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PRESS RELEASE

Network of European Environmental Advisory Councils

Environment must be at the heart of sustainable development in Europe, say independent advisors

Stockholm/Bremerhaven, 23. February 2001. Existing patterns of economic and social development in Europe are causing unsustainable damage to the environment, government advisory bodies from across Europe warned today. Launching proposals for a new EU strategy for sustainable development, the network of European Environmental Advisory Councils (EEACs) called for a shift to a new concept of development which acknowledges economic needs and social aspirations, but which accepts the protection of the environment and natural resources as a fundamental constraint.

EEACs, a network of bodies which provide independent advice on environmental issues to individual European governments, unveiled the statement at a conference in Stockholm today organized by EEACs and the Swedish Environmental Advisory Council. The proposals are supported by more than 20 advisory bodies in 15 European countries.

Professor Richard Macrory, Chairman of the EEAC steering committee, told the Stockholm conference: „It is vital that the EU sustainable development strategy sets out a clear long-term vision that puts the environment where it belongs – at the heart of European policy. For too long the environment has been sidelined by short-term economic and social pressures. But economic and social development is only sustainable in the long term if the environment and natural resources, on which we all depend, are fully protected.“

The conference comes at a critical stage in the European Commission’s preparation of an EU sustainable development strategy, which it is expected to submit to the Gothenburg summit in June 2001. EU heads of state have instructed the Commission to set a long-term framework dovetailing policies for economically, socially and ecologically sustainable development. The strategy is also expected to form the main EU input to the forthcoming ‘Rio+10’ Earth Summit, due to be held in South Africa in 2002.

Professor Macrory said: „The sustainable development strategy must have a real impact on the EU’s policies and procedures. The challenge is to achieve a progressive change in lifestyles and in patterns of consumption and production which will decouple economic growth from resource use and pollution. The prize is a future in which the EU, by taking a world lead in technical and commercial innovations, secures increased competitiveness for its industries, stimulates employment and improves the quality of life for its citizens.“

The EEAC statement recognizes that significant advances have been made in tackling pollution from point sources. However, it identifies a range of unsolved environmental problems such as climate change, pollution from diffuse sources, damage to soils, production of waste, management of the water cycle and loss of biodiversity, including coastal and marine ecosystems. These unsustainable trends are driven by the high, and increasing, use of basic natural resources such as energy, materials and soil. Existing methods of assessing wealth, such as GDP, treat the environment as a free good and fail to recognize its importance in achieving wider objectives such as quality of life.

Many of these fundamental problems are compounded by incoherence in EU policies. For example, the Common Agricultural Policy continues to provide perverse subsidies that encourage environmentally damaging practices.

The EEACs' key recommendations for the sustainable development strategy include:

- the strategy should take a long term perspective and assess trends to 2020 and beyond. It must contain a list of policy changes that are considered priorities to achieve sustainable development.
- the strategy must have strong, continued backing at the highest political level. It must set clear objectives for dealing with long-term environmental problems, backed by quantified targets and indicators and regular, coordinated monitoring of progress. The overall strategy should be reviewed every year at an EU summit, and each part should be reviewed in detail at least every four years, not least to extend its scope considerably beyond the six initial policy areas identified by the European Commission.
- existing efforts to integrate environmental considerations into other policy areas need to be reinforced. In particular, the recently instituted Lisbon process – which aims to improve the integration of social and economic policies through an annual report to EU heads of state – should be extended to include environmental considerations.
- Where international obligations are allocated between Member States (such as under the Kyoto Protocol), the European Court of Justice should have powers to impose penalties on any Member State which fails to meet its obligation.
- The European Parliament should establish a new Sustainable Development Committee to keep under review the extent to which the EU's policies are environmentally sustainable.
- The expansion of the EU is a major challenge to sustainable development. Accession states should be encouraged to move rapidly from the traditional concept of economic growth to the new concept of development. Increases in production and resource use in accession states may have to be offset by reductions in existing Member States.

EEACs also call for fundamental changes in a range of policy areas:

Energy: The strategy must focus on the need for very large reductions in carbon dioxide emissions in the long term. A carbon tax must be introduced, with a minimum rate applying throughout the EU. New, demanding energy efficiency standards should be set for products and buildings. The liberalized energy markets must be structured to encourage renewable energy and combined heat and power.

Transport: More ambitious targets must be set to reduce fuel consumption of vehicles. A high minimum rate of road fuel taxation must be set at EU level, backed by other measures to reduce the need to travel and to promote less environmentally damaging forms of transport. Market-based instruments should be applied to air transport.

Agriculture and fisheries: The common agricultural and fisheries policies are still in need of radical reform. In future, financial support should only be given to farmers who go beyond legal requirements to protect the environment. The recovery of commercial fish stocks will require an integrated approach to conservation designed to maintain the overall biodiversity and productivity of marine ecosystems.

Industry: The main challenge is to focus on the use of materials and energy over the whole life cycles of products, including wastes produced when they reach the end of their life. A systematic and effective risk management programme based on the precautionary principle is needed to manage the risks from chemicals, with deadlines for the phaseout of certain substances or groups of substances. Statutory backing should be given to industry product stewardship schemes.

Nature conservation: Policies in all fields must have regard to the EU biodiversity strategy, and indicators and targets must be established to promote biodiversity in the longer term. The promotion of biodiversity is desirable as an objective in all forms of land use and throughout territorial waters.

Coastal zone management: EEACs support the European Commission's proposed strategy for integrated coastal zone management. Use of EU Structural Funds for developments affecting coastal zones should be fully compatible with sustainable development.

The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) and the German Council of Environmental Advisors (SRU) are members of the Network of European Environmental Advisory Councils (EEAC).

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