

Executive Summary

Context for the new programme

A healthy environment is essential to long term prosperity and quality of life and citizens in Europe demand a high level of environmental protection. Future economic development and increasing prosperity will put pressure on the planet's capacity to sustain demands for resources or to absorb pollution. At the same time, high environmental standards are an engine for innovation and business opportunities. Overall, society must work to de-couple environmental impacts and degradation from economic growth. Business must operate in a more eco-efficient way, in other words producing the same or more products with less input and less waste, and consumption patterns have to become more sustainable.

In the European Union, thirty years of environment policy has led to a comprehensive system of environmental controls. The 5th Environment Action Programme (1992-1999), 'Towards Sustainability', took new measures and a broader commitment to integration of environmental concerns into other policies. The Global Assessment of the programme concluded that while progress was being made in cutting pollution levels in some areas, problems remained and the environment would continue to deteriorate unless:

- more progress was made in the implementation of environmental legislation in Member States;
- integration of environment into the economic and social policies driving the pressures on the environment was improved and deepened;
- stakeholders and citizens took more ownership of efforts to protect the environment;
- new impetus to measures aimed at addressing a number of serious and persistent environmental problems as well as a number of emerging concerns.

This context has guided the strategic focus of the Sixth Environmental Action Programme, which effectively sets the environmental objectives and priorities that will be an integral part of the European Community's strategy for sustainable development. The programme sets out the major priorities and objectives for environment policy over the next five to ten years and details the measures to be taken.

A strategic approach to meeting our environmental objectives

Environment policy must be innovative in its approach and seek new ways of working with a wide cross section of society.

Implementation of existing environmental legislation needs to be improved. Vigorous legal action through the European Court of Justice should be combined with support for best practices and a policy of public information to 'name, fame and shame'.

Integration of environmental concerns into other policies must be deepened, for example all Commission policy initiatives should be fully assessed in this light. Progress should be measured through indicators and benchmarking.

Working with the market through business and consumer interests will contribute to more sustainable production and consumption patterns. Business should not simply be penalised for failure but schemes should be introduced to reward good performance. Consumers need useful information to allow them to choose environmentally benevolent products, thus driving the market. Public subsidies should promote environmentally friendly practices. Business must be encouraged to innovate, for example seizing the opportunities offered by the use, development and spread of clean technologies.

Individual citizens make daily decisions that directly or indirectly impact the environment. Better quality and easily accessible information on the environment and on practical matters will help shape opinions and thus decisions.

Land use planning and management decisions in the Member States can have a major influence on the environment, leading to fragmentation of the countryside and pressures in urban areas and the coast. The Community can provide support by promoting best practice and through the Structural Funds.

These approaches will apply across the spectrum of environmental issues. In addition, special attention will be paid to four priority areas for action.

Tackling climate change

Objective - to stabilise the atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases at a level that will not cause unnatural variations of the earth's climate.

The scientific consensus is that climate change is happening and that human activity is causing the increases in concentrations of greenhouse gases that are the cause of the problem. The key priority for the 6th Programme will be the ratification and implementation of the Kyoto Protocol to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 8% over 1990 levels by 2008-12. This must be considered as a first step to the long term target of a 70% cut.

Nature and Bio-diversity - protecting a unique resource

Objective - to protect and restore the functioning of natural systems and halt the loss of bio-diversity in the European Union and globally. To protect soils against erosion and pollution.

Healthy and balanced natural systems are essential to supporting life and the functioning of society. Pressures from pollution, unsustainable use of the land and sea and risks to biodiversity need to be redressed. Full implementation of environmental legislation is the key to the pollution threat. Valuable environmental areas should be protected by the Community's Natura 2000 programme and this must be implemented fully. Extending protection to the wider countryside requires a deeper and effective integration of environment and bio-diversity into agriculture, landscape, forestry and marine policies, coupled with new initiatives, for example to develop a soil strategy for Europe. More attention will be given to protecting the marine environment.

Environment and Health

Objective - to achieve a quality of the environment where the levels of man – made contaminants, including different types of radiation, do not give rise to significant impacts on or risks to human health.

There is increasing realisation, and evidence, that human health is affected by environmental problems related to air and water pollution, dangerous chemicals and noise. A holistic and comprehensive approach to environment and health is needed, with precaution and prevention of risk being central to this policy and taking account of particularly vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly. Implementation of existing legislation and further actions will be needed in the individual policy areas.

Sustainable use of natural resources and management of wastes

Objective - to ensure the consumption of renewable and non-renewable resources does not exceed the carrying capacity of the environment. To achieve a de-coupling of resource use from economic growth through significantly improved resource efficiency, dematerialisation of the economy, and waste prevention.

The planet's resources, especially renewable resources like soil, water, air and timber, are under severe pressure from human society. A strategy is needed aimed at measures, such as taxes and incentives, to ensure a more sustainable use of resources.

Waste volumes are predicted to continue rising unless remedial action is taken. Waste prevention will be a key element of an integrated product policy approach. Further measures are needed to encourage recycling and recovery of wastes.

The European Union in the wider world

The implementation of the Sixth Programme will be undertaken in a context of an enlarged European Union and subsequent measures will need to take this broader perspective into account.

The implementation of the Community's environmental legislation will of course be the main task for the candidate countries, supported by Community funding programmes. The Candidate Countries have the opportunity to make progress towards an economic development that is sustainable and avoids the type or scale of environmental problems now faced in Western Europe.

Internationally, it will be essential that environmental concerns are fully and properly integrated into all aspects of the Community's external relations,. Environment must be taken seriously by international organisations and properly resourced. International conventions, notably on climate change, bio-diversity, chemicals and desertification need to be supported and implemented.

Policy-making based on participation and sound knowledge

Broad involvement of stake-holders will be central to the successful implementation of the Sixth Programme, and in every stage of the policy process from agreeing targets to putting measures into practice. Sound scientific knowledge and economic assessments, reliable and up-to-date environmental data and information and the use of indicators will underpin the drawing-up, implementation and evaluation of environmental policy.

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The proposed decision on a 6th Environment Action Programme will give an enlarged European Union the direction, impetus and tools we need to create a clean and safe

environment. It will involve citizens and business in this endeavour and will contribute to sustainable development.