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S U M M A R Y

- P. 2 CONSUMER PROTECTION: Mad cows present no danger ...
... now that the Twelve agree to take a series of precautionary measures.
- P. 3 ENERGY: "Green" sources will remain in very short supply
An international conference sketches the prospects for the 21st century.
- P. 4 ENVIRONMENT: Stricter European controls on waste disposal
The Twelve decide to strengthen the existing Community legislation.
- P. 5 ENVIRONMENT: Saving the cities of the EC
A Green Paper for 257 million Europeans.
- P. 7 AGRICULTURAL FRAUD: The Court of Auditors examines export refunds ...
... and issues a highly critical report.
- P. 8 EMPLOYMENT: Continuing vocational training for all
The Twelve adopt a new programme, FORCE.
- P. 9 RACISM: The Twelve adopt a resolution on racism and xenophobia ...
... which the European Commission finds timid.

Mailed from: Brussels X

CONSUMER PROTECTION: Mad cows present no danger ...

... now that the Twelve agree to take a series of precautionary measures.

European housewives can put beef back on the family menu without fear, even if it comes from Britain, the country hit by "mad cow" disease - known to the vets as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). The European Community's agricultural ministers reached agreement on June 7, after some 20 hours of discussions, on the precautionary measures that need to be taken to ensure the free movement of beef within the Community. It is to be hoped that, as a result, they have put an end to a situation that was becoming alarming.

By end May, early June imports of beef and cattle from the United Kingdom were being banned in quick succession: in France, to begin with, then in Germany, Luxembourg and Italy. While many European consumers began to look on beef with a jaundiced eye, the European Commission feared a chain reaction on the part of governments, with Britain's 11 partners joining the rush to ban imports of British beef. Such a development would have left the "common market" in disarray with less than 1,000 days to go to the "1992" deadline.

After having vainly asked Paris, Bonn and Rome to lift their ban - Luxembourg had meanwhile reopened its frontiers to beef - the European Commission demanded the Community's agricultural ministers to meet in emergency session. At the same time it brought together independent veterinary experts from the 12 Member States.

The experts were unanimous in their view that the risk of people falling victims to "mad cow" disease was "very slight", and that the real culprit was offal from cattle over six months of age. The ministers, for their part, held that meat from a country affected by BSE - only Britain for the moment - would have to be specially certified before it could be imported into other Member States. The certificates have to state that the meat in question comes from herds free of BSE and that, in the case of de-boned meat, nerve and lymphatic tissue has been removed. As for live animals, only calves under six months of age and born to cows BSE-free can be exported.

The European Commission has decided to tackle the causes of BSE by studying the manufacture of the proteins used in cattle feed. It has also been asked by the Twelve to launch a Community research programme on BSE.

ENERGY: "Green" sources will remain in very short supply

An international conference sketches the prospects for the 21st century.

Renewable energy sources, the kindest to the environment, will account for only a tiny part of the European Community's energy requirements at the beginning of the next century. They will represent 1.1 - 1.5% of the Community's total energy production in the year 2010, according to a study published by the European Commission on the occasion of an international conference on the theme "Energy for a new century - the European perspective", held in Brussels in early May.

The European Commission's Director-General for energy, Constantinos Maniatopoulos, regretted this. He nevertheless felt the Community could successfully meet the large-scale challenge of energy in the 21st century through "restructuring and focusing on its technical capacities". In other words, Europeans must innovate and apply new techniques in order to obtain maximum advantage from a delicate energy situation: the 12-nation Community has limited resources and must import substantial quantities of energy from the rest of the world.

For Mr Maniatopoulos, the Community should be able to find enough supplies to meet its needs, even while pursuing economic growth and safeguarding the environment. Energy savings clearly can make the task of Europeans easier. Thus the Commission study shows that the average petrol consumption of new cars has fallen to 8.5 litres per 100 km. this year, as compared to 10 litres in 1985. There should be a further decline to 7.5 litres in the year 2010. Prospects for energy savings in the use of refrigerators, deep freezes and washing machines appear very bright, with consumption falling by as much as 50 - 65% in relation to present levels according to the appliance. The future is not as bleak, perhaps, after all

ENVIRONMENT: Stricter European controls on waste disposal

The Twelve decide to strengthen the existing Community regulation.

The Twelve agreed in early June on substantially reinforcing the existing 15-year old Community regulation on waste disposal. The hope is the much stricter regulation will reduce the transport of waste to a minimum and prevent it being dumped in Member States with lax controls or less stringent legislation.

Under the new "law" adopted by the Community's environment ministers the words "waste" and "disposal" are defined in the same way throughout the 12-nation Community. In addition, the "law" sets out the principles which will apply to all the forms of waste in question. Firstly, all the waste produced within the EC will have to be disposed of within its own frontiers; secondly, all waste will have to be disposed of as close to the place where it is produced as possible.

This implies the creation of an integrated European network of waste disposal plants which will have received special authorization to operate. The new European "law" also provides for an obligatory system of registration for companies engaged in the collection, transport or sale of waste products. All the installations engaged in the treatment and disposal of waste will be periodically checked.

The new "law" makes provision for clean technologies and products which can be recycled and re-used. It will serve as a reference for the adoption of specific regulations covering particular types of waste. The environment ministers in fact took immediate advantage of this possibility to adopt a Community directive ("European law") aimed at encouraging the recycling or harmless disposal of used electric batteries containing toxic materials.

This directive envisages a ban on the most harmful types of batteries, the alkaline and manganese batteries containing more than 0.025% of mercury by weight. It moreover requires manufacturers to show clearly on both dry and storage batteries, as the case may be, the quantity of heavy metal they contain, the need to separate them from other types of waste for collection and the possibility of recycling them. The new regulation also stipulates that batteries must be placed in such a way that they can be easily removed after use by consumers.

ENVIRONMENT: Saving the cities of the EC

A Green Paper for 257 million Europeans.

There are more than 120mn. motor vehicles on the roads of the 12-nation European Community today. Out of every 1,000 Europeans, babes in arms and dotards included, 379 have a car. This is twice as many as 20 years ago. And the number will rise by 35% in the next 20 years, according to the experts. Some 45mn. new cars, in other words, will join the traffic jam. The result will be massive emissions of carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides and other toxic gases. Their first victims are the city dwellers, who make up some 80% of the Community's population and number no less than 257mn.

But this growing flood of motor vehicles is not the only threat to the Community's urban population. Many others are listed in the Green Paper on the urban environment, a reflective document published by the European Commission at the beginning of June and released in Brussels by the Environment Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana.

Air pollution alone is an unwelcome cocktail of car emissions, industrial emissions and waste, atmospheric discharges from oil refineries and thermal power stations and from the combustion of coal and oil in heating systems. This disastrous blend undermines our health: it makes breathing difficult, irritates the eyes, skin and throat and weakens the body's resistance to germs.

Unhappily the Community's city dwellers must put up with other forms of aggression as well. Noise is one of them; it makes them ill-tempered and, worse, threatens them with deafness. They must also suffer polluted rivers and streams, many of which flow through their cities, as well as the mountains of waste - 110mn. tonnes of solid municipal waste in the 12-nation Community in 1988, more than 10mn. tonnes of which were dumped illegally no matter where. And one must not overlook the deterioration, and even destruction, of old buildings and open spaces.

The Green Paper does not limit itself to such ills; it points out that the very existence of numerous cities is threatened. Its authors claim that the root cause of the pollution and deterioration of European cities is their rigid compartmentalization on the basis of function. As a result, their inhabitants must con-

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tinually be on the move, travelling from their homes to their place of work, and from there to shopping centres and places of amusement. This compartmentalization of cities both destroys their soul and threatens to transform them into lifeless, soulless urban areas.

However, the Green Paper is not simply a catalogue of the ills of European cities. It was prepared by the European Commission and published in response to a request from the European Parliament in December 1988, which at the same time sought social and "ecological" help for the Community's major cities. The problems in question being both "very urgent and very sensitive", as Mr Ripa di Meana has pointed out, the European Commission envisages a period of reflexion of up to 18 months, to allow the Twelve, as well as those responsible for the major cities and interested professional bodies, first to take a stand and then the necessary decisions.

The Commission believes the cities of Europe can be "saved". But it has no intention of trespassing on the preserves of municipal and regional authorities. The task of the European Community, in the Commission's view, is primarily to diffuse information among the Member States, provide ideas, finance imaginative projects in the urban transport sector, for the revival of run-down areas, the preservation of historic buildings, waste management and energy conservation. The Commission must also see to it that the regional aid provided by the Community contributes to improving the environment of cities - all cities and not only those in regions regarded as disadvantaged by the European authorities.

However, the Commission does not rule out drastic measures, such as banning private cars from city centres - or at the very least taxing them, as is done in Oslo, Hong Kong and Singapore. The European Commission recognizes that each Community city has its own characteristics; but it believes that all of them have common problems and that improving the urban environment will lead to improvements to the environment in general.

AGRICULTURAL FRAUD: The Court of Auditors examines export refunds ...

... and issues a highly critical report.

Take surplus beef, butter and cereals: add to it a complicated European Community regulation on export refunds as well as traders looking for quick profits ... mix them up thoroughly and you will find you have on your hands cases of fraud running into millions of ECUs, at the expense of the European taxpayer. The recipe is a well-known one. Now, in a highly critical report published at the end of May, the EC's Court of Auditors has accused the European Commission of laxity in the management of the export refunds in question and blamed the national administrations of the Member States for not checking more efficiently export shipments of agricultural products.

The massive amounts - ECU 7,000mn.* in 1988 - paid out by the Community to make up the difference between world prices for the agricultural products in surplus in the EC and the higher Community prices are a strong temptation to fraud. The Court of Auditors in fact claims the Commission has spent too much. In its defense the Commission has argued that it is much more expensive to stock the products in question than to subsidize their export to the Soviet Union or Brazil, for example. It has added that it consults all available sources of information before deciding when, how and at what level to set export refunds in order to avoid unnecessary expenditure.

As for the Court's criticisms of the complicated nature of the relevant Community regulations, the Commission has stressed that it is already engaged in a vast operation aimed at simplifying them. It has pointed out, however, that there are limits to what it can do. The Community, for example, cannot sell at the same price to all third countries if its principal competitor, the United States, sells the same product for a higher price to Colombia than to Tunisia.

The Twelve, for their part, are not spared either. The Court of Auditors has claimed they often make Community refunds for operations they do not check out: it often happens that no checks are made over a period of years on the operations of exporters in receipt of large sums from the Community budget. Nor is this the only example of negligence by national administrations reported by the Court.

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It has made a number of suggestions so that a maximum number of cases of fraud can be unearthed. The Twelve should check export transactions most likely to give rise to fraud - because of the sums of money at stake, the products themselves or their destination. Checks should cover 5% at least of all Community export refunds, and when only laboratory tests enable the identification of the product in question the number of samples taken should be of this order also.

The Court of Auditors nevertheless has not asked that customs officials close the Community's internal frontiers for days on end; on the contrary, it is of the view that checks should be carried out systematically on the traders' premises. In its reply the European Commission has stated that it will take the Court's suggestions into account. It remains to be seen how the national administrations will react. This clearly is not the last word on the subject.

EMPLOYMENT: Continuing vocational training for all

The Twelve adopt a new programme, FORCE.

Vocational training has become a must for many European workers, faced with the technological changes of recent years. And it will be the solution for many others with the steady progress towards the single market. To facilitate the development of continuing vocational training throughout the 12-nation European Community, its employment ministers decided at the end of May to launch a European action programme, FORCE. It will run from 1991 to 1994 and have a budget of ECU 24mn.* for the first two years.

In adopting this new programme the Twelve undertake to respect certain common principles, such as access for all to continuing vocational training, regardless of Community country of origin, sex and level of professional qualification. At the same time FORCE will provide funds for the development of new training methods, the study of needs created by the single market and the sharing of information and experiences among the Twelve.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.72 or IR£0.77

RACISM: The Twelve adopt a resolution on racism and xenophobia

... which the European Commission finds timid.

However timidly, the Twelve nevertheless took a step in the right direction by signing a resolution against racism and xenophobia on May 29. Given that racism and anti-semitism are once again on the rise in several European countries, the European Commission chose to associate itself with the views expressed in the resolution. But it did not sign the text, on the grounds that the Twelve could have gone much further, and specifically mentioned the protection of immigrants from non-Community countries living in the Community.

The Twelve preferred to limit themselves to declarations of principle, accompanied, it is true, by a number of more specific recommendations. The first, which is also the most important for the future, is addressed to national educational authorities. It is up to them to promote tolerance and mutual understanding, through the contents of educational programmes, international exchanges and the increased awareness of teachers employed in areas with large numbers of immigrants. The European Commission, for its part, undertakes to improve the education of children of immigrant parents at the Community level.

As for the education of adults, the Twelve have stressed the need for the media to play an active role in the elimination of racial prejudices and the promotion of harmonious relations between the different communities living in Europe. The resolution also seeks to promote an awareness of the role of information in the face of instances of racial violence.

Finally, at the legal level the resolution basically proposes three measures. The first is for the setting up, in all the Member States, of a system of effective legal assistance for the victims of racist acts. The second would encourage Member States to grant anti-racist bodies the right to take to court those responsible for racial crimes. Lastly the resolution invites the Member States to ratify international conventions and protocols against racial discrimination.