

EUROPEAN BACKGROUND INFORMATION COMMUNITY

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BACKGROUND NOTE

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EUROPEAN COMMUNITY SETS STANDARDS TO PROTECT EC WATERS

The roster of European Community laws to protect the environment continues to grow. The latest action came at 1:30 this morning when the EC Council of Ministers agreed on a directive to protect the Community's lakes, rivers, and coastal waters from pollution by toxic wastes.

The directive sets standards for companies which dump waste into Community waters. It also sets quality goals for waters absorbing "black listed" poisons, such as pesticides, defoliants, mercury, arsenic, and organophosphoric, organohalogenic, and organostannic compounds. Quality goals could be applied instead of dumping standards if a member state can prove to the EC Commission that water quality goals have been met and will not be lowered by dumping. Every five years, the Council will review cases where quality goals are being applied.

The directive also stipulates reductions in water concentration of less toxic substances on a Community "gray list" -- dangerous metals and metalloids, biocides, cyanide, florides. Quality goals for waters containing these substances will be set.

Early conclusion of the agreement on the directive was blocked by the United Kingdom, on the grounds that its waters could easily absorb black listed poisons without danger. Britain favored quality control over dumping standards, citing the following reasons: political, economic, and technical. Agreement that quality goals could sometimes be applied instead of dumping standards smoothed over British objections.

Means of Applying the Law

As a guide to enforcement of the law, maximum "value limit" will be set for black and gray listed poisons. These limits will depend on the poison's toxicity, permanence, and bioaccumulative properties. Member state authorities will be forbidden to exceed these limits when giving the mandatory approval before any dumping.

Decision Furthers EC Environmental Policy

The decision on pollution controls over Community waters is part of the Community's first action program for the environment, adopted in July 1973. Under this program, the Council has passed directives setting quality standards for swimming water, as well as a directive to reduce the sulphur in gas oils which pollutes the air.

The December 8-9 Council also adopted a decision authorizing Commission participation in negotiations for the conclusion by the Community of the Convention on the Protection of the Rhine Against Chemical Pollution.