Environment: 6th Community action programme 2001-2010

2001/0029(COD) - 30/04/2007

For the past thirty years the EU's environmental programme has been guided by strategic Environmental Action Programmes. The Sixth Community Action Programme (6^{th} EAP) establishes the Community framework for environment policy and covers the period July 2002 to 2012. It represents the environmental dimension of the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy and sets out the EU's environmental priorities. It focuses on four issues: climate change, nature and biodiversity, health and the quality of life, and natural resources. The purpose of this report is to offer a mid-term review of the 6^{th} EAP.

It addresses three distinct questions. Firstly, the extent to which the Union is meeting commitments made; secondly, to consider the most recent scientific evidence as a means of assessing whether the original goals set out in the 6^{th} EAP are capable of being met; and thirdly to consider whether the EU's approach to environmental policy needs to be reassessed in light of the changed political context – in other words taking account of the recently revised EU Sustainable Development Strategy, the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs and the Commission's Better Regulation agenda.

State of the Environment: One of the main findings of this heading is that the EU's environmental policy has improved the quality of life for its citizens. Considerable progress has been made in areas such a reducing greenhouse gas emissions, wetland conservation, sustainable forest practices and waste management. The overall conclusion, however, is that in spite of progress made Europe is not yet on a path of genuine sustainable development.

Growth, Jobs and the Environment: Sustainable Development is the overarching objective of the EU. It governs all of the Union's policies and activities. The concept of sustainable development is underpinned by the synergies that exist between the economic, social and environmental elements. Well designed environmental policies can also contribute to other objectives such as increasing competitiveness, stimulating economic growth and enhancing job creation. Indeed, inaction, as the Stern Report highlights, can have very high economic costs. The Stern Report concluded that limiting temperature rises to safe levels would cost approximately 1% of global GDP while the cost to the global economy of a, business as usual, approach would be up to five times as much. The paper also highlights that environmental performance can trigger innovation, which in turn contributes to the EU's competitiveness. Environmental policy has helped the development of the booming sector of environmental technologies. The annual turnover of European eco-industries is EUR 227 billion, which represent approximately 2.2% of the EU's GDP. The sector alone accounts for 3.4 million full time jobs or 1.7% of total EU employment.

Assessing the 6^{th} EAP Priorities:

Climate Change: The Commission suggests that there are three main issues confronting the EU with respect to climate change. Firstly, the EU must cut emissions of greenhouse gases and make the shift towards a low carbon economy. This is partially being achieved through the EU-wide Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) as well as the proposed energy climate package to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by at least 20% by 2020. The key challenge for the EU, in future, will be to deliver on these political commitments.

The second challenge is "climate diplomacy". Climate diplomacy commits the EU to engaging with third countries in order to build support for a global agreement on greenhouse gas emission limitations. This means convincing the United States, and other countries, that it is in their own interests to be at the forefront of the fight against climate change. Climate diplomacy will be accompanied with an increase in technical assistance as well as technology transfer.

The third challenge is "adaptation" to climate change. Although the EU is only now beginning to see the actual impact of climate change the need for adaptation must begin now and be built into all relevant European and national policies. In 2007, the Commission will present a Green Paper on adapting to climate change.

Nature and Bio-diversity: In 2006, the Commission published a strategy on reducing, significantly, the loss of global biodiversity. The main conclusion of the strategy is that the EU policy framework is largely in place – most notably with the NATURA 2000 network of protected areas. The priority for the EU, in future, will be the full and effective implementation of existing legislation. In other areas, the EU is committed to stepping up efforts to stop deforestation and to establish legal requirements on the prevention of bottom-trawling (a practice which is highly destructive to the ocean floor).

Health and the quality of life: Four pieces of legislation from the foundation of the EU's approach to limiting environmental threats to human health: the Water Framework Directive, REACH, the proposed Directive on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe and the proposed framework Directive on pesticides. To shape the next generation of environment policies, the Commission will assess whether there are gaps in existing measures that need to be addressed – such as the cocktail effect of chemicals. While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, the Commission will continue to look at ways to improve the urban environment. The Commission will also step up efforts to improve public information on environmental pollution and adverse health impacts.

Natural Resources and Wastes: The 6th EAP aims to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation. The Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources provides a long-term framework for achieving this objective and takes the first steps towards making the EU the most resource-efficient economy in the world. In 2007 the Commission will also propose an EU Sustainable Consumption and Production Green Paper, the purpose of which is to reverse unsustainable patterns of consumption and production.

Better regulation principles in environmental policy-making: The Commission is committed to focusing on the Better Regulation agenda in environmental policy by: using the market to deliver environmental results; simplifying the regulatory environment and reducing administrative costs; co-operating fully with civil society when developing environmental policies; developing closer working relationships with industry in order to promote sustainable development; promoting the dissemination of good regulatory practices; and streamlining reporting requirement while improving the quality of environmental information.

Conclusions: The Commission concludes the mid-term review of the 6th EAP by stating that the EU's environmental policy is one of its major achievements. There have been substantive reductions of harmful emissions into air and water, waste is better managed and there are fewer harmful chemical substances in the environment. The EU's environmental policy has helped European industry to become a world leader in a number of high growth sectors and it has created millions of jobs.

Yet, in spite of progress achieved thus far, the EU's level of ambition needs to be increased. For example, there has been limited progress in integrating environmental concerns into other policy areas and improving the enforcement of EU legislation. Further, global emissions of greenhouse gasses are rising,

the loss of biodiversity is accelerating, pollution still has a major effect on public health, the amount of waste produced inside the EU countries continues to increase and the EU's ecological footprint is steadily growing.

As the EU celebrates its first 50 years, it is clear that developing and implementing policies that can effectively protect Europe's environment will be at the heart of the European "project". Implementing and building upon the 6th EAP will be at the centre of the EU's work.