The first action plan for innovation in Europe

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OBJECTIVE: following on from the 1995 Green Paper on innovation the Commission communication seeks to establish an action plan in order to coordinate and strengthen the efforts of the Member States and the Union in favour of innovative companies. SUBSTANCE: the action plan proposed by the Commission has three areas for action: 1) to foster a genuine innovation culture in companies: the Commission advocates firstly action on education and training. It will set up a permanent training and innovation forum to stimulate the exchange of experience and best practice and will foster links between schools in the use of the new tools of the information society. The Commission also intends to facilitate mobility for researchers and engineers to firms and will ensure increased effort under the Fifth Framework Programme for Research to achieve secondments of young researchers and engineers to businesses, in particular SMEs. It will also establish a European benchmarking system, starting with quality. Lastly, the Commission will stimulate innovation in the public sector and government. 2) to set up a legal, regulatory and financial framework conducive to innovation: the European Union and the Member States should first of all make efforts to improve the European patent system, making it more efficient, more accessible and less expensive. To this end the Commission will prepare in 1997 a Green Paper on the issue of the Community patent. A service to assist firms and researchers with regard to intellectual property and action against counterfeiting will be set up under the RTD framework programme. The Commission also recommends that Member States set quantitative objectives and a timetable for cutting the formalities, costs and delays involved in starting up businesses. Lastly, in the vital area of innovation financing the Commission will launch pilot projects and encourage the mobilization of structural funds and the European investment fund. This Commission action should be guided by three objectives: encouragement of investment in risk capital and equity; the creation of the conditions for the development of new European capital markets for innovative companies; strengthening of the interfaces between innovation and financial circles. An information and guidance service on sources of funding will be set up for those taking part in the RTD framework programme. 3) to gear research more closely to innovation: the Commission calls on Member States to strengthen research carried out in companies, to encourage the start-up of technology-based firms and to intensify the cooperation between public, university and industrial research. It recommends that Member States should set ambitious objectives aiming to increase the share of the GIP dedicated to research and development and innovation; it hopes that encouragement will be given to dissemination measures in undertakings at local, regional or national level and will support pilot projects in this field. At Union level the Commission will emphasize in the Fifth Framework Programme the specific SME dimension by introducing greater flexibility in research contracts and in setting the maximum deadline for decisions. The positive experiences of the Research-Industry Task Forces will be used to improve coordination of research activities in the priority areas. Lastly, the Commission will improve the interaction of the framework programme with the COST and EUREKA initiatives and will encourage the CEEC and the Mediterranean countries to be involved in EU research projects by using the resources of the TACIS, PHARE and MEDA programmes.