



Environment 2010:

Our Future, Our Choice



6th EU **Environment** Action Programme

2001-2010



European Commission

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Our Future, Our Choice

In the first year of the 21st century, the European Commission has adopted its proposal for a new Action Programme for the environment for the next 5-10 years. The Programme is far reaching. This booklet outlines the four environmental priorities and some of the actions to address them, along with proposed new ways of achieving our environmental challenges.

The European environment - the issues

What kind of environment do we want to live in? What kind of environment do we want our children and grandchildren to inherit? This is the starting point for the new *Environment Action Programme: Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice*, which the Commission has proposed to the Member States and the European Parliament.

All of us believe that the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat should be free of harmful pollutants. We want to avoid the threat and uncertainty of climate change. A clean and healthy environment is vital to the quality of life we desire for ourselves now and for our children in the future.

Protecting the planet creates both challenges and opportunities. Through greater efficiency and better use of natural resources, we can break the old link between economic growth and environmental damage. We can be both more prosperous and greener.

Many people in Europe have now become aware that we need to act to protect the planet and to use our natural resources more prudently and efficiently. We need to grasp opportunities for innovation that can improve our environment and the economy. We are starting to take more responsibility for our own behaviour and its impact on the environment. Individuals, families, businesses and environmental associations now make efforts to recycle waste, to save energy, to buy green products and to protect the countryside.

We have made progress over the last 30 years. Since the 1970s, the European Union has put into place a network of measures to protect our environment. European Union policies have led to a steady improvement in the quality of air and water, for example.

However, much more remains to be done. Pressures on the environment are increasing. We have to deal with climate change, the erosion of our countryside, growing quantities of waste and chemicals that get into food, air and water. If progress is to continue, we now have to put the environment at the heart of decision-making on every issue: from transport to energy, from industry to farming.



In short, we need to aim for a society where cars do not pollute the atmosphere, waste can be recycled or safely disposed of and energy production does not lead to climate change. Our children must not take in harmful chemicals from their toys or food. Landscapes and wildlife should not be endangered by development.

The environmental challenges we face in the first decade of the millennium are global challenges. These problems do not respect national boundaries. Environmental degradation in other countries will affect our shared environment and hence our quality of life. Although some would argue that we consume more than our fair share of global resources, the EU has also taken a leading role in important international agreements for the protection of our environment.

This is not only an issue for politicians and industry; it concerns all of us. We cannot solve environmental problems like climate change alone: concerted international efforts are needed. We all have a part to play – as individuals, employers or employees, governments, consumers and as parents – it's Our Future – Our Choice.

What is the EU doing?

The Sixth Environment Action Programme focuses on areas where more action is needed and new European initiatives will make a difference. It sets out objectives for the next 10 years and beyond. The key to our long-term welfare, in Europe and around the world, is 'sustainable development': finding ways of improving our quality of life without causing harm to the environment, future generations or the people of both the rich and developing world.

We particularly need to encourage business to go further, on a voluntary basis and through legislation. Increased attention to environmental measures will improve efficiency and productivity. The expanding market for green goods will lead to increased innovation and expanded job opportunities. European businesses will prosper in this expanding market. The Sixth Environment Action Programme supports and encourages such developments.

There are four areas where new effort and impetus is needed. The Commission proposes we take strong action to:

Tackle climate change

Protect nature and wildlife

Address environment and health issues

Preserve natural resources and manage waste

Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice is not only about protecting the environment for now and the future; it is also about improving the quality of life for us all.



Tackling climate change

Compelling evidence shows that climate change is happening. Human activities are creating higher global temperatures. Over the last 100 years, average temperatures in Europe have increased by about 0.8°C and will probably continue to rise by between 1°C and 6°C by 2100. Recently the consequences of such climate change have been all too clear - severe flooding and storms are a possible sign of things to come.

Five percent of the world's population lives in the European Union where about 15% of global greenhouse gases are generated. Road transport and power generation principally produce the greenhouse gases that cause the temperature increases and disrupt the climate: carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane and nitrous oxide, as well as so-called fluorinated gases.

Europe must take a lead in reducing emissions. This means first meeting its target to reduce emissions by 8% over 1990 levels by 2008-12 as agreed in Kyoto, Japan. We have to rethink our transport policies if we are to avoid the severe predicted rise in emissions as a result of increased travel by cars and planes in the next decade. Our energy systems also have to change, for example with wind and solar energy playing a bigger role.

We all have a part to play. More can be done to protect soils and forests that act as 'sinks' which absorb carbon dioxide from the air, and business must aim for at least an annual 1% boost in energy efficiency. And even if we cut emissions successfully, some degree of climate change is inevitable. We will need to adapt our infrastructures to withstand extreme weather. Health and emergency services will need to improve, as gastric and other illnesses are likely to become more widespread.

Our objective is to stabilise concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere at a level that will not cause unnatural variations in the Earth's climate.

- In the short to medium term we aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 8% compared with 1990 levels by 2008-12 (as agreed at Kyoto);
- In the longer term we need to reduce global emissions even further by approximately 20-40% on 1990 levels by 2020;
- For the first time the Programme recognises the need to tackle the long-term goal of a 70% reduction in emissions set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

To achieve this we will:

- Achieve international agreement on the Kyoto Protocol and put it into practice;
- Set objectives for cutting greenhouse gas emissions in the main economic sectors;
- Establish a scheme for 'trading' greenhouse gas emissions within the European Union by 2005;
- Support renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar power;
- Help Member States to prepare for the consequences of climate change.



Protecting nature and wildlife

Providing for the protection of nature and biodiversity is not just a special area for ecologists or bird lovers. It is about ensuring that natural systems continue to function, systems which provide us with air, food and water. It is about reducing the risks from flooding by ensuring that we do not lose forests or misuse agricultural land. Nature is under threat on many sides, from pollution caused by acid rain and chemical leaks to the over-exploitation of fish stocks or the destruction of the countryside.

In the European Union, 38% of bird species and 45% of butterflies are threatened. In north and western Europe, 60% of wetlands have been lost. Two-thirds of our trees are suffering from pollution, and in parts of the south, soil erosion is beginning to create deserts. We must take action to preserve these irreplaceable natural resources before it is too late. Soil, a valuable natural resource, takes thousands of years to create. Yet it can be lost overnight to development or more gradually due to soil erosion. Until now, soil protection has not been a major policy for the European Union, but given the extent of the pressure from pollution and from erosion, a new policy must be developed.

We must take better care of the seas around us and avoid over-fishing and damage to the seabed, and protect against oil and chemical pollution. Forests are key natural resources that we must manage with greater concern. We have already established programmes to fund environmentally friendly farming methods and to preserve natural habitats. The Natura 2000 scheme is establishing a network of protected areas already covering 12% of European Union territory.

We depend on healthy natural systems and we want our children to grow up aware of the beauty of nature. We have a responsibility to preserve this natural resource both for our own sake and for future generations.

Therefore, our objectives are to:

- **Protect and where necessary restore the structure and functioning of natural systems;**
- **Halt the loss of biodiversity both in the European Union and on a global scale;**
- **Protect soils against erosion and pollution.**

To achieve this we will:

- Protect our most valuable habitats through extending the Community's Natura 2000 programme;
- Put in place action plans to protect biodiversity;
- Develop a strategy to protect the marine environment;
- Extend national and regional programmes to further promote sustainable forest management;
- Introduce measures to protect and restore landscapes;
- Develop a strategy for soil protection;
- Co-ordinate Member States' efforts in handling accidents and natural disasters.



Action for the environment and health

We now understand that environmental pollution causes a range of human health problems, from allergies and infertility to cancer and premature death. Despite improvements in the quality of air in the European Union, more children get asthma. We also suffer from a growing noise nuisance. We are concerned about health – by this we mean not only the absence of disease but also physical, mental and social well being.

The relationship between health and the environment is often complicated. We need to understand it better. The role of the European Union must be to identify dangers and set standards – especially to protect vulnerable groups such as children and elderly people. This means acting on the side of precaution and preventing risks where possible.

There are some 30,000 man-made chemicals currently in use. Although the European Union already has strict laws governing their use, we know very little about many of the health risks they pose. At the same time chemicals bring numerous medical, industrial and other benefits to society. So we need a reliable way to assess and reduce their impact on human health while managing their use.

Pesticides used in agricultural practices require special attention, especially to stop them contaminating the groundwater that supplies some 65% of our drinking water. Pesticides must be used responsibly and in quantities or strengths that reduce the risk they pose to health.

Our coastal bathing waters, drinking water and air are all cleaner than they used to be. But pollutants continue to cause health problems, especially in towns and cities. The European Union needs to make sure that existing laws are enforced. Our water resources must be used in a sustainable way.

Noise affects the health and quality of life of at least one quarter of the European Union population. It raises stress, disrupts sleep and can increase the risk of heart disease. New legislation will oblige public authorities to draw up ‘noise maps’ and set noise objectives when they make planning decisions.

Our objective is to achieve a quality of environment where the levels of man-made contaminants do not give rise to significant impacts on, or risks to, human health.

To achieve this we will:

- Improve our understanding of the link between environmental pollution and human health through better research;
- Look at health standards to account for the most vulnerable groups of society;
- Reduce the risks from the use of pesticides;
- Develop a new strategy on air pollution;
- Reform our system for controlling the risk from chemicals.



Natural resources and waste

The planet's renewable resources, such as water, air, timber and fish, are rapidly being exhausted as a result of population growth and economic development, while our use of non-renewable resources like metals and minerals is changing the environment forever.

As European society has become wealthier we have generated more waste, which in turn has taken up valuable land space and polluted the air and soil. This waste often includes scarce materials that could be recovered and recycled. We need to develop a strategy to deal with conserving our natural resources. We must separate the generation of waste from economic growth.

The European Union must focus on ways to provide products and services using fewer resources and to prevent waste. By informing consumers, supporting research and technological development of new products, as well as creating good examples for business and, perhaps, raising taxes on the use of natural resources, much can be achieved.

Our approach to waste management is to prioritise waste prevention, followed by recycling, waste recovery and incineration, and finally, only as a last resort, land filling. The target is to reduce the quantity of waste going to final disposal by around 20% on 2000 levels by 2010 and in the order of 50% by 2050.

To achieve this we will:

- Identify hazardous substances and make producers responsible for collecting, treating and recycling their waste products;
- Encourage consumers to select products and services that create less waste;
- Develop and promote a European Union-wide strategy on waste recycling, with targets and monitoring to compare progress by Member States;
- Promote markets for recycled materials;
- Develop specific actions, under an Integrated Product Policy approach, to promote the greening of products and processes. One example is the promotion of intelligent product design that reduces the environmental impacts of products from their conception to the end of their useful life.

A new approach

We need new, imaginative ways to bring about all these improvements to the environment, harnessing the support of everyone, and working with them. Alongside this, a whole range of instruments and measures can help to influence the decisions made by business, consumers, and policy-planners to help improve our environment.

As well as talking about the issues we need to tackle, we need to look at the way in which we tackle them. *Environment 2010: Our Future – Our Choice* proposes five approaches which are key to our success:

1. Putting legislation into practice

Europe-wide legislation continues to play an important part in achieving environmental objectives. National governments



have an obligation to put environmental laws into effect. Failure to do so damages the environment and the Commission will take the matter before the European Court of Justice.

The legal process is still a slow and cumbersome one and years may pass before it brings results. Other methods can effectively speed up the process. Transparency, by making information widely available, helps to create public pressure for a rapid response and embarrasses laggards by highlighting how they are not delivering their commitments to our future.

So, we will:

- Monitor how European laws are applied and compile a regularly up-dated scoreboard;
- A 'name, shame and fame' exercise will publicise the success and failure of different national governments.

2. Putting the environment at the heart of policy-making

Environmental objectives should be taken into account early on in the development process for all policies, ranging from agriculture to economics. This is made clear in the Treaty of Amsterdam. The European Commission will continue efforts to ensure environmental issues are at the heart of its own policy initiatives.

To do this properly we need better information and sound science about why environmental problems occur and how they interact. We also need to measure our progress. The use of indicators and targets will help us and the public to assess progress. They will also give us an early indication of whether our policies are effective enough. The European Environment Agency will support us in these efforts.

We will:

- Develop and publish regular reports of environmental indicators, illustrating our progress towards a better environment;
- Review the way we collect information and report on it with the aim of introducing a more comprehensive image of the state of the European environment.

3. Working with the market

The European Union aims for a situation where environmental care is as important to companies as customer care.

The big economic sectors of society such as industry and transport have been responsible for causing significant environmental damage. We must change course, and to do this we need commitment from industry. 'Green growth' can offer major opportunities for European business, acting as a spur to competitiveness, profit margins and job creation.

The European Union is committed to working with industries to develop new approaches that help them to reduce their negative impacts on our environment and become more environmentally friendly. There are already several European Community initiatives to encourage firms to improve their green credentials. Companies need incentives and rewards as well as the threat of penalties in order to boost their performance.

Purchasing by public bodies makes up some 14% of the European Union market. Schools, libraries and Government departments will be encouraged to buy green products.

The financial sector can also encourage green activities through its lending and investment policies and can encourage greener financial reporting. Finally, we must ensure that



those who cause damage to the environment are held responsible for their actions, and that further damage is avoided. The principle that the 'polluter pays' means that financial and other liability rests with the polluting party.

To do all this we will:

- Encourage more businesses to assess their environmental performance and help them to understand European Union rules;
- Start environmental performance reward schemes for companies;
- Investigate taxes and other incentives to boost the purchase of greener products;
- Work with the financial sector to develop criteria for green investment.

4. Helping people to make environmentally friendly choices

People want more of a say in how decisions are made which affect the environment, and that means access to clear and trustworthy information. At the same time people, as consumers, can help persuade firms to be environmentally friendly and develop innovative green products and services in the choices they make. To do this people need access to reliable information. Therefore we will promote environmental education and look at ways to raise environmental awareness. Education remains the responsibility of Member States, which are encouraged to ensure environmental issues are included in school curricula.

The European Union will continue to promote good practice and share ideas for improving people's access to environmental information. For example, we will encourage the use of website facilities and educational programmes to advise people on adopting greener lifestyles. Public authorities and Non-Governmental Organisations can all provide information to help people take action to protect their local neighbourhoods, countryside and wildlife.

We will also:

- Improve citizens' access to information;
- Help with producing practical 'tool-kits' to help people assess their individual or household environmental performance.

5. The better use of land

The way land is used has a massive and lasting impact on the environment. Poor decisions can lead to lost habitats, destruction of landscapes, or increased traffic pollution. Urban and coastal areas are especially vulnerable. We will look at how best to help local authorities with their land-use planning to ensure the environment is properly considered.

We will:

- Provide support to and promote best practice in Member States, who are responsible for land-use planning;
- Develop a website for architects, planners, developers and members of the public to encourage sustainable urban planning and share knowledge on best practice.



An expanding Europe

When the Candidate Countries (from central and eastern Europe, Malta and Cyprus) join the European Union over the next few years, they will bring in 170 million more inhabitants, a 58% increase in land area and large areas of unspoiled landscape. These countries have a wide and important range of biodiversity. Joining the European Union will contribute to these nations' prosperity and will be important to ensuring development, which improves the overall environment. But these countries also have environmental problems. The key to addressing the problems faced by candidate countries will be implementing European environmental laws.

The European Union must also work with neighbouring states, such as those bordering the Mediterranean Sea, to increase public and political awareness of the environment and promote action to protect it. Globally, the European Union will push for stronger international action for the environment.

And so, we will:

- Co-operate with environmental NGOs and businesses in the accession countries;
- Develop methods for assessing the sustainability (economic, social and environmental) impact of multilateral and bilateral trade agreements;
- Include environmental issues in all aspects of European Union external relations;
- Ensure the implementation of international conventions on the environment.

What happens next?

Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice - the Sixth Environment Action Programme has been presented in two parts:

1. The European Commission's Policy Statement (referred to as a Communication);
2. The European Commission's proposed text for a legal decision by Environment Ministers and the European Parliament.

The main bulk of the Programme forms the Policy Statement, which is now European Commission policy. The Commission is committed to working towards the objectives set out in this statement and summarised in this booklet.

The proposed text for a legal decision now needs to be discussed and formally adopted by joint agreement by the Parliament and the Council of Ministers. This will be followed by more detailed proposals from the Commission on individual measures.

While *Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice* establishes our priorities for action over the next 10 years, the Commission will review progress after five years, updating the Programme as necessary to take account of new developments and information.

For more information:

- Specific information on the development of *Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice - the Sixth Environment Action Programme*, the full text, executive summary and this promotional booklet can be found at: http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/environment/index_en.htm
- Or
- Browse on the website of DG Environment at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment>



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