Combating acidification and air pollutants: Community strategy

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OBJECTIVE: this communication responds to the request of the 1995 "Environment" Council for a coherent and integrated strategy to combat acidification. It sets out a series of specific actions based on national emission ceilings for the main atmospheric pollutants in question. CONTENT: the strategy proposed by the Commission follows from an in-depth analysis on the effects of acidification on the environment. Acidification is caused by emissions of atmospheric pollutants: sulphur dioxide (SO2), nitrous oxides (NOx) and ammonia (NH3). Given the significant increase in the devastating effect on ecosystems of acidification (degeneration of the soil, pollution of surface and ground water, deterioration of buildings, increase in human morbidity and mortality rates as the result of respiratory illnesses), pollution which gives rise to acidification needs to be reduced to acceptable levels. The analysis carried out by the Commission shows that a 50% reduction in the gap between the level of protection of sensitive ecosystems and the critical loads on the environment was exceeded in 1990 and that the final objective of 100% protection was a realistic objective to which the Community could aspire by the year 2010. The Commission intends to achieve this interim target through a 12-point strategy under which: 1) national emission ceilings would be set for the main pollutants in a European directive: setting ceilings would comply with the UN Economic Commission for Europe Convention on long- distance cross-border atmospheric pollution, while giving Member States the flexibility to decide how this could be achieved at minimum cost. A European directive would set ceilings for SO2, NOx, NH3 and VOCs ; 2) all the Member States would ratify the 1994 protocol on sulphur, which forms the basis for any action against acidification: a proposal for a decision on the conclusion of this protocol by the Community is attached to the communication (cf. CNS97107); 3) Directive 93/12/EEC relating to the sulphur content of certain liquid fuels would be revised: the combustion of heavy fuels is the main source of SO2 emissions from the use of liquid fuels, which is why the Commission proposes to reduce these emissions by setting stricter limits. A proposal for revising these limits is attached to the communication (cf. SYN97105); 4) emissions from fixed sources would be combatted: the Commission proposes revising Directive 88/609/EEC on the limitation of emissions from large combustion plants by setting new limit values (or even emission ceilings) for SO2 and NOx emissions from both old and new plants. These values would take account of local geographical and environmental conditions; 5) emissions from maritime transport would be reduced: the countries bordering the Baltic (which are particularly exposed to this type de pollution) would be classified as sensitive zones for SO2 emissions, i.e. zones in which ships would no longer be allowed to burn fuels containing more than 1.5% sulphur; 6) action to combat acidification in the CEECs would be supported (especially in future candidate countries bordering the Community); 7) a new multi-pollutant protocol would be ratified within the framework of the UN Economic Commission for Europe Convention on atmospheric pollution and the 1994 protocol on sulphur would be revised as a matter of urgency; 8) emissions of ammonia (NH3) would be reduced: this pollutant results mainly from agricultural activities. Initiatives have therefore been planned with a view to limiting emissions, especially from manure from cows and other bovines, emissions from poultry and strictly industrial emissions; 9) recourse would be taken to national and Community economic instruments: the Commission suggests combining national emission ceilings with economic instruments such as taxes, subsidies, incentives, emission permits and environmental agreements. Actions are also planned at Community level, such as an energy tax, navigation dues and measures under the CAP; 10) new emission values would be set for transport: the Commission has already tabled proposals on emissions and fuels ("auto-oil" directives, cf. COD96163 and COD96164). Other proposals could be made during 1998; 11) renewable energy: particular efforts would need to be made under the fifth framework programme for research in the area of alternative and renewable sources of energy and energy conservation; 12) a monitoring and revision process would be

introduced: the Commission needs to evaluate the results of this strategy on an on-going basis, which is why it plans to draft a report by the end of 2004 on the effects of its strategy and foreseeable prospects between now and 2010.