

## Interreg III C: forum in Berlin

An Interreg III C partner search forum is to be held in Berlin on 8 and 9 March. This will be the occasion for local and regional representatives from the 25 EU countries to meet potential partners as well as to find out more about the programme and its funding opportunities.

<http://www.interreg3c.net/psf/berlinpsfmarch04>

## Interreg III C East: 27 projects approved

The decision was taken, at a meeting of national representatives in Vienna on 21 January, to grant total funding of EUR 61.17 million to 27 inter-regional cooperation projects within the Interreg III C East zone. As many as 200 partners from 11 EU countries, 9 new Member States, Norway and 4 non-Member States will be participating in the projects.

[http://www.interreg3c.net/web/east\\_en](http://www.interreg3c.net/web/east_en)

## 'Clustering': workshop in Pescara (Italy)

IRE, the network of innovating regions in Europe, and the IRC, the network of innovation relay centres, are holding a workshop in Pescara (Abruzzi, Italy) on 26 and 27 February on the subject of 'clusters' (industrial districts and enterprise networks).

<http://www.innovating-regions.org/network/presentation/>

## The EU gains 74.1 million inhabitants

According to Eurostat, enlargement to a Europe of 25 Member States on 1 May 2004 will increase the population from 380.8 million to 454.9 million. A gain of 74.1 million.

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/Public/datashop/print-product/EN?catalogue=Eurostat&product=3-09012004-EN-BP-EN&mode=download>

## Budgetary execution of the Structural Funds: an improved performance

**Addressing the European Parliament Committee on Budgetary Control (Cocobu) on 20 January on the subject of the budget discharge procedure for 2002, Michel Barnier, European Commissioner responsible for Regional Policy, stressed — with figures to support him — how the effort to simplify Structural Fund management is bringing results with continuing progress in the budgetary execution.**

On 25 April 2003, the Commission adopted a communication to achieve a simpler, clearer, better coordinated and more flexible management of structural policy (C(2003)1255). The aim was to facilitate Structural Fund management so as to speed up the use of funds.

Addressing the Cocobu, Michel Barnier sought to answer four questions. These concerned a simplified management of the Structural Funds, progress made on the budget discharge, the impact of the 'n + 2' rule on Fund management, and the need to continue dialogue with Member States.

**Simplification** — 'The progress we have made to date should enable us to make further progress in the next programming period', declared the Commissioner. Referring to the communication of 25 April 2003, Michel Barnier indicated that he had taken the process of simplification as far as possible for the present programming period (2000-06). Significant results have already been achieved in a number of fields, such as programme modification and Commission reimbursement levels, and an improvement in the forecasting accuracy of the Member States is also expected.

**Budget discharge** — The year 2003 looks like showing a very positive result, as the provisional figures show that the level of payments made from the Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund reached EUR 28.6 billion in one year alone. Michel Barnier stressed that 'it is an unprecedented amount which has come at the right moment to support growth and investment in our regions.' The 'balance in hand' for the 1994-99 programming period was reduced considerably both for the Funds as a whole (- 41 %), and for the ERDF in particular (- 51 %), without sacrificing any rigour in the con-

trols. This trend is set to continue in 2004 and the amounts committed but not yet paid remain well under control for the present programming period (2000-06). The measure by which Fund performance must be judged in this respect is the 'n + 2' rule.

**'n + 2' rule** — This states that any commitment made in year *n* which is not spent by the end of *n* + 2 must be cancelled. It therefore ceases to be available for the national or regional programme in question. This rule therefore has 'a positive effect by encouraging a dynamic Fund management', explained the Commissioner, even if 'it is too early at this stage to put a precise figure on the impact of the *n* + 2 rule at the end of 2003.' The national authorities had until 31 December 2003 to submit to the Commission their latest payment demands that may still be booked to 2001 commitments.

**Dialogue** — In the face of often overly optimistic budgetary forecasts by Member States, the emphasis must be on dialogue rather than sanctions, stressed the Commissioner. 'Prevention is cheaper than repair,' he explained, adding that: 'I am not convinced that it is the time to change the method when things are improving.'

### The period 2000-06: 2003 budgetary execution levels for amounts committed under the Structural Funds (situation at 31 December 2003)

|                          |         |
|--------------------------|---------|
| (provisional figures)    |         |
| ERDF                     | 100 %   |
| EAGGF — Guidance Section | 99.77 % |
| ESF                      | 99.81 % |
| FIFG                     | 99.91 % |

# Greece/Turkey: cross-border cooperation in the interests of peace

**The European Commission has given the green light to an Interreg III A programme between Greece and Turkey which is to receive a budget of EUR 66 million by 2006.**

Approved on 22 December 2003, the programme was signed officially by the partners on 9 February. It is part of a global strategy aimed at consolidating peace and the development process on the Balkan peninsula and in the Aegean Sea region. On signing the agreement, Michel Barnier stressed that it marked a historic new stage in relations between the two countries.

This new Interreg III A programme between Greece and Turkey covers the whole of the mutual border areas, both land and sea, and thus all of the eligible areas. These fragmented and often mountainous areas cover a surface area of 81 215 km<sup>2</sup>, or 17 % of Greece and 8 % of Turkey. The 8 100 753 inhabitants destined to benefit from the programme represent 10.20 % of the population of the two countries.

The Interreg III A Community initiative aims to promote cooperation between cross-border regions and an integrated economic and social development. The Interreg III A Greece/Turkey programme will focus mainly on improving

access and communications in the region, boosting economic activity and encouraging initiatives designed to combat unemployment and improve the quality of life of its inhabitants. In the field of tourism, efforts will be made to improve the management of the environment and cultural resources.

The programme's total budget is EUR 66 million, with EUR 46.66 million for Greece (receiving EUR 35 million from the ERDF) and EUR 19.35 million for Turkey (EUR 15 million from the pre-accession financial instrument).

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[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/interreg3/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/interreg3/index_en.htm)

## Innovative actions: four new regional programmes

**In January 2004, the Regional Policy DG approved four new innovative actions for the following regions: Friesland and Limburg in the Netherlands, Wallonia in Belgium and the South Aegean Sea in Greece. These four regions will receive total funding from the ERDF of EUR 9.6 million.**

The ERDF innovative actions are laboratories of ideas for Objective 1 or 2 regions. Since 2001, 130 innovative action programmes have been approved for 156 eligible regions in the present European Union.

These programmes cover measures concerning one or more of the following strategic themes: the development of the regional economy based on knowledge and technological innovation; the information society and regional development; regional identity and sustainable development.

Within these three priority areas, each region has drawn up its own plan of action in line with its specific context. The common element in the projects approved in January was the focus on drawing full benefit from the new information and communication technologies. At the same

time, each region chose to place the emphasis on different aspects of this technological challenge.

In Wallonia, for example, a special effort will be made to reduce the digital divide, socially and geographically. For the South Aegean, information technologies will be used to support the promotion of tourism services as part of a drive for sustainable development. As to the Netherlands, both Limburg and Friesland will be placing the emphasis on the use of information technologies by SMEs. In Friesland, the regional authorities will also be paying particular attention to providing rural populations with access to the Internet and other information technology facilities.

To find out more about the innovative actions and these four new programmes, go to:  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/innovation/prog2001\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/innovation/prog2001_en.htm)

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