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COMMISSION APPROVES GUIDELINES FOR NORTHERN IRELAND INITIATIVE

The European Commission has approved guidelines for the first three years of a special five-year program that would allocate almost \$400 million in EU funds for projects supporting peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Under the Commission's plan, which could be finalized by May after consultations with the European Parliament, projects in five priority areas - employment, investment, cross-border development, urban and rural regeneration and grassroots cross-community cooperation - will receive up to 75 percent of the required funding from the Commission.

A maximum of 80 percent of the funds will be spent on projects in Northern Ireland, and at least 20 percent of the funds will go to Irish border counties whose economic development suffered as a result of the fighting in the neighboring province. Fifteen percent of the total amount will go to cross-border activities.

To receive support, the United Kingdom and Ireland have to submit detailed proposals for an integrated operational program within four months of the Commission's final decision on the program. Program preparation and management will also include representatives of local authorities, business, trade unions, community groups and voluntary organizations in the region.

The plan, which was approved by this week's Commission meeting, is based on its December Communication to the Essen European Council where it received the endorsement of EU leaders. The Communication draws on the findings of a European task force which was set up by former Commission President Jacques Delors following the ceasefire announcements in September 1994.

Commissioner Monika Wulf Mathies, who is responsible for Regional Policies in the new Commission, said of the approval: "I'm delighted that the Commission, with this decision, makes its contribution to the historic process which started on December 15 1993 through the Joint Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Further financing of projects in 1998 and 1999 will be subject to a Commission review.

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