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Committee of the Regions: 317 members and a new address

The first plenary session of the enlarged Committee of the Regions was held on 16 and 17 June. From now on, 95 observers from the 10 new European Union Member States will be taking part as full members. This brings the total number of members of the Committee of the Regions to 317. A full list of these 95 new members is available at:

http://www.cor.eu.int/en/prss/cprss2004/infonews_04_05.html

Another notable event was the inauguration of the Committee of the Region's new building, located at the following address: 101 Rue Belliard, B-1040 Brussels; tel. (32-2) 282 22 11; fax (32-2) 282 23 25.

Dutch Presidency and Europe's urban dimension

At its plenary session on 16 and 17 June, the Committee of the Regions discussed the third report on cohesion. It was the occasion for Dutch Deputy Prime Minister Thom De Graaf to set out the regional development priorities of the Union's new Presidency, stressing Europe's urban dimension. 'The towns are the engines for Europe's economic and regional development and as such are vital to strengthening European competitiveness,' he declared. Thom De Graaf also announced the Presidency's intention to launch a study to determine: 'how to define a European policy for the towns and cities'.

<http://www.eu2004.nl>

Interreg III B North Sea call for proposals

The sixth call for proposals for the Interreg III B North Sea programme will be open from 23 August to 24 September 2004. The updated applicants' pack can be downloaded until 23 August from:

<http://www.bsrinterreg.net/toapply.html>

The financial decisions concerning this sixth call for proposals will be taken at a meeting in Hamburg in December 2004.

Structural Funds: official launch for the 10 new Member States

Less than two months after enlargement, the European Commission has approved economic and social development programmes in the framework of the Structural Funds for each of the 10 new Member States. On 23 June, Jacques Barrot, Péter Balázs and the other Commissioners responsible for the Structural Funds were able to ratify these decisions with the permanent representatives of the 10 new Member States, at a ceremony to mark the occasion at the Council.

The formal adoption of these new programmes follows an agreement on their content already concluded in December 2003. Under this agreement, the 10 new Member States will receive more than EUR 24 billion (at current prices) in Community aid from the Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund during the period 2004-06.

Speaking at the ceremony, Jacques Barrot declared that 'This is a historic day both for the people and

for the regions of the new Member States. ... The new programmes will help bridge the significant gaps in the enlarged European Union and contribute to integration and to territorial cohesion.' For his part, Commissioner Balázs welcomed the fact that the new Member States were quick to launch calls for project proposals early in 2004.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy

'Open days 2004': the regional development open days in Brussels

The Regional Policy DG, together with the Committee of the Regions and more than 60 regional representations in Brussels, are organising open days on the subject of 'Managing regional development' on 27, 28, 29 and 30 September.

At these 'Open days 2004', 60 regional policy experts will be participating in 30 interactive workshops at the offices of the various regional representations in Brussels. At least 10 subjects will be discussed: cooperation between regions; programme management and project selection; Cohesion Fund management; urban development; management of regional partnerships; evaluation and monitoring; financial management and control; administrative capacity building;

information and transparency; specific development issues.

These open days will permit continued discussion on the management and future of cohesion policy, a debate launched in February 2004 when the Commission adopted its third report on economic and social cohesion in the Union.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/opendays

Solidarity Fund: the Commission takes initial stock

In its report of 26 May, the Commission looks at the performance of the European Union's Solidarity Fund in 2002 and 2003. During this period, this new Community instrument was activated on eight occasions in response to disasters affecting several Member States.

In the summer of 2002, floods hit central Europe with devastating consequences before moving on to the south of France. On 18 August, a special meeting was held in Berlin under the Danish Presidency, at which the Heads of State or Government concerned and the European Commission representatives all agreed on the need for a solidarity instrument at European level to supplement existing instruments. The Commission immediately introduced a proposal to this effect. On 11 November 2002, the Council adopted Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 (OJ L 311, 14.11.2002), designed to provide a rapid and flexible response to meet a part of the public expenditure incurred by countries hit by major disasters.

In a report (COM(2004) 397 final) published on 26 May of this year, the European Commission made an initial evaluation of this European Union Solidarity Fund during the last six weeks of 2002 and through 2003.

During this period, the Commission implemented the Solidarity Fund on eight occasions, granting financial aid totalling EUR 832 million to requesting States.

Using this instrument, the Commission compensated Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and France for the dramatic flooding that hit their regions. In Germany, for example, the August 2002 floods affected 337 000 people and more than 10 000 companies, forcing 100 000 people to leave their homes.

In 2003, the Commission used this new solidarity instrument on four further occasions in response to a variety of disasters. In Spain, it was an oil spill from the *Prestige* tanker that did the damage. In Italy, it was first the eruption of Mount Etna and then a series of earthquakes (Molise and Pouilles). In Portugal, forest fires destroyed 270 000 hectares during the summer months.

At the end of 2003, thus at the close of the period reviewed by the report, the Commission had not yet reached a final decision on five requests received during the year. The situation has evolved since then and will be the subject of the next report.

A disaster is classed as 'major' when it causes direct damage estimated at over EUR 3 billion (at 2002 prices) or more than 0.6 % of the affected country's GDP. Exceptionally, and with a total budget limited to EUR 75 million a year, countries hit by disasters on a smaller scale can have recourse to the European Union Solidarity Fund if these qualify as 'exceptional regional disasters', for which a number of specific criteria imposed by the regulation must be met. To be accepted, all applications must be submitted by a government within 10 weeks of the date that the disaster begins.

http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/rpt/2004/com2004_0397en01.pdf

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European Commission
Directorate-General for Regional Policy

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