



NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST

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

Weekly No 42/99

20 – 27 December 1999

The European Commission is modernizing the Institution and its structures. Publication of EUROFOCUS is suspended as from this issue, following the reorganization of the information and communications department.

Thank you for your interest. We wish you a Merry Christmas and a happy millennial year.

INDEX

Page

<u>INFORMATION SOCIETY – Coming – an Internet accessible to everyone</u> eEurope is launched to hasten the day!	2
<u>HEALTH – Testing for cancer</u> The conclusions reached by European scientists.	5
<u>CIVIL PROTECTION – Joining forces across the EU to deal with diasters</u> A European action programme for 2000-2004 is adopted.	5
<u>YOUTH – Budding consumers, its your turn !</u> The 6 th European competition for consumers is launched.	6
<u>TRANSPORT – Technical standards for cross-border trains</u> European proposals for technical harmonization and safety.	7
<u>CONSUMERS – Price differences are narrowing in the EU...</u> ...particularly for clothes, furniture and hi-fi equipment.	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.

INFORMATION SOCIETY - Coming - an Internet accessible to everyone

eEurope is launched to hasten the day!

The Internet in every home and school, and in every business and administration in the 15-nation European Union (EU) – this is the key objective of a European Commission initiative – eEurope – launched in early December. But the road to this electronic Europe is a long one. The fact is that a year ago fewer than 10% of Europeans were connected to the Internet, as against nearly 25% of Americans. In June just 60 million Europeans were using the Internet, as compared to more than 80 million in the United States, which has a much smaller population than the EU.

The Commission's initiative does not reflect an obsession with technology ; rather it stems from the realization that information technology creates jobs and can improve the daily lives of everyone, from motorists to the disabled, from students to the ill. In the United States, the home of the information revolution, businesses which are linked to the Internet directly account for 2.3 million jobs today, as against 1.6 million last year.

Most EU countries have yet to take to the Internet. Relatively speaking, far more Finns and Swedes are connected to the Internet than Americans; but the picture is very different in the southern half of the EU, and more particularly in Greece and Portugal. However, Europe is ahead when it comes to mobile phones and digital television, two fully electronic devices.

eEurope, which is expected to bring together the EU, its member states, and its businesses and citizens, has 10 priority areas of action. The first of these relates to young people and schools. EU member states have already undertaken to provide every school with Internet access by 2002, in line with their common employment guidelines. The goal now proposed for the end of 2001 is access not only for schools but also public places, including those located in the most disadvantaged areas.

But eEurope is also designed to reduce the cost of Internet access, and a number of EU-wide measures are already envisaged. Electronic commerce is another area of activity for eEurope.

.../...

What is envisaged here is a series of complementary measures aimed at increasing consumer confidence and helping small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to be taken in addition to EU legislation, including legislation in course of adoption.

Students and researchers have not been forgotten. eEurope also provides for multimedia networks, which would transmit information, sound and pictures between every university, research and vocational training centre, including those set up to help people retrain for new jobs. The fifth of the 10 priority areas of action centres on smart cards which could be used throughout the EU. These computerized bits of plastic can be used to make calls from telephone boxes, access health services, watch programmes on pay television and surf the Internet from public places. Some cards serve as electronic purses.

The sixth of the eEurope areas of activity would be financing high-tech SMEs. The aim is better coordination of existing European financing mechanisms, and the introduction of complementary ones - in order to prevent European ideas and innovations crossing the Atlantic, to be exploited by American firms, as often happens.

eEurope also seeks to ensure that disabled people benefit from the information society like everyone else. To ensure that all electronic communication products can be used by the disabled, European technical standards must take their needs into account. Manufacturers, in other words, must keep the disabled in mind when designing their products. Designers and engineers could therefore receive special training to this end.

Information technology has an important role to play, at the European level, in health matters in general. It can monitor contagious diseases and facilitate communication between hospitals, laboratories, chemists, doctors and rest-homes. This is the eighth area of activity, which also covers European medical libraries which can be consulted from a PC as they are on line. What is more, by the end of 2003 all Europeans should have a smart card to access information on their health.

Information technology also has a part to play in improving transport and reducing the number of accidents.

.../...

The messages flashed electronically to motorists have reduced by 85% the number of accidents due to fog on motorways. Motorists and passengers needing help or access to emergency services will be able to obtain them by dialing 112. But eEurope will also work to improve electronic safety devices installed in new cars, and to develop information systems for itineraries and traffic conditions.

The last of the 10 areas of activity deals with Internet use by government departments to keep people informed. The authorities would be encouraged to use the Internet to provide information on legal, cultural and environmental matters – and to consult their constituents. eEurope even envisages on-line income tax forms!

The European Commission's initiative was well received by EU heads of state or government at their Helsinki summit on December 10 and 11. They must look at it in detail in March, during a special meeting devoted to employment, economic reform and social cohesion. The eEurope action plan should be finalized in June, for implementation between 2000 and 2004.

CORRIGENDUM

In the last issue, no. 41/99, we referred (article "FOOD - Our intake of dioxins is still too high) to the amount of dioxins that could safely be absorbed by body weight. Instead of "pictograms" the article should have said "picograms". Our apologies for any confusion this may have caused.

HEALTH - Testing for cancer

Conclusions reached by European scientists.

To avoid the risk of suffering from cancer unawares, people must undergo certain tests regularly. But just how many tests are needed? Three are enough for people in good health, according to the scientists who attended a European conference in Vienna recently. The two tests for women are a cervical smear – for women who are 30 years and older, but certainly not for those under 20 – and a mammography, designed to detect breast cancer in women between the ages of 50 and 69.

Both men and women in the 50-69 age group need to be tested for rectal cancer. The test involves looking for traces of blood in stools. The usefulness of these three types of tests has been amply demonstrated, but the other tests in use are not conclusive in the case of healthy people, according to European cancer specialists.

CIVIL PROTECTION – Joining forces across the EU to deal with disasters

A European action programme for 2000-2004 is adopted.

Disasters, whether natural or man-made, are best dealt with by joining forces. Even when they affect a single country, the knowledge, experience and resources of its neighbours can prove extremely useful. This is the reasoning behind the European action programme for the period 2000-2004, which the European Union (EU) Council of Ministers adopted recently. With a budget of €7.5 million*, it takes over from the current 1998-1999 programme.

The two key themes of the new programme are prevention and information. The aim is to anticipate and prevent disasters, on the one hand and, on the other, tell people of the risks they run and what they should do in the event of an accident. The programme also includes activities in the medical field and the use of new technologies.

* 1 EUR = UK £0.63 or IR £0.79.

YOUTH – Budding consumers, it's your turn!

The 6th European competition for young consumers is launched.

Secondary school students from all 15 European Union (EU) countries once again have the opportunity to demonstrate their talents as consumers. The theme of the recently launched sixth European young consumer competition is "Consuming in the 21st century." Students can develop it through posters, brochures, CD-ROMs, videos or Internet sites. The best of them will be awarded prizes, the first prize being a surprise trip.

More than 1,400 teams of secondary school students took part in the fifth competition (1998-1999). The winners came from Belgium, Austria, Italy and the UK.

In each EU country students can register with a national coordinator, who will provide them with the competition rules as well as all the information they need in order to compete. Competitors from all the EU countries must submit their productions to their national coordinators by 17 March 2000 at the latest.

In the UK, write to:

Trading Standards Service

South Ayrshire Council

(Bruce Collier)

5/7 River Terrace, Ayr KA8 OBJ

Tel: 00 44 1292 616060

Fax: 00 44 1292 616061

E-mail: eyc@tradingstandards.demon.co.uk

In Ireland, write to:

National Youth Council of Ireland

(Eamonn Waters)

3 Montague St., Dublin 2

Tel: 00 353 478 41 27

Fax: 00 353 478 39 74

E-mail: eamonn.waters@nyci.ie

TRANSPORT – Technical standards for cross-border trains

European proposals for technical harmonization and safety.

When travelling by train on the Continent, you may have found yourself waiting 20 minutes or more for your train to leave the station. This is because the station in question is close to a frontier between two European countries whose national railway networks use different technical standards. The fact is that such differences still exist within the 15-nation European Union (EU), and cost a great deal of time and money.

The European Commission recently proposed several directives, or European laws, with the aim of speeding up the introduction of a genuine, EU-wide railway network. As matters stand at present, each national network has its own characteristics, which can be the same as those of neighbouring networks but are often different. To begin with there are several track gauges within not just the EU but Europe in general. While most countries use the same gauge, Spain and Portugal, on the one hand, and Finland and the entire Emerald Isle on the other, have their own systems. To complicate matters further, several different signalling and electrification systems are in use in the EU.

Nor is the direction of running the same everywhere – it is left in most EU countries right in Germany, Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands and Finland, and varies in Greece and Austria. You could add any number of incompatible pieces of equipment to the list. The result is a halt of anywhere up to half an hour at border crossings to allow engines and drivers to be changed and checks to be carried out.

The EU has begun to tackle these problems in the case of its high-speed trains. In 1996 it adopted a directive aimed at ensuring swift passage at the EU's internal frontiers, which is being implemented at present. But much remains to be done. High-speed trains do in fact make the journey without changing engines and without long delays; but there is a price to pay. The trains which run between Paris and Amsterdam, on the one hand, and Paris and Cologne on the other, must carry up to six kinds of signalling equipment, and cost 60% more than an equivalent train designed to operate within the territory of a single EU member state.

.../...

The European Commission has now proposed a new directive, which would allow ordinary passenger and goods trains to operate efficiently across national frontiers. The directive itself would set the legal framework, while member states would adopt the technical specifications and specialized European bodies would draw up the necessary standards. This would result in a certain harmonization as regards the basic technical requirements for running trains, but would not involve replacing national railway networks with a European one, an operation that would cost a fortune.

Another of the directives put forward by the Commission would modify the ground rules set by the EU in 1991 in order to introduce gradually a separation between the maintenance of railway lines, signals and other equipment, on the one hand, and the running of the trains themselves on the other. The aim is to help the railways meet competition from road and air transport more effectively.

Another aim would be to create a European railway network for the transport of goods, so that in this particular area trains could run faster and more efficiently. At present a goods train runs at an average speed of 20 km/hr, while the railways accounted for just 14% of freight transport in 1997, as compared to 30% in 1970.

Safety on the railways is covered by national laws which differ from one EU member state to another. Taken as a whole, the European measures now proposed by the Commission provide for a set of controls, the most innovative feature of which is the intervention of an organization that would be independent both of governments and the railway companies. One of the proposals provides for a new system of European licences, authorizing companies to operate on condition that safety is fully guaranteed.

CONSUMERS – Price differences are narrowing in the EU...

...particularly for clothes, furniture and hi-fi equipment.

It's always pleasant to shop while visiting another European Union (EU) country, in hope of picking up bargains. But less appealing is the thought that you would pay less for your car or groceries if you lived in a neighbouring country. In any case, price differences between EU countries, inclusive of VAT, have sharply narrowed in recent years, under the impact of the European single market, where goods move freely and you can indulge in cross-border shopping. From the consumer's point of view, this is the European Commission's main finding, as reported in its latest single market scoreboard.

The EU's southern member states - Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy - remain the least expensive, the Nordic countries - Denmark, Sweden and Finland - the most expensive, along with Austria. Between them are Britain, Ireland, Germany, the three Benelux countries and France. Even so, Danish prices are 75% higher than Portuguese on average, taking purchasing power into account.

Price differences are at their narrowest in the case of clothing, with prices in the most expensive country just 30% higher than in the least expensive. Danish prices for furniture, television, hi-fi equipment, sports goods, toys, footwear and electrical appliances are less than one and a half times higher than in Portugal.

There are greater price differences for confectionery, fish and books and magazines. But prices in the most expensive country are twice as high as in the least expensive in the case of cosmetics, stationery, jewellery, travel goods, cars, motorbikes, bicycles, fruit and vegetables, bread and cereals, and household linen.

The differences are even greater when it comes to meat, and up to two and a half times greater in the case of non-alcoholic beverages and tobacco products. And alcoholic beverages are in a league by themselves: Danish prices are three times higher than

Please contact us by fax or e-mail 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