



## NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST

Information newsletter published by the European Commission.  
Articles of immediate interest to readers, ready for publication.

Weekly No 41/99

13 – 20 December 1999

INDEX	Page
<u>FOOD – Our daily intake of dioxins is still too high</u> But exposure to it has fallen in all countries, according to an EU study.	2
<u>INFORMATION SOCIETY – Secure electronic signatures</u> European rules for shopping on the Internet in security.	3
<u>AIR TRANSPORT – A single European sky...pollution-free if possible</u> Proposals to avoid delays, congestion, noise and pollution.	4
<u>JOBBS – European want to work, but differently...</u> ...according to a poll of 30,000 people.	7
<u>UNEMPLOYMENT – Unchanged at 9.1% in the EU as a whole</u> And it has fallen below 10% in the euro area.	9

REPRODUCTION IN FULL OR IN PART AUTHORISED

The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the official views of the institutions of the European Union.

## **FOOD - Our daily intake of dioxins is still too high**

**But exposure to it has fallen in all countries, according to an EU study.**

Our daily intake of dioxins, nearly all of it through the food we eat, is still above the recommended levels, according to a recent study, partly funded by the European Commission. This is bad news, because if dioxins have been making headlines, notably in Belgium a few months ago, it is because they are cancerous. Those most at risk, according to the experts, are people who eat higher than average amounts of food with a high fat content, particularly certain fish and fish products, but also meat and dairy products.

For people living in the European Union (EU) exposure to dioxins fell by 10% a year on average between 1985 and 1995, according to the study, which notes that 95-98% of total human exposure to these substances is directly related to the food we eat.

For many Europeans, however, the intake of dioxins and dioxin-like compounds is at levels which put them at risk, in the view of experts. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that the maximum daily intake should not exceed 1 to 4 pictograms toxicity equivalents (pgTEQ) per kilogram of body weight. (A pictogram is one billionth of a gram.) But the average daily intake of dioxins in the EU has been put at between 2 and 6 pgTEQ/kg body weight.

What can we do to reduce dioxin levels in the food we eat? The study mentions two types of measures, to be taken at EU level, given that food products move freely throughout the single market. Maximum dioxin levels must be set for animal feed as well as food for human consumption. The European Commission has already submitted proposals in this connection, and others should follow.

But it is also necessary to reduce waste incineration, as some of its emissions pollute soil and grass and enter the food chain through animals raised for meat. The Commission has proposed a directive aimed at reducing such emissions, which could be adopted next summer.

## **INFORMATION SOCIETY - Secure electronic signatures**

### **European rules for shopping on the Internet in security.**

Shopping on the Internet – otherwise known as electronic or e-commerce – seems to be the wave of the future. Even so, many are afraid of it. However, you will soon be able to sign your name using your PC's keyboard. What is more, your electronic signature will be just as valid as your hand written signature, throughout the European Union (EU) if necessary. The rules guaranteeing the security of electronic signatures are contained in a directive, or European law, which the EU Council of Ministers adopted recently, after reaching agreement with the European Parliament.

After conquering the United States, E-commerce is beginning to make inroads into the EU also, although its principal practitioners are companies, for the time being. But you can buy software on the Internet, take out a magazine subscription and read your daily paper onscreen. You can also shop on the Internet for books, records and clothes, and even order flowers.

But the fear of being ripped off is greater in this form of retailing, partly because you cannot sign «normally,» and most of the time the law only recognizes handwritten signatures. However, thanks to the new directive, from the summer of 2001 at the latest, all member states will have to provide for the legal recognition of electronic signatures in the EU, including their acceptance as evidence in legal proceedings. Each member state will have to monitor certification service providers, as they alone are technically capable of guaranteeing the authenticity of an electronic signature.

In addition to the security that the new directive will provide consumers, it will facilitate electronic commerce, and lead to the creation of numerous jobs in Europe in the years ahead.

## AIR TRANSPORT - A single European sky...pollution-free if possible

### **Proposals to avoid delays, congestion, noise and pollution.**

The 15-nation European Union (EU) is a single market for purposes of shopping and has its own currency, the euro, which we will be able to jingle in our pockets in two years' time. But the sky above the EU is still divided into 15 pieces, one per member state, while air traffic is growing by leaps and bounds. The result is that aeroplanes often arrive late at their destination, and manage to make an already turbulent area a little more noisy and polluted. In order to improve the lot of air travellers, yearning for take-off, and of those living next to airports, shouting in order to make themselves heard, the European Commission proposed at the end of December a series of measures, particularly the creation of a single airspace for the EU and anti-pollution actions.

This year one flight in three was delayed by more than 15 minutes, while delays exceeded 25 minutes on average between the end of March and mid-July, a period of some four months. Last year such delays occurred over a 3-week period only. Moreover, the peak period in air transport, which before lasted only a few weeks, now lasts from three to four months. Aircraft movements totalled 26,000 per day in the EU this year. The corresponding figure for the more sparsely populated United States is 48,000. Only when aircraft movements reached 40,000 per day did the Americans experience difficulties.

So why is Europe facing problems? Nearly half the delays between January and May of this year have been attributed to air traffic management, or the organization of the airspace used by aircraft. The remaining delays were due mainly to saturation at airports and the way airlines function.

Air traffic management is still organized at the national level, with each country managing its own bit of sky. There is Eurocontrol, of course, an organization which brings together a number of countries, including the 15 EU countries. Although its powers were strengthened last year, they remain limited. In addition, much of the EU's airspace is controlled by the military authorities of the various member states, who limit or even ban its use by civil aircraft.

.../...

Civil aircraft are obliged, therefore, to follow more or less the same routes. Given the increase in traffic, this has led to congested skies. Faced with a situation of this complexity, the European Commission has taken the view that the most urgent problems must be dealt with first, if a crisis is to be averted next summer. EU member states should therefore take the necessary measures, such as either allowing civil aircraft to use the airspace presently reserved for military aircraft or changing flight schedules, something they alone can do.

The Commission has tried to tackle the problem of delays at its roots. To this end it has suggested that air traffic management be shared, or that control of airspace, including the choice of routes, no longer be subject to national frontiers. Similarly, the way in which airspace is shared between civil and military aircraft should take into account the situation in Europe on the eve of the year 2000.

Lastly, a single organization should manage the EU's airspace. Eurocontrol would appear to be well placed to do this, and the EU is already negotiating to join it. Should this solution prove inadequate, it would be necessary to look for others. A group consisting of representatives of EU member states is expected to submit proposals within six months.

### **Protecting the environment**

Congested skies and delayed flights are not the only problems the EU has to contend with; there are environmental problems also. An aircraft circling an airport, waiting for permission to land, is both noisy and a source of pollution. Increase the number of aircraft in this situation and you increase the level of carbon dioxide and nitric oxides in the atmosphere, as well as noise levels around airports. Of course today's aircraft pollute less and are not as noisy as their predecessors, but the experts feel that the increase in traffic cancels out the gains from advances in technology.

The European Commission is therefore proposing stricter international standards for aircraft noise and emissions. Should this prove impossible, it favours the adoption of European standards. A tax on the kerosene which fuels aircraft is also envisaged, although it would be effective only at the global level. But the Commission is also looking at other forms of an environmental tax, which would take into account the ecological characteristics of aircraft.

.../...

The proposals under examination include the possibility of measuring noise, and exposure to noise around airports, in a standardized manner throughout the EU. This could be the starting point for the introduction of noise monitoring and zoning, and land use around airports, on the basis of the best practices in EU countries.

Scientific research also has a role to play. The aircraft which are being built today use technologies developed some 10 to 15 years ago. Environmental issues are in the forefront of European research programmes designed to improve aircraft performance. The aim is to reduce fuel consumption along with pollution, without loss of efficiency, and to design aircraft which are both lighter and less noisy.

Research into climate and other forms of planetary change will measure the effect of aircraft emissions on the ozone layer and global warming. And last but not least, it must not be forgotten that a less crowded and less polluted airspace also requires an efficient railway network and the linking of air and rail transport.

## **JOBS – Europeans want to work, but differently...**

**...according to a poll of 30,000 people.**

Europeans want to work; if anything, it's jobs that are scarce. But they want to work differently: more part-time work, more self-employment, more working from home, somewhat shorter hours and greater equality between men and women at the level of couples. These are among the findings, published recently, of a survey covering some 30,000 Europeans, between the ages of 16 and 64, carried out last year on behalf of the Dublin-based European Foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions, an autonomous European Union (EU) organization.

To begin with, Europeans want to work. The advocates of a life of all play and no work account for a mere 1% of those with jobs. And two jobless Europeans out of three, in the 16-64 age group, would like immediate employment. This is a high proportion, given that many young people are still studying, while many of those over 60 have taken early retirement and many women are not seeking gainful employment.

The downside to this is the shortage of jobs. Some 63% of people of working age currently have a job in the EU. According to the European Foundation, however, this proportion must rise to 76% if all those who want a job can actually have one.

The survey shows that the traditional family, with the husband as the breadwinner while his wife looks after their children and home, is no longer what most Europeans aspire to, even though it remains rather widespread. Over nine men out of 10 work full time, but 15% of them prefer part-time work, for themselves as well as their partners. Similarly, nearly all single women who have a job, and who plan to marry or live with someone in the coming years, want to continue to work, even if they have children.

Just over a third of those who have jobs are satisfied with them. Nearly half of them, and more women than men, would like to work shorter hours, while just one in 10 would like to work more, with men outnumbering women in this case. For most Europeans the ideal working week is a 34-hour week, as against the 39 hours worked on average by employees and the self-employed, taken together, in the EU.

.../...

Only one European out of five works part-time; that is, not more than 30 hours a week. But just one-third of those who have a job, or want one, would like part-time work, and only one-fifth of men are interested in it.

However, those in full-time employment entertain all sorts of fears as regards part-time work. More than half of them believe that their employer would not accept it, while just as many feel that they would be unable to do all that is required of them if they were to work part-time. And nearly half of those with full-time jobs fear that their careers would suffer if they were to work part-time, while some four-fifths of them believe that part-time workers lose out in terms of labour legislation and social security.

Working from home seems to be popular. At present fewer than one European in employment out of 10 has opted for it in the EU, although one in four work from home occasionally, but this includes work done on a voluntary basis. Among those who work away from the office, one in three would like to work from home, either full-time or on a part-time basis. The majority, however, would like to work from home only some of the time. More than 40% of women who return to work after an interval would prefer to work from home.

While 84% of Europeans in work are salaried employees, nearly 20% would rather be **self-employed**, although nearly 40% would find this unacceptable. Those currently self-employed include more men than women and their average age is higher than in the case of salaried employees. Self-employed people work longer hours - over 48 hours a week as compared to less than 38 hours for salaried employees. Nearly two-thirds of the self-employed work in the services sector.



## **UNEMPLOYMENT – Unchanged at 9.1% for the EU as a whole**

**But it has fallen below 10% in the euro area.**

The unemployment rate for the European Union (EU) as a whole was unchanged at 9.1% in October from the previous month, but was lower than a year ago (9.7%), according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical service. It put the total number of unemployed people at 15.4 million, on the basis of International Labour Office (ILO) criteria.

Unemployment fell very slightly in the 11-nation euro area\* to 9.9% in October, as against 10% in September. This was the first time in 10 years that the rate dropped below 10%. Eurostat put at 12.7 million the number of people unemployed in the euro area.

Luxembourg continued to enjoy the lowest unemployment rate in the 15-nation EU (2.7%). It was followed by the Netherlands (3% in September), Austria (4.2%), Denmark (4.3% in September), Portugal (4.6%), the UK (5.9% in August), Ireland (6.2%), Sweden (6.6%) and Belgium (8.9%). Germany's unemployment rate was identical with the EU average of 9.1%. Countries with above-average rates were Finland (10%), France (10.6%), Italy (11.4% in July) and Spain (15.3%).

\* The 11 euro area countries participate in the single currency. They are Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.

*Please contact us by fax or email if you would like copies of the documents used in the preparation of Eurofocus articles.*

Mailed from Brussels X

Rue de la Loi 200 Wetstraat• VM-2 5/55• B-1049 Brussels • Belgium • Tel.: +32-2-296.01.80 • Fax: +32-2-296.95.92  
email: eurofocus@dg10.cec.be