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CONSUMERS : Watch out for benzopyrenes

There were already enough hormones, mercury, food colouring and various preservatives and additives for the average man in the street to imagine that if he had to watch out for everything in his normal food supply, there would be nothing left to eat.

But he probably hadn't even heard of benzopyrenes yet. These are potentially harmful substances contained in a number of food products. Their presence results from various cooking processes including toasting, smoking and roasting. Each one of us consume an average of three microgrammes a day. The roasting of coffee beans is one of the ways of producing traces of benzopyrene. Luckily most of it remains in the coffee grounds rather than being absorbed by the consumer. But it has been estimated that a heavy coffee drinker who consumes about ten cups a day absorbs about 0.1 microgrammes of benzopyrene from them.

Benzopyrenes are also present in the environment as a result of air pollution from motor vehicle exhaust fumes. Other food products can also be contaminated by being subjected to the types of cooking listed above. This is why it is difficult to take legal steps in the interests of consumers to put an end to the amount people absorb.

Questioned recently on the subject by Mrs Krouwel-Vlam, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, the European Commission told her that it would make proposals aimed at limiting the consumption of this toxic substance as soon as such measures are required.

RESEARCH : New technology to measure pollution

Atmospheric pollution is a significant danger in our urban and industrial society. It is not just limited to soiling the exteriors of our most beautiful public buildings, but it also attacks wildlife and, more pertinently, our lungs. Pollution generally consists of a mixture of gases and solids. Depending on its composition, there are different methods to measure the level of pollution reached in a given location. This is indispensable for any environmental protection policy. The most popular method currently in use involves the filtration of air using a pump. If one uses a low-capacity pump, the amount of light absorbed or rejected by the filter is measured. In the case of a high-capacity pump, the filter is weighed on a highly-sensitive scale to measure the quantity of dust retained. These two techniques produce very different results, and neither is entirely satisfactory.

But a new method has just been perfected in Geel, Belgium, in one of the four locations of the European Community's Joint Research Centre (three others are located in Ispra, Italy; Karlsruhe, in the Federal Republic of Germany; and Petten, in the Netherlands).

With this method, the dust particles suspended in the atmosphere are again filtered, but their volume is measured more accurately by electron beams alternately crossing the clean and dirty parts of the filter. The differing amounts of light absorbed by the electrons indicates the weight of the dust collected. The principal advantage of this method is that the measures obtained do not vary according to the chemical composition, colour or size of the dust particles.

The mechanism developed by the Geel research scientists has already been tested throughout the Community, with the exception of Greece. The data collected is still being analysed. But if it meets the scientists' expectations, European authorities in the future will have a valuable tool in their campaign to improve air quality and the general environment.

DEVELOPMENT : Alternative energy sources for the Third World

The dissatisfaction of European motorists facing regular increases in petrol prices is understandable. But it must also be acknowledged that by and large the economies of the industrialised countries have adapted remarkably well to the continuing increase in the price of "black gold". On the other hand, the developing countries have had a harder time. Their annual oil import bill is currently about 50 billion dollars, an astronomical amount for countries which are poor and not yet industrialised. Some of them have to devote up to 50 percent of their export revenues to buy oil.

Help for Third World energy needs may come through the development of new and renewable sources of energy. At the moment, they already account for about 50 percent of energy consumed in the Third World, whilst they only supply about 15 percent of total world consumption.

On December 20, 1978, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution identifying 14 sources of new and renewable power which could provide a transition towards an era of abundant and cheap energy. These include solar and wind power, ocean and thermal power, wave-produced energy, biomass, hydroelectricity, geothermal sources, firewood, charcoal, bituminous deposits, tar sands, peat and work-animals.

The developing countries possess most of the world's potential for exploiting these natural and inexhaustible resources like the sun, the wind and the sea. But they lack the capital and technology which only the industrialised countries can provide.

An international conference on new sources of energy brought together developed and under-developed countries in Nairobi, Kenya, in August, 1981, with the purpose of studying a joint action programme. The emphasis rested on the idea that Third World countries should no longer be encouraged to copy the development models provided by the industrialised countries, based primarily on centralised and capital- and energy-intensive technologies. In addition, they should also avoid over-dependence on a single energy source. For example, firewood represents 80 percent of the alternative energy used in the Third World today. Current needs for household uses like heating and cooking amount to nearly 15 billion joules per day. But the number of forests in the Third World is rapidly declining and according to some studies, 101 million persons are currently affected by a serious shortage of firewood.

Another study by the World Bank estimates that the development of new sources of energy in the Third World, excluding hydro-electric power, would require annual investment to the order of 12 billion dollars between 1981-1985. In Nairobi, a number of Western countries, notably the United States, Sweden and some European Community states said that they were prepared to increase their bilateral aid in this sector. But they opposed the establishment of a special fund and the setting of specific targets. The European Community, which played an active role at the conference, sharply increased its energy cooperation with Third World countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, following the signing of the second Lomé Convention in 1979.

In the field of exploiting new energy sources Community projects represent about 80 percent of all aid projects in the sector in the developing world. Community action has mostly consisted of financing projects chosen by the beneficiary countries themselves, using techniques tested elsewhere, but adapted to local needs.

AGRICULTURE : Feeding 270 million Europeans

As proof that feeding the world's population is not an easy task, one only has to look around at the planet's starving millions and the renewal of the annual European debate on agricultural prices and policies. On the one hand, many in the Third World and even some people in Eastern Europe lack the basic daily necessities in food. On the other hand, farmers in the European Community produce such an overabundance that it strains Europe's already-besieged treasuries.

As they do at this time each year, the Governments, institutions and other interested parties in the Community have just begun the always-difficult effort to reconcile the interests of some eight million farmers and their families with that of Europe's 270 million consumers.

With economic and inflationary pressures mounting, it has become more difficult to maintain the farmers' standard of living in the face of rising production costs simply by guaranteeing higher prices for their produce. The past three years have seen a decline in real farm incomes despite overproduction in some areas which has proved expensive for the European Community. The European Commission, which initiates this annual process by proposing price increases for the coming season (which are then debated with vigour by all those involved), has just recommended increases of about 9 percent for most products. In this category will be milk, sugar, meats, olive oil and wine. Increases ranging from 6 to 12 percent are proposed for products like cereals, oilseeds, fruit and vegetables, textile plants and tobacco. To try to bring the costly surpluses of the past under control, the Commission has also urged that a limit be applied to the price guarantees it offers on certain products. Although this proposal seeks to meet the aims of both consumers and farmers, and would represent the first real increase in income for growers in four years, farmers' organisations have already attacked it and a number of rural protest demonstrations have already been organised in the Community during the past few weeks. Some member countries have also already let it be known that they consider the proposed increases inadequate, whilst others think it excessive.

In the meantime, most of the Community is also embroiled in a fundamental review of the predominant role of agricultural programmes in the Community budget. Redirecting priorities to other social and industrial concerns such as unemployment has become as pressing a need as ensuring a steady food supply and guaranteeing farmers' incomes.

TRADE : Japan hesitant about concessions

The size of the European Community's trade deficit with Japan in 1981 amounted to between 13 and 14 billion dollars. This represents a record figure that illustrates the structural imbalance in trade between the 10 member states of the Community and their Japanese trading partner. This imbalance has been persistent and is even more disturbing given that the Community now has some 10 million registered unemployed and is in the midst of an economic recession. Partly because of the deficit, there has been increasing and inevitable pressure building up in Europe for the Community to take protectionist measures against Japanese goods.

Anxious to preserve an open market system, in December 1981, the Commission presented a list of five demands to the Japanese Government. Japan recently replied in the course of high-level consultations between the EEC and Japan in Tokyo on January 29.

As proof of its good will and understanding of the European position, Japan announced that the reduction in customs duties foreseen in the recent Tokyo Round of international trade and tariff negotiations will be applied two years earlier than anticipated. This concession, however, represents only a half-point cut in the general Japanese tariff. At the retail level, it will result in a reduction of between 8 or 11 Yen in the minimum price of a bottle of top-quality whisky priced at between 5-10,000 Yen. The European Community, which had asked for tariff reductions going beyond those agreed to in the Tokyo Round, was therefore not entirely satisfied with this concession.

The Japanese authorities also announced the elimination of 67 non-tariff barriers concerning testing procedures and standards for acceptance of imported products. These deal primarily with pharmaceutical and cosmetic products, but the European Commission is doubtful about the real significance of the gesture since only time will show the impact on imports. No specific assurance was obtained on the self-limitation of Japanese exports in sensitive sectors such as automobiles, television receivers and tubes, and machine tools.

Sir Roy Denman, the EEC Commission Director-General for External Relations, declared during a press conference that "the measures offered by our Japanese counterparts constitute a step in the right direction but a long road remains ahead."

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS : Movement on worker consultation

During these difficult economic times, which are unfortunately accompanied by numerous plant closures, many feel that there is a growing need for more consultation between employers and their work force about matters affecting their livelihood.

That's why the European Commission in Brussels two years ago proposed a new law to be applied in all the member states that would require companies to consult and inform workers about important plans and developments. This measure has generated intense controversy between representatives of European and multinational companies who are generally opposed to such a plan and trade unionists who favour it. The proposal has been examined closely in the EEC Economic and Social Committee and in various Parliamentary Committees prior to its consideration by the full Parliament and by the Council of Ministers, where the final decision will be made. Recently, the Economic and Social Committee, an advisory group composed of representatives of employers, labour and other interests, voted 79 in favour, 61 against, with 11 abstentions to support the general concept of the pending Directive. The same week the Parliament Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee by a 16-14 vote of its members also sided with the idea after amending a first recommendation that was against the measure. The main Parliamentary recommendation on the subject is being prepared by the Social and Employment Affairs Committee, which is expected to finish its review in February. But already that group has before it a preliminary report by a British Conservative member, Tom Spencer, which favours the approach with some modification.

Addressing the various Committees recently, the EEC Commissioner in charge of the measure, Ivor Richard, expressed surprise at the controversy which had arisen over what he saw as a necessary process. He pointed to recent plant closures in the automobile industry when Peugeot shut a Talbot factory in Scotland, British Leyland shut a Belgian plant and Ford closed a Dutch operation, as underlining the need for worker-management consultation. He denied that the proposed Directive amounted to "a witch hunt against multinationals". But he also indicated that the Commission would take into consideration the various comments and objections made on the measure and probably seek to reduce or simplify the procedures to lighten the administrative and financial burden on employers.

But with so much attention and controversy already focused on the first phase of the EEC legislative process on this proposal, it is certain that the coming months of further consideration in the Parliament and Council of Ministers will also be accompanied by intense debate between employers and trade unions.