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EU support for tourism and commerce

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Enterprise recently published a series of brochures with general information on Structural Funds support for the tourism and commerce sector. A separate brochure is available for each Member State, both in English and in the official language of the State concerned. The brochures contain a general overview of funding opportunities in each Member State and present a number of project examples. All the brochures are available on the web site of the Enterprise DG:

<http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/services/tourism/studies/structuralfunds/index.htm>

New Interreg newsletter

In July 2003, the managing authority of the Interreg IIIB north-west Europe programme published the first issue of its monthly newsletter, called *New-Update*. The newsletter provides information on project approvals, describes the activities of the programme, and presents the views and insights of project leaders. To download the newsletter, or for further information on the Interreg IIIB north-west programme, see the following web site:

<http://www.nweurope.org> or
contact: nwe@nweurope.org

Commission shows solidarity with Portugal

The European Commission is currently seeking the agreement of the Council and the Parliament to mobilise EUR 31.655 million from the EU Solidarity Fund to assist Portugal in dealing with the damage caused by recent forest fires.

The money is to be used to restore infrastructure and reimburse the cost of emergency measures to deal with the consequences of the fires. So far, the fires have claimed 18 lives and destroyed an estimated 270 000 hectares of forest and 25 000 hectares of agricultural land. The destruction of forestry and agricultural lands is reported to have resulted in the loss of income for about 45 000 people through the loss of property and jobs. The total cost of the damage to date is estimated at about EUR 946.5 million.

To help offset some of these costs, the Portuguese authorities have applied for assistance

from the Solidarity Fund. Some EUR 182 million of EU Structural Funds is also to be reallocated.

The Commission services have indicated that they will process the grant request as quickly as possible and have called upon the Council and Parliament to take their budgetary decision with the same expediency. Payment from the fund will flow immediately after approval by the Council and the European Parliament and following signature of the Portuguese Government and the European Commission. Further information is available at:

<http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/g24217.htm>

The urban dimension of future cohesion policy

At the initiative of Commissioner Michel Barnier, representatives of European regional and city associations and experts on urban policy met in Brussels on 17 July to discuss the urban dimension of future cohesion policy.

The debate centred on four key topics: lessons from current programmes; future priorities for intervention; the added value of Community intervention in urban matters; and strategy and implementation methods where urban questions are concerned.

The meeting concluded that while the URBAN Community initiative amply fulfils its innovative and demonstrative remit, and has a positive influence on forms of urban governance, it also has a number of limitations. These include its modest budget and the limitations of interven-

tions in terms of space, time and population coverage. Furthermore, its limited scope, which does not extend to some topics of importance for urban regeneration such as housing and the city-wide transport network, was also highlighted.

Participants suggested that Community urban interventions should in future link competitiveness and cohesion, while avoiding putting cities in direct competition, and should favour 'bridge-building' projects which open cities to their surrounding regions.

In terms of addressing social exclusion, some flexibility is advised, so that priorities can be chosen according to the scale and gravity of the problems, for example through a 'menu' approach.

With regard to the added value of Community intervention in urban matters, participants highlighted the key role of URBAN in offsetting the harmful impacts of other Community policies, and the importance of territorial cohesion as an integral part of economic and social cohesion. The demonstrable benefits of cooperation and the exchange of experience between European cities were also cited.

A clear majority were in favour of 'mainstreaming' future urban actions, as long as: the urban agenda and the

URBAN method were preserved, funds for urban actions and areas were ring-fenced, and cities were given responsibility for the management of the part of the programmes which concerned them. It was suggested that 'mainstreaming' of urban actions should also be extended to other Community policies exerting a determining influence on the future of cities, such as transport policy. However, several participants indicated that they would like to see a programme like the URBAN Community initiative maintained on a complementary basis for 'soft' actions. Further information is available at:

http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/debate/urbanhearing_en.htm

Involving regions in the knowledge economy

On 1 August, the Commission launched the 'Regions of knowledge' pilot action, which aims to boost the involvement of European regions in creating a knowledge-based economy.

The initiative has an initial budget of EUR 2.5 million for 2003, which will come from the Structural Funds and from the European framework programme for research. Support will be provided for innovative projects involving regions in several Member States that have identified knowledge (know-how, human resources, research and development and other 'intangible' production factors) as playing a key role in the development of their regional economies. It is anticipated that up to 10 projects will receive support in the first year.

Projects to be supported will include technology audits, developing economic and technological future models at regional level, initiatives to promote university involvement in the local economy, mentoring between technologically advanced and less favoured regions, and awareness-raising actions focusing on the role of knowledge as a booster of regional development.

The 'Regions of knowledge' initiative recognises the crucial role of the regions in developing the European research area (ERA) and driving economic growth. Research shows that there is a positive relationship between a region's spending on R & D and its overall wealth. However, the performance of EU regions in research activities and in realising the economic benefits of the knowledge-based economy varies widely. While some regions, such as Baden Württemberg (Germany), Île-de-France (France), Uusimaa (Finland), Vaestsverige (Sweden) and eastern England (United Kingdom), spend well over 3 % of their gross domestic product (GDP) on R & D, in many regions this figure is less than 0.5 %.

The deadline for applications under the new initiative is 17 September 2003, and to receive funding projects must involve bodies or entities from at least three current EU Member States. Further information is available at:

<http://www.cordis.lu/era/knownreg.htm>



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