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AGRICULTURE: The olive problem

Enlargement of the European Community to include Spain and Portugal looks like bringing with it an olive oil lake. We examine the problems.

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TECHNOLOGY: Esprit - is anybody there?

It's news to no one that jobs in Europe's traditional industries - steel, textiles, coal mining, shipbuilding - are disappearing fast. But are enough jobs being created in the industries of the future to replace them? The struggle between the Community, Japan and the USA to establish a lead in the micro-chip, computer and data processing industries and in the application of these technologies in the office, factory and home is fierce. How well are the Europeans doing?

Not as well as we ought to be, according to the European Commission, although it's not for want of money or brains. For instance, the Community has spent about \$470 m on developing micro-chips, while the Japanese have spent \$240 m and cornered 40 percent of the world market. The Americans have taken another 40 percent share, leaving Europe with less than 20 percent.

The member states are belatedly waking up to the fact that the rot must stop. Many have started national research programmes. The French, for instance, are investing \$20 bn in their electronics industry over the next five years.

At the same time, the Community is convinced that it is only by linking hands that Europe can catch up with its competitors. A joint effort is taking place in numerous fields. The European Commission's latest and most ambitious venture is the ESPRIT programme. This brings together the research laboratories of Europe's leading electronics companies in a combined effort in pre-competitive fields of research that will help guarantee the future health of the industry. Partly funded out of the Community's own budget, and partly by the companies themselves, about a billion dollars will be spent over the next decade on projects such as the fifth generation computer, which will be operated by the man in the street. The idea is to pool and coordinate strategies on research well before an idea is ready for the market place.

The ESPRIT programme is also a new way of organising European Community research, since previous areas of cooperation have only involved government sponsored laboratories. ESPRIT will mean a high degree of cooperation among a group of competing industrial companies. Next year will see the launching of a series of pilot projects and, on the basis of the experience gained, a larger and long-term strategy will eventually come into operation. Even

so the pilot projects will cost \$25 m, half from the Community and half from the companies.

A number of other programmes are already running. One such initiative is the the four-year programme (1979-83) on data processing, costing \$28,5 m, aimed at promoting new uses for data transmission technology and creating common technical standards. For instance, grants have been awarded to help establish a common computer language, and for a transnational information system for ports and shipping companies. This programme may be extended to 1986 with an additional 34 m dollar budget.

To help Europe keep pace with the development of the coming generation of integrated circuits, a \$45 m four-year programme to stimulate research and cooperation was also launched this year. And in jobs, the Community's social policy is devoting \$3,9 m to retraining workers to find the new skills for the computer age and encouraging schoolchildren and students to learn the uses and techniques of data processing.

ENERGY: Natural gas

The share of natural gas consumption in the European Community has more than doubled from 7 to 18 percent during the last two decades. This trend is in keeping with the objectives of the European Commission's energy policy up to 1990, the major outlines of which have already been approved by the Council of Ministers. Europe's main objective is to reduce its dependence on imported energy, especially oil.

Consumption of natural gas has rapidly increased since 1970, mainly because of sizeable deposits discovered by the Netherlands, the main Community producing country, and later by the findings in the British zone of the North Sea. Consumption went from 153 bn m3 in 1973 to 226 in 1979 to 214 in 1981.

But two questions remain. First, will European natural gas production continue to increase at the same pace as the energy needs of the coming decade? According to figures published in 1981 by the European Commission, European natural gas production, which reached about 179 bn m3 in 1979, should be between 149.5 to 158 bn m3 in 1990. Import figures indicate that purchases should rise from 46.8 bn m3 in 1979 to 161 bn m3 in 1990. The second question is whether this increase in imports will again create difficulties for the security of Europe's energy supplies. Currently,

Europe's biggest natural gas imports come from the Soviet Union, which account for about 19 percent of total imports. Algeria provides 10 percent, and Norway 11 percent.

A recently published European Commission report on Community natural gas supplies until 1990 is reassuring on both issues. First, European natural gas consumption is falling, decreasing from 226 bn m³ in 1979 to 214 bn m³ in 1981. Estimates forecast for 1990 have been revised downward by the Commission from 292 bn m³ to 273 bn m³. This can be attributed to a variety of reasons, including energy conservation and substitution of other energy sources for gas. The logical consequence will be a reduction of imports from third countries.

As far as security of supplies is concerned, the Commission forecasts that after 1991, there will be a greater diversification as a result of deals with new supplier countries. Possible new suppliers include Nigeria as well as certain Middle East countries, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Gas imported from the Soviet Union should account for less than 4 percent of the Community's total supply in 1990. In the long run, Norway should also become an important new supplier.

The European Commission also believes that in 1990 the European natural gas industry should be able to cope with all the possible scenarios involved in an interruption of normal supplies for six months, if cuts of between 10 and 25 percent occur.

ENVIRONMENT: European Commission seeks to limit noise pollution

Noise pollution is increasingly coming under attack as one of modern society's most harmful byproducts.

For many years noise was considered a nuisance and less dangerous than other forms of environmental pollution. When the first European Community Environmental Action Programme was adopted in 1973, there was no specific reference to noise pollution.

But in recent years, authorities everywhere have begun to express their concern at the health hazards represented by environmental, occupational and entertainment noise pollution. While urban traffic noise and the effect of loud rock-and-roll music have captured more attention recently, probably the most serious form of noise pollution is the kind encountered by millions of people everyday in their place of work.

Noise pollution can lead to a partial loss of hearing as well as increased strain, nervousness and a deterioration of certain basic motor skills. Workers exposed to constant high levels of noise at work for years can suffer serious damage as a result.

As more and more governments have become conscious of the problem and begun to adopt legislation seeking to control occupational noise, the European Community has been moving to establish joint standards and avoid a patchwork of different and sometimes conflicting national measures. The European Commission in Brussels, as part of its "health and safety at work" programme, has just recommended that the Council of Ministers adopt a new law standardizing legislation relating to noise levels at work. It would set a minimum degree of protection throughout the Community member countries of a daily average exposure not greater than 85 decibels, which is currently the lowest level found in existing European legislation. Noise above that level can prove to be harmful if sustained over a continuous period of time and the human ear can suffer damage from noise levels higher than 150 decibels.

The proposal would also incorporate medical check-ups for workers likely to be exposed to noise levels above the 85 decibels prescribed in the legislation. The Commission says that it is aware of the differing views among industry, trade unions and health experts about the need for such protection and the levels involved. But the proposal was worked out after lengthy consultation with the interested parties and is thought to be a balanced first step that would bring a marked improvement for most workers.

ARTS: Starving Bohemians

For many writers, actors and artists starving in garrets, the Bohemian life hasn't changed much, according to statistics released in a recent European Commission report.

Unemployment among actors in some parts of Europe is estimated at 80 percent. The number of people employed in the arts has declined by half in 25 years, many of them are paid wages below the subsistence level and there is a shortage of qualified people throughout the arts sector.

The European Commission in Brussels has now responded to the problems by asking the Community institutions to improve state aid to the sector. "The Community must assume toward the cultural sector the same economic and social responsibilities that it assumes by virtue of the treaties in other fields", says the report.

Up to now Community aid has been limited to a few programmes and the establishment of a European Cultural Foundation earlier this year.

The type of action the Commission is now proposing ranges from changes in national tax and customs regulations to give artists and actors a better deal to promote various regional and minority cultural activities.

The reasoning is not just to create theatres, orchestras or other activities in the main urban centres where they now exist, "but to create them where they are really lacking, in the small cities and rural areas, where a potential public exists for music, theatre and dance", the report states.

The Commission wants to compile an inventory of unmet needs and jobs available and to create training programmes to respond to real needs. At grass-root level, it recommends action to support performers and other cultural workers in regional or minority languages, whose lot is even worse than that of their colleagues. It has already helped to finance a pilot project in 1981 at the EISTEDFODD, the annual festival of culture and poetry in Wales.

A number of other initiatives to help artists, actors, photographers, musicians, authors, composers and craftsmen were also suggested, including reforms of tax and copyright laws and the sponsoring of major events like the 1985 European Year of Music and an exhibition of works by 150 young European Community artists scheduled for 1983 and 1984.

CRIME: Lorry drivers face assaults

The shooting of a Danish long-distance lorry driver in Italy has brought calls from the European Parliament for legislation to bring an end to organised crime rings which prey on truckers and their loads in Europe.

Danish European Democrat MEP Kent Kirk says that attacks have reached such proportions that "they pose a real threat to the free movement of goods" in some parts of the European Community.

But the European Commission says that, although it knows what is going on, it is not allowed to act, because problems of law and order are the exclusive legal preserve of the Community's individual member states.

AGRICULTURE: The olive problem

Shady groves, sun-baked hillsides and the sparkling Mediterranean seem like a tourist paradise to most people from cold, damp northern Europe. But to agricultural economists at the European Commission in Brussels they are a challenge that means olives.

On top of being a sophisticated addition to your martini, olives are grown by thousands of farmers throughout southern Europe to make olive oil, which up to now has been a staple part of every southern European diet.

But olives are expensive to pick and olive oil is facing growing competition from other cheaper vegetable oils. Farmers' livelihoods are threatened by falling demand and the problem is compounded by the fact that the poor land used for olives cannot often be converted to other crops.

The plan to enlarge the European Community to include Spain and Portugal, two major olive-oil-producing countries, puts the problem squarely in the Community's plate. Despite the advantages of a larger market, consumption of olive oil in both countries will probably fall in favour of vegetable oils when the new members join.

The question facing the agricultural economists in Brussels is how to re-organise the European market for olive oil to give olive growers in all the Mediterranean Community member states an adequate income, whilst keeping the price of olive oil low enough to compete with vegetable oil. Hence the challenge.