Revised community eco-label award scheme (regul. 880/92/EEC)

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The Committee voted for a new scheme to revive the ailing eco-label system with its Euro-flower logo. The system, which awards a Euro-flower logo to "green" products designed to reduce environmental damage, was launched in 1992 with the adoption of Council Regulation 880. The logo consists of a corolla of petals in the form of twelve EU stars surrounding the letter E for Europe. However, in the words of the committee's rapporteur, Mr Danilo Poggiolini (EPP, I), the limited or non-existent visibility of the European eco-label is a fact: in nearly all Member States the public is not familiar with it. Among other things, this reflects lack of enthusiasm from industry and serious delays in implementing the system by Member States: according to Mr Poggiolini, the UK is the only Member State to have publicized the European eco-label with proper advertising campaigns. Hence, in his report under the cooperation procedure (first reading) on the Commission's proposal for a Council regulation to revise the existing eco-label system, the rapporteur called for major advertising and information campaigns to heighten public awareness of the system. And the committee voted to modify the logo to add up to three brief items of information explaining to consumers in what way the product in question had a reduced impact on the environment. The Commission itself had wanted to replace the existing system with up to nine flowers, but the committee found this too complicated. The Commission is also proposing that - where eco-label criteria have been set at Community level - existing national eco-labels, such as Germany's "Blue Angel" or the "Nordic Swan", should be replaced by the European label within a five-year period. The aim is to avoid confusing consumers and preclude hidden protectionism. An amendment to throw out this provision was defeated in committee, but only just, as a result of a tied vote (14 votes in favour and 14 against, which meant that the amendment fell). Groups of products to which the European eco-label has been awarded include washing machines, dishwashers, fridges, soil improvers, paper, detergents, light bulbs, bed linen and T-shirts. Members accepted the Commission proposal to extend the eco-label system to retailing and also voted to include services (eg coachbuilders using environmentally friendly paints). However, the regulation will not apply to food, drink or pharmaceuticals nor - according to a committee amendment - to medical devices. However, the committee rejected a key aspect of the Commission proposal: the establishment of a new independent private European Eco-label Organization (EEO) to set eco-label criteria on the basis of a Commission mandate. Instead, avoiding the expense and delays that such a body would involve, the Commission should set up its own internally-staffed ad hoc Technical Committee for the Eco-label (TCEL). This will be composed of representatives of the competent national bodies assisted by a consultation forum drawn from environmental groups, consumer associations and industry. The committee also voted to extend the legal base of the regulation to include Article 100a (internal market, codecision) of the EC Treaty in addition to Article 130s (1) (environment, cooperation). Applicants for eco-labels will have to pay an application fee as well as an annual fee based on sales, but the committee voted to halve the annual fee for SMEs and developing country manufacturers. It also thought that Community institutions and national public authorities should set an example by buying eco-labelled goods.