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Mailed from Brussels X

FISHERIES: Tightening up checks on trawlers from elsewhere

European Commission and Twelve want to prevent doubtful imports.

Cod, angler and other white fish from Eastern Europe, which were being sold very cheaply although they did not always meet European standards, should become a thing of the past. A month after having imposed a minimum price on such imports, the European Commission adopted on March 25 a regulation which subjects all direct imports from non-EC countries to systematic checks and extends the system of minimum prices to additional species. These measures were taken at the French government's demand and with the backing of EC fisheries ministers, meeting in Brussels on March 18.

With 30% to 40% of the white fish consumed in the 12-nation Community consisting of imports from the rest of the world, the arrival of cod, haddock and their like from Russia and Poland, often via Norway or Iceland, led to a fall of 15% to 30% in wholesale prices at the beginning of the year. The result was an explosion of anger among fishermen, first in France, then Britain and Denmark. The minimum prices decided on by the European Commission at the end of February failed to calm tempers.

When EC fisheries ministers met on March 18, the French government asked the European Commission to raise minimum prices for white fish in the Community by 30%, and to suspend the unloading of fish from non-EC vessels. The Commission did not meet French demands in full, in order not to threaten supplies to a European market which depends on imports. But it decided on emergency measures, to apply from March 26 to June 30. Their effectiveness will depend on the Member States themselves.

Thus all fish from non-EC countries will have to be unloaded in the presence of the competent national authorities, who will have to verify that the products in question meet EC standards and minimum prices.

The EC's fisheries ministers, for their part, have undertaken to strengthen checks within their respective countries. They will also be responsible for continuing the measures adopted by the Commission beyond June 30 - or adopting new ones.

ENVIRONMENT: The fight against the greenhouse effect must be stepped up
The Twelve confirm their undertakings and decide to see they are being met.

EC environment ministers meeting in Brussels on March 22 and 23 were warned by the European Commission that if the European Community does not act now, it will be unable to meet the undertaking, given in 1990, to stabilize carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions at 1990 levels in the year 2000. CO₂ emissions could even rise by 3% by then, according to the data - unhappily incomplete - collected and analyzed by the Commission. The fact is that in order to know the exact situation and take the necessary measures the Commission and national governments need complete and reliable data. Hence the decision by EC ministers to set up a surveillance mechanism for CO₂ emissions.

Under the terms of this decision EC governments will have to send the Commission details of the programmes they have undertaken nationally to reduce emissions of CO₂ and other gases responsible for the greenhouse effect - the artificial warming of the planet, which experts claim will result in dramatic climatic changes. The Twelve will send the Commission each year data on emissions of these gases within their respective territories, presented on a comparable basis. The Commission will use the data to see whether the EC is doing its share in the fight against global warming.

Last June the EC and its 12 Member States took part in the world environment summit in Rio de Janeiro, when the world's political leaders drew up an international convention aimed at stabilizing concentrations of the gases responsible for global warming. On March 22 and 23 EC environment ministers undertook to adopt this convention definitively by the end of the year, on behalf of both their own governments and the Community as a whole.

A vital piece is still missing from the EC's strategy: the energy tax proposed by the European Commission and still under discussion in the EC Council of Ministers.

ENVIRONMENT: A green light for "green" companies

The Twelve adopt a European scheme for stimulating "ecological" firms.

"Clean" factories - those which neither pollute the environment nor waste natural resources, neither belch black smoke nor produce toxic waste, deafen neither their workers nor their neighbourhood - will be able to count on ecology in ways which are more effective, more systematic and more ... European. And industrial firms which had not given much thought until now to environmental matters will be encouraged - or so it is hoped - to do so. The EC's environment ministers adopted on March 22 a "European law" which introduces an optional scheme for environmental management and control in industry.

Throughout the 12-nation Community industrial firms which so desire will be able to take part in the scheme by registering with a national body designated by their government. This body will first verify that the firm abides by all the environmental standards and regulations currently in force. In order to take part, the firm will also have to submit to the national body in question an environmental analysis and an environmental programme.

The analysis will contain a description of the plant and give full details of the firm's "ecological" characteristics, including consumption of raw materials, energy and water; polluting emissions, waste and noise. The programme will set out quantitative undertakings by the firm to improve environmental protection in the context of its activities. The analysis and programme will have to be validated by an independent body or individual specializing in such work, and submitted to the national authorities. These independent persons and bodies could be based in an EC country other than that of the firm in question, but they will work under the control of the authorities of the Member States in which the enterprise itself is located. The European Commission will facilitate collaboration between the Twelve in order to guarantee that the scheme operates according to the same criteria and under the same conditions throughout the EC.

Firms taking part in the scheme will have to allow an independent body to make regular checks, every three years at the outside, on how closely they are following their programme. They will be able to publish the results. In any event, the EC's Official Journal will publish annually a complete list of all the industrial firms taking part in the scheme. Thanks to this scheme the firms themselves will be able, it goes without saying, to enhance their public image. But they will not have the right to mention their participation in the scheme on their packaging and in their advertisements.

The Twelve will help small and medium-sized enterprises take part in the scheme by providing them technical assistance and training.

INFLATION: A further fall in February

3.5% for the EC as a whole on an annual basis.

The rate of inflation is continuing to fall in the 12-nation European Community: it stood at 3.5% in February on an annual basis, as compared to 3.6% in January and 4.7% in February 1992, according to Eurostat, the EC's statistical office. The last time inflation was below 3.5% was in June 1988, when it stood at 3.4%. Prices rose by 0.4% in February. The sharpest increases were recorded in Britain (0.7%) and Portugal (0.8%).

The EC's rate of inflation is close to that of the United States (3.2%) on a 12-month basis; but it remains well above the Japanese rate of 1.4%.

The level of inflation continues to vary considerably from country to country within the EC. It is lowest in Denmark (1.3%), below 2% in Britain and Ireland and between 2% and 3% in France, the Netherlands and Belgium. All the other EC countries have inflation rates above the Community average: Luxembourg, for the first time, with 3.8%; Germany (West), Italy and Spain between 4% and 5%; Portugal (8%) and, finally, Greece (14.5%).

SOCIETY: Child abduction

European Parliament wants a legal solution.

Some 6,000 children are abducted in the European Community by one parent, or even by a third person, and taken to a country other than the one in which the couple was living. Most cases involve couples of different nationalities. The number of such abductions is rising steadily, and the situation could worsen with the elimination of the European Community's internal frontiers.

Very few of these 6,000 abductions attract attention, but they are tragedies nevertheless, with unimaginable consequences on occasion for parents and, more especially, the children. A concerned European Parliament therefore called on the Twelve during its last session to adopt a Community regulation, in order that the phenomenon may be combatted more effectively.

According to the rapporteur, Mrs Salema O. Martins, contrary to popular belief, the abduction of children is not only a matter involving a Member State and a third country, as is the case for example in the disputes which oppose France and Algeria, but also a Community problem.

Hence the need to harmonize the laws of the Member States in cases of abduction (or the failure to return a child, which amounts to the same thing) by one of the parents and to take concerted action at the level of the competent international bodies to bring into line, indeed strengthen, the penalties when the abduction is carried out by a third person. At present it is possible to fight against the abduction of children under three international instruments: the U.N. Convention on children's rights, adopted in 1989; the 1980 Hague Convention and the 1980 European Convention of Luxembourg on the recognition and implementation of decisions regarding child custody.

Unfortunately several EC countries (Greece, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland) have yet to ratify all three conventions. And even if they had done so or were to do so, the situation would not automatically improve, given that the Hague and Luxembourg conventions contain numerous exceptions to the return of the child, on the one hand, and the recognition and implementation of foreign decisions on the other.

Another important problem has to do with the nature of the offence. Is it to be covered by civil or penal law? The Hague convention refers explicitly and only to the "civil aspects of the abduction of children", while the offence is covered in some cases by the penal code in certain Member States (including France, Belgium and Greece). The European Parliament's legal committee has come out against penal sanctions for parents guilty of child abduction, in order that Parliament may not be accused of interfering in the internal affairs of Member States.

Parliament has nonetheless called for a Community regulation aimed at ensuring that children are returned to their country of residence. It has also invited those countries which have not already done so to ratify the U.N., Hague and Luxembourg conventions. It would also like EC countries to take steps to encourage third countries to sign these three instruments and to conclude bilateral conventions with them on these questions. Parliament finally has asked Member States to adopt measures which guarantee the full operation and implementation of the right of visit.

CONSUMERS: A very colourful debate in the European Parliament

Is it necessary to ban the use of food colourings by the food industry?

"Gray cheese, cherries and jam - that's what the Socialists have done!" The speaker was Caroline Jackson, a Conservative Euro-MP representing Wiltshire and the author of the draft resolution on permitted colourings in food. She was speaking just after the European Parliament had adopted restrictive amendments to the European Commission's draft directive. Her remark prompted a Labour Euro-MP, Pauline Green, to declare that the Socialists were not seeking to eliminate foodstuffs but rather food colourings, adding that she and her colleagues had "voted in favour of public health".

A very heated debate had already taken place in the European Parliament's environment committee, between those who wanted stricter rules and those who favoured authorizing certain colourings, and in particular erythrosine, or E 127, Red 2G or E 128, which colour foodstuffs red, and the green used to brighten peas. This last finally was not banned - but the red colouring in cocktail cherries and in British sausages was banned. As a result of the ban milk will no longer have its attractive colouring, nor will pre-cooked meat- and fish-based dishes. Euro-MP Caroline Jackson foresaw a lot of "gray cocktail parties".

But opponents of food colourings were having none of this. Another Socialist Euro-MP, the Belgian Claude Delcroix, claimed food colourings serve to flatter the eye or cover up poor quality products. A member of the Green Party wanted to know if it was necessary to dress up foodstuffs in borrowed colours, adding that the difference between the enjoyable and the fraudulent was not very great.

Although the amendments were adopted, the European Commission let it be known that it would keep some of them but not those banning the colourings in question. In other words the Commission, having already taken into account the experience of Member States and the opinion of their experts, will abide by its initial proposal. This means that food colourings traditionally used in Britain can remain in use.

TRANSPORT: Improving road safety

European Parliament calls for precise and detailed measures.

Some 50,000 people are killed each year on EC roads, while as many as 1.7mn. are injured, resulting in a loss to the EC economy equal to 2% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is high time, therefore, that road safety was given priority.

Even while insisting on the need to respect the competence of Member States and the freedom of citizens, the European Parliament adopted a report on road safety, in which it has invited the European Commission to submit proposals covering notably MOT tests and motor vehicle equipment, the behaviour of drivers and road equipment. Parliament has also called on the Council of Ministers to adopt quickly legislation on speed limits and on drinking and driving, the mandatory use of helmets by motor-cyclists and moped drivers, a ban on the use by drivers of cassette players with headsets and the labelling of medicines which can affect the capacity to drive.

Euro-MPs have also called for proposals for the mandatory installation of seatbelts in long-distance coaches; a coordinated system of emergency helicopter services; the establishment of a European Transport Safety Council, entrusted with the task of providing all interested bodies scientific and technical information; increased cooperation between the Twelve at the legal and administrative level in order to sanction driving offenses committed by a driver in a Member State other than the one he or she lives in.

Euro-MPs are also seeking changes to the directive on driving licenses, particularly with the introduction of standards regarding access to the theory and practice of driving mopeds; the introduction of a points system, notably in combination with a provisional licence for beginners and the follow-up of the behaviour of drivers.

The European Commission is ready to accept these proposals, as Commissioner Raniero Vanni d'Archirafi told Euro-MPs. He pointed out that several of them were already under study.