

Environment: assessment of effects of certain plans and programmes

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The Committee welcomes the proposal, since it fits in with the concept of "sustainable development", aiming at better integration of environmental considerations from the land use planning stage onwards. Other highly important directives on environmental controls, procedures and authorizations have been adopted in recent years or are currently being adopted. The present proposal therefore adds to an already complex picture: the opportunity should be grasped to provide a clearer definition of existing hierarchies and the specific scope of the various directives, so as to prevent overlap, duplication and excessive red tape. The methodologies are less well-consolidated than suggested; such at least is the general view of both technical specialists and those affected by decisions. Mechanisms for ad-hoc comparison should be provided to make the technical requirements of environmental assessment clearer. The Commission could, in agreement with the Member States, issue non-binding indicative guidelines to assist Member States in taking better coordinated action; it should also encourage exchanges of information and experiences, specifically on methodology, under the terms of Article 11(1). Lastly, implementation of the directive should be adapted to the national, regional or local decision-making level appropriate to each case and to the Member State in which the plans or programmes are being adopted. The ESC therefore voices strong reservations concerning the reference in the body of the directive to Member States in connection with derogations (Article 4(3) and (4)); such derogations should be decided in conjunction with the competent regional or local authority. The Committee would make a number of suggestions to extend the directive's scope (Article 2), and is also concerned at the exclusion from its scope of plans submitted to the Commission under the Structural Fund's regulations. The inclusion of strategic environmental impact assessment in this field could do much to ensure that greater attention focuses on integrating environmental considerations into sectoral policies, as envisaged by the Fifth Action Programme.