Extractive industry: safe operation of mining activities, follow-up to recent accidents

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PURPOSE: to present a Commission Communication on the safe operation of mining activities: a follow-up to recent mining accidents. CONTENT: The Danube pollution caused by a cyanide spill following a damburst of a tailings pond in Baia Mare/Romania and an accident that occured in 1998 in Aznalcollar /Spain where a dambust poisoned the environment of the Coto Donana National park, have increased public awareness of the environmental and safety hazards of mining activities. The Commission has already laid down its policy towards promoting sustainable development in the EU non-energy extractive industry, including metal mining, in its Communication of 3 May 2000. Against this background, the objective of the current Communication, which should be seen in this context, is to give an accont of the accidents and to inform the Council and the European Parliament in more detail about some of the actions announced in the previous Communication, focussing on accident prevention in relation to metal mining activities. The objective is to provide an opportunity for the principal stakeholders concerned, notably industry, NGOs, Member States and other interested parties, to give their views on these actions. The Communication was established in close consultation with the Baia Mare Task Force and for factual elements concerning the Baia Mare accident, the paper relies to a large extent on the UNEP/OCHA report, published in March 2000. After providng an account of the different accidents and the follow-up activities, the Communication outlines the current situation with regard to existing Community environmental legislation. It then goes on to state that the recent mining accidents have illustrated a need for a review of Community environmental policy, especially in light of future enlargement. With regard to substantive action, discussions with Member States' experts have started in view of changing the classification of dangerous waste and including these wastes in the Hazardous Waste list (first conclusions are expected for the second half of 2000). Other actions forseen include amending the Seveso II Directive, an initiative on the management of mining waste and finally, a Best Available Techniques reference document under the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Directive.