

EUROPEAN BACKGROUND INFORMATION COMMUNITY

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE

2100 M Street NW, Washington DC 20037 Telephone (202) 872-8350

New York Office: 1 Dag Hammerskjöld Plaza, New York NY 10017 Telephone (212) 371-3804

BACKGROUND NOTE

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UNITED WE STANDARDIZE

The European Community has taken another step on the road to unity with the adoption by the Community Council of 18 more directives on the elimination of technical barriers to trade. These directives, once approved by the Community institutions, are binding on the member states which must incorporate them into their national law. Although they deal with highly technical matters - these directives will have a significant effect on Europe's quality of life.

Better for Everyone

The directives make it easier for producers to do business since product standards (in the case of those covered by directives) apply to a unified market of 260 million people throughout the nine nations of the European Community, and not just to national markets, each subject to different and often conflicting laws. This helps the producer cut prices because he saves by not having to modify his product for each national market and has a bigger market to sell to. This, in turn, means a saving for the customer. Harmonization of standards means advances in safety and quality for the European consumer and provides one more bond between the member states.

The latest package to be approved contains seven directives on automobiles, two on tractors, four on measuring instruments, two on radio interference, one on pressurized vessels, one on cosmetics and one on dangerous substances.

New Standards for Cars

There are now 28 directives which apply to cars. The seven directives just approved deal with lights and signalling equipment. For example, from now on every car to come out of a factory must have at least one fog light in the back and one back-up light as well as all the lights now standard. Only a few directives on the automobile are still pending. These include the ones on safety belts and safety glass.

The main objection to such EC directives has been that they would result in dull, standardized products - "Eurocars," for example. This, of course, has not proved to be the case in Europe. And in the United States, where the government requires that automobiles produced within its jurisdiction meet certain specifications, the fantasies of American car designers have continued to blossom.

Tractors

The other directives recently adopted are similarly pragmatic. In the case of tractors, one directive sets noise levels which may not be exceeded by tractor engines. This is designed to protect the drivers and diminish noise pollution.

Cosmetics

A more direct protection for the customer will result from the directive on cosmetic products. These are products designed for use on the human body or the mouth "with a view exclusively or principally to perfume them, clean them, protect them and keep them in good condition, to change their appearance or to correct body odors." Hundreds of chemicals and other substances are banned outright - from adonis vernalis to yohimbine. Many others, including coloring agents, are subjected to specific restrictions on authorized concentrations, labelling requirements and use. As the directives come into operation it is to be hoped that fewer Europeans will suffer to be beautiful.

Electrical Interference

The new directives on radio - electric interference are the first in that series. They apply to home appliances, portable tools and other such electrical equipment as well as fluorescent lighting. The intention is to make sure that Community consumers will get better radio and television reception.

Measuring up

Each year the Community produces millions of essential measuring devices, such as clinical thermometers, which are used in every household. But the technical barriers to trade, i. e. differing national regulations, are such that at present only a thousand are sold across national borders within the Community. The situation with pressurized vessels is similar. When the new directives in this area come into force, consumers will get a bigger choice and producers a bigger market.

These latest directives bring the current total to 80, covering a wide range of areas where technical barriers, like so many barriers in Europe, are being steadily removed.