mentioned earlier. If to this is added the pollution due to pesticides, the picture is even darker - but still incomplete.

Fresh surface and ground water, as well as coastal waters, are the first to be affected. In many regions of the Community the presence of nitrates and pesticides in drinking water exceeds the European Commission's guidelines.

Other farming practices which damage the environment include unsuitable deforestation and afforestation of land; the drainage of wetlands and marshes; hedge removal; high fertilizer applications, leading to soil acidification and intensive farming, resulting in soil erosion.

Not even the air is free from pollution due to modern farming methods. Intensive livestock production results in ammonia evaporation; when manure is spread on the land, most of the ammonia it contains may be lost to the air within a few days.

Farmers traditionally have lived and worked in harmony with nature. Their livelihood has depended - and still does - on fertile soils, clean waters and a stable ecological balance. Faced with the threat posed by modern farming methods, the European Commission envisages a series of measures to deal with the problem, both in the short and medium-term, which take into account the interests of farmers.

In its fourth environmental action programme (1987-92), the European Commission had already stressed the need to integrate the environmental dimension into other Community policies, not least of all agricultural policies. It therefore intends to propose, before the end of the year, extending the Community Directive on environmental impact assessment to certain large-scale agricultural projects.

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Among the other proposals the Commission hopes to submit to the Member States before 1989 is a revision of the existing Community rules on the marketing of pesticides; a directive for the protection of fresh surface and ground water and measures concerning the production and marketing of organically grown products.

A start must be made with land use. More planning controls and incentives are needed to limit damaging new developments, and to influence the way in which land is used, in the Commission's view. It therefore wants the Community Directive on environmental impact assessment to apply automatically to large-scale agricultural projects, such as the restructuring of holdings, changes in the water regime, new roads, etc. In areas of intensive agriculture, the Commission favours the creation of ecological corridors to protect both the habitat and water courses and ponds.

The use of pesticides must be sharply reduced, it believes, for at least two reasons: (1) the hazards to humans, flora and fauna and (2) the present uncertainty as to their long-term and synergetic effects. The Commission therefore intends revising the existing regulation, and is considering introducing new controls limiting sales of certain products against prescription only.

As for intensive animal and plant production, the Commission takes the view that controls should be imposed on them, as is done in the case of other activities practised on an industrial scale. "Vulnerable zones", where there is risk of pollution of surface and ground water, would be identified. In the case of intensive livestock production, the creation of large new units, as well as substantial extensions to existing ones, would require prior authorization, on the basis of an environmental impact assessment.

Organic farming, which avoids the use of chemicals, and therefore protects both consumers and producers, should be encouraged, in the Commission's view. Legislation will be needed, however, to guarantee that food described as organically produced really is so.

Pending the adoption of these measures, the Commission would like the Member States to make much greater use of the existing provisions of Community law to encourage farming practices and planning which safeguard the environment.

TRANSPORT: High-speed trains, the Channel tunnel, etc.

The European Community proposes 12 projects to be undertaken on a priority basis.

If the single European market is to function properly after 1992, transport bottlenecks will have to be eliminated over the next few years. This has led the European Commission to propose a 5-year programme, aimed at up-grading the main intra-Community transport links, at a cost to the Community budget of about ECU 630mn.* The programme seeks to eliminate transport bottlenecks, link isolated or peripheral regions to the rest of the Community, improve land-sea transport routes, ensure high-quality links between the main urban centres and reduce the cost of transiting through non-Community countries - through Switzerland, for example, when travelling from Germany to Italy.

To make it easier to finance certain projects, the Commission has proposed they be declared as of special interest to Europe. Such projects would be entitled to financial assistance, which normally would be limited to 25% of the total cost or 50% in the case of preparatory studies.

Projects which meet the general criteria laid down by the Commission include the construction of a high-speed rail network linking Paris, London, Brussels, Amsterdam and Cologne; the improvement of the infrastructure associated with the Channel tunnel and the development of new telecommunication technologies to improve traffic management and information to drivers.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.65 or IR£ 0.78

ROAD TRANSPORT: Making the transport of dangerous loads safer

The European Commission wants stricter qualifications for drivers of such loads.

Driving a heavy-duty lorry loaded with chemicals requires a much higher level of skills than driving a milk van or a truckload of vegetables. Hence the European Commission's decision to send the 12 Member States a draft directive requiring drivers of lorries carrying dangerous goods to undergo special training, in order to obtain a certificate of competence.

The training would cover subjects such as the main type of hazards, preventive and safety measures and what to do after an accident. The certificate would be valid for five years in the first instance. Drivers with five years' experience in the transport of dangerous goods would be exempted from the special training.

CHILDREN: A giant house to teach accident prevention

A travelling European exhibition devoted to safety in the home.

Millions of Europeans will have the opportunity this autumn to learn, in a dramatic setting, of the dangers to which children are exposed in their own homes. They will be able to walk about in a giant house and thus experience for themselves the scale on which the child sees his everyday surroundings.

This giant house will be on display in some 30 cities throughout the 12-nation European Community, as part of an exhibition organized by the European Commission. The exhibition itself will be the centrepiece of a European information campaign aimed at promoting the safety of children at home and at play.

Over half the accidents to children under 15 years of age, and which require hospitalization, take place in the home or its surroundings, according to EHLASS. Sixteen children die in the European Community each day from such accidents, the World Health Organization has reported.

The European Commission's safety campaign will also provide information on the steps taken by the governments of the 12-nation Community and may include a European child safety week.

CONSUMERS: A Community-wide system of labelling

The Twelve decided to harmonize the way in which prices are shown on products of mass consumption.

Price comparisons on a Community-wide basis will soon become child's play for the housewife, thanks to a European Community Directive which requires that prices of consumer products be shown in the same way in all 12 Member States. This harmonization had been limited so far to foodstuffs; it has now been extended to all non-food products also.

Hereafter shops will have to show not only the unit price of each article but also the price per metre or kilo, or per dozen, depending on the way the product in question is usually marketed. The Community Directive also stipulates the specifications for measurement, packaging and presentation of goods where the price indication is waived. The Council has also adapted the regulation on foodstuffs to the changes in technical standards.

HEALTH: Four groups of cancer-producing chemicals are banned

The EC Council of Ministers also sets concentration limits for benzene.

Four groups of cancer-producing chemical substances have been banned by the EC Council of Ministers as part of the Community programme for the protection of workers. The ban covers both the manufacture and use of 2-Naphthylamine and its salts; 4-aminobiphenyl and its salts; benzidine and its salts and 4-nitrodiphenyl.

The ban does not apply if these chemicals are present in another substance or preparation in the form of impurities and by-products or in waste, provided the concentration does not exceed 0.1%. Waivers will be granted only for research or test purposes.

The Council also adopted a draft Directive on the risks from exposure to benzene. The Directive, which must now go to the European Parliament for examination, fixes concentration limits which, if exceeded, automatically set off precautionary measures. It has been set at 6.50mg. per cubic metre as from 1 January 1995. The limit per cubic metre of air is 16.25mg.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS: There is no one at the end of this particular line

The European Commission wants one telephone number for emergencies for the entire Community.

Europeans are a restless lot in general. As they are often travelling outside their own national borders on business or for pleasure, they can find themselves facing an emergency far from home.

It obviously would help if the telephone number for emergencies was the same throughout the 12-nation European Community. The fact is that each country has a different number at present. In some countries there is more than one number.

The European Commission has been trying for a long time to remedy this state of affairs. A start was made with the progressive introduction of a number which automatically connected the caller to the main service handling emergencies in each country, generally the police.

The national telephone authorities have so far pointed to the technical difficulties that stand in the way of an early solution to the problem. This has led the European Commission to set up a working group of experts drawn from all the Member States and their telephone authorities, so as to make sure the system can be in operation before 1992.

In the long run several such numbers will be needed, as not all emergencies can be handled by, say, the police. There will have to be separate numbers for the ambulance service and the fire brigade, for example.

A PEOPLE'S EUROPE: Festivities on the banks of the Leine

Hanover sets the European summit to music.

Hanover, the capital of Lower Saxony, was the capital of the European Community from June 24 to 28. The occasion was the 2-day meeting of the European Council, the Community's movable summit. But the city fathers decided they would follow Brussels' example and greet the Community's heads of state and government with a week-long cultural festival.

It looks as if these European festivities will yet become a Community tradition, with concerts and folk dancing, fireworks and a carnival atmosphere serving as a counterpoint to the solemnities of the summit itself.

The festivities organized by the city of Hanover ran the gamut from the Carmina Burana of Orff, played by the European Community Orchestra, and Bizet's Carmen, to a jazz festival and folk dancing. The fairground, too, had been designed to attract as wide an audience as possible.

For the studios there were the information booths set up by the European Commission and Parliament; for the sportive, there were athletic displays; for the daring, parachute jumping and for the hungry and thirsty the gastronomical specialities of all 12 Community countries.

HUMAN RIGHTS: Fighting racism as a Community

The European Commission makes a number of proposals for a Council resolution.

The European Commission believes that racism, and its twin, xenophobia, can be combatted effectively throughout the European Community through legal and institutional measures, a well-conceived information policy and better education and training. It has sent the 12 Member States a proposal in fact, for a Council resolution on the fight against racism and xenophobia.

The Commission notes that the constitutions or laws of all Member States affirm the equality of their citizens. Several EC countries have already adopted laws which severely punish racist activities and declarations. The European Commission has asked the Twelve to improve and extend the provisions of these laws.

Thus the right of associations to lodge complaints or start proceedings in cases of racist activities could be extended. Governments can also see to it that the freedom of the press is not used as a cover for incitement to racial animosity.

The European Commission has also proposed that journalists and others working for the media can be made even more aware of their role and their responsibility in fighting racism. There should be surveys of the relation between the different communities living within the 12 EC countries, and a progress report on the integration of immigrants every three years. Other measures favoured by the Commission include the regrouping of immigrant associations on a Community basis.

Activities in the field of information and education should be aimed at both the nationals of the country and its immigrant population, in the Commission's view. It has proposed that the training of immigrant workers and the education of their children be improved, by making it easier for them to learn their mother tongue. At the same time civil servants and teachers who are frequently in contact with immigrants should be given special training.

Civics courses which take into account the European dimension and inculcate in the young the values of pluralism and tolerance can, in the Commission's view, help stop the spread of xenophobia. Youth exchange programmes can give similar results, it believes.