

Environment Council

Following is a summary of the political agreements and decisions reached by EU Environment Ministers at their meeting on 24 June 1999 in Luxembourg:

Noise Emissions

The Ministers were successful in working out a political agreement in anticipation of a common position on the proposal for a Council and European Parliament Directive concerning the approximation of national legislation on *sound emissions from machines used outside buildings*.

The proposal aims to replace nine specific Directives establishing strict standards for noise emissions from around fifty items of machinery with a single piece of legislation. Existing EU legislation covers only a few types of construction machinery and lawn mowers. The new legislation will cover equipment such as cement mixers, drills, rollers, dumpers and waste skips, and aims to guarantee the free movement of goods within the European Union and to protect public health and well-being.

Chemicals

Following a policy debate on the future Community strategy on chemicals, Ministers adopted Conclusions calling on the Commission to base its work on this strategy on the precautionary principle.

The Council also called on the Commission to ensure that the strategy constitutes a coherent and effective body of legislation covering the risks dangerous substances and preparations pose to human health and the environment. It was stressed that the Strategy will also need to place ultimate responsibility for the drafting and submission of risk assessment data on dangerous chemicals with producers, importers and user industries. These should also be required to provide adequate information for consumers and users.

It was also noted that the strategy would need to clarify the respective responsibilities of those entrusted with risk assessment and those responsible for risk management.

Emissions from Tractors

Ministers arrived at a political agreement with a view to a common position on the proposal for a Council and

European Parliament Directive on measures to *combat polluting gas and particulate emissions from engines designed for the propulsion of farm and forestry tractors*, amending Council Directive 74/150/EEC.

LIFE

Agreement was reached on the budget for the LIFE financial instrument for the environment for the period from 2000–2004.

The Commission had proposed Euro 613 million and the European Parliament Euro 850 million. A majority of Member States was in favour of the Commission figure. Three States supported the Parliament proposal and a further three wished for a Europe 580 million budget.

Vehicle Recycling

Ministers decided again to postpone adopting a common position on the draft Directive concerning end-of-life vehicles: A decision which came at the end of lengthy and ill-tempered discussions.

The problem was the proposal for old cars to be taken back to be dismantled and recycled at the manufacturer's expense. Strong opposition came from the car industry because of the expense involved. The German car industry, which accounts for 40 per cent of current car production, says that to apply this Directive to the German industry would be an unacceptable financial burden.

The German Government announced before the Council meeting that it could not vote for the draft directive, thereby pre-empting any debate. The matter has now been postponed until October 1999, and in the meantime, experts will assess possible amendments tabled by Martin Bartenstein, the Austrian Environment Minister, which set different deadlines for taking back vehicles free of charge, and reflect the dates vehicles are first put on the road.

Waste Incineration

Ministers approved the draft Directive and reached a political agreement so that all waste will shortly be covered by a single piece of legislation setting the conditions and standards for incineration. The proposal is being prepared for formal adoption in the form of a com-

mon position, which will be forwarded to the European Parliament for a second reading.

The proposal aims to prevent emissions affecting the air, soil, surface waters and underground waters and their harmful effects on human health and the environment as a result of the incineration and/or co-incineration of waste.

The draft Directive applies to waste not covered by Directive 94/67/EC, such as non-hazardous waste, non-municipal waste (tyres, purification sludge, medical waste), as well as certain types of dangerous waste not covered by present legislation (used oil and solvents). It applies tougher rules than those in the Directive on municipal waste incineration do which is to be cancelled by the new Directive. It excludes certain types of waste, such as biomass (non-processed farm and forestry waste), which comes within the scope of the Directive on large combustion plants, along with experimental installations.

The draft Directive also makes a clear distinction between incineration and co-incineration facilities and defines the procedure for granting operating permits.

Eco-Label

Ministers arrived at a political agreement with a view to a common position on the proposal for a Regulation amending the European ecological label scheme created in 1992. Some environmental groups expressed disquiet over the text, as they feel that the Council is giving industry an unduly powerful role in the process.

Environmental Impact

A policy debate was held on the proposal for a directive concerning assessment of the impact of certain programmes and plans on the environment.

The proposal stipulates that every land-use programme or plan presented by local authorities should be subject to an appraisal of its likely environmental consequences. This requirement covers projects in the transport and energy sectors, the management of waste and water resources, industrial sites, telecommunications and tourism.

Ministers also adopted their common position on the proposal for a Regulation to extend the scope of the vol-

untary environmental management and eco-audit system (EMAS).

The Regulation, which until now has applied only to firms in the industrial sector, extends the scope for participation in the scheme to all companies and organisations having an impact on the environment. It also provides for the introduction of a new logo, improving public visibility of the good environmental performance of enterprises that voluntarily submit to an assessment of their activities. Once formalised, the common position will be passed on to the European Parliament for a second reading.

Nuclear Waste

In adopting a set of Conclusions on the management, transport and disposal of spent nuclear fuel Ministers outlined the need for effective and independent monitoring in this field. They stressed not only the need for enhanced cooperation between Member States, but also between industries in the nuclear sector and the public authorities. They called on the Commission to submit its proposal for a new EU action plan on radioactive waste, taking account of the Community's powers in this area.

The Council insisted on the need to develop further a common Community approach to the identification, classification, storage and eventual clearance from regulatory control of those quantities of declared radioactive materials which exhibit very low levels of residual radioactivity and may even be totally free of man-induced radioactivity: Without prejudice to the possibility for Member States to develop this in specific situations, in line with the provisions of Council Directive 96/29/Euratom, laying down basic safety standards for the protection of the health of workers and the general public against the dangers arising from ionising radiation.

Ministers stressed the importance of ensuring transparency, on the level of governments, regulators, operators and the public, of waste management operations throughout the Community with the view to a better understanding of the technical, social, environmental and ethical issues involved. (MJ) □