Brussels, 11 May 2004

OPINION
of the
Committee of the Regions
of 22 April 2004
on the
Communication on Towards a thematic strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources
COM(2003) 572 final

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,
Having regard to the European Commission Communication Towards a Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources, COM(2003) 572 final;

Having regard to the European Commission Communication on European governance, COM(2001) 428 final;

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 1 October 2003 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of its President of 27 January 2004 to instruct its Commission for Sustainable Development to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to the Commission Recommendation for the 2002 Broad Guidelines of the Economic Policies of the Member States and the Community, COM(2002) 191...
Having regard to the definition of "sustainable development" set out in the Amsterdam Treaty;


Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Towards a global partnership for sustainable development, COM(2002) 82 final;


Having regard to its opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament Towards a thematic strategy on the prevention and recycling of waste, COM(2003) 301 final – CdR 239/20003 fin;

Having regard to the European Commission's Green Paper Towards a European strategy for the security of energy supply, COM(2000) 769 final;


Having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 11/2004 rev. 1) adopted on 5 March 2004 by its Commission for Sustainable Development (rapporteur: Mr Cormick McChord, Leader of Stirling Council (UK/PES)).

Whereas:

1) it is clear that the current use of resources and impacts on the environment and the peoples of Europe and the wider global community cannot be sustained;
2) a long-term approach is needed, consistent with EU sustainable development policies to reduce the impact of resource use and place the EU on a path towards more sustainable consumption;

local and regional authorities are in a unique position to influence the use of natural resources through a range of policy actions, such as waste management and planning, and to implement community-based measures to protect natural resources and influence consumption and production patterns;

it is essential that the Strategy identifies priorities and practical actions, to deliver more sustainable use of resources. This will require decoupling of economic growth from environmental and social impacts, and the use of resources. The purpose of this is to reduce environmental impacts, address depletion and security of non-renewable resources, and stop further degradation and depletion of renewable resources. The Strategy should also deliver social inclusion and environmental justice within the EU, address resource consumption needs of poorer countries (including the acceding states) and inter-generational equity. The Strategy will require assessment of policies, gathering of knowledge, including changing consumer behaviour, policy integration and alignment. Given its "unique role" (Chapter 28, Agenda 21) local government should be a key stakeholder to promote community-based activity;

to secure these aims, the Strategy must recognise the importance of economic and fiscal policy. Steps should be taken to internalise externalities (making the polluter pay), reinforced by appropriate fiscal measures and public procurement policies;

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 54th plenary session, held on 21 and 22 April 2004 in Brussels (meeting of 22 April 2004)

The Committee of the Regions' views

The Committee of the Regions
welcomes the Commission's Communication as a first step towards the Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources ("the Strategy"), called for in the EU's Sixth Environment Action Programme. Central to this is the recognition of the need to manage and reduce resource use to meet the objectives of the EU's sustainable development strategy;

is pleased that the Strategy has as its overarching goal the delinking or decoupling of environmental impacts from economic growth; and that the Strategy should "focus on reducing environmental impacts, thus enabling growing economies to use resources efficiently, from both an economic and environmental point of view";

agrees that achieving this will be a long-term process, and therefore welcomes the 25-year time scale proposed, to enable stakeholders to adapt their policies and processes "to develop and adopt production and consumption patterns with lower impacts";

supports the broad approach of knowledge gathering, policy assessment and integration, agrees especially the importance of education and awareness-raising
...and emphasises the need to prioritise, taking into account where there is the greatest need for environmental improvement of resource use;

acknowledges that the impacts of using non-renewable resources are currently of primary concern but thinks it also important to recognise the risks to sustainable development of depletion of non-renewable resources, with particular regard to the limitations of European resources, security of supplies, and geopolitical risks.

The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions proposes that the Strategy is presented unambiguously as the foundation of sustainable development, with implications ranging from the realignment of economic and fiscal policy through to policy on climate change. It should not be presented more narrowly as part of environmental policy alone, or as part of waste management (though these are integral to it). This would be contrary to the Cardiff Process which seeks to increase the integration of environmental issues into other policy areas, and carry the risk that the strategy might be marginalised;

urges that decoupling is not seen as just enabling economic growth to proceed without resource depletion or adverse environmental impact. Environment, economy and society remain interdependent. Economic growth, and in particular technological innovation, must be harnessed to reduce resource use, increase resource efficiency, possibly by recovering and re-using them and encouraging the use of renewable resources, and reduce environmental damage. The “three pillars of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental” are not to be “balanced”, but aligned and coherent;

wishes therefore to see an enhanced recognition of the importance of economic and fiscal policy. The aim should be to internalise externalities, making the polluter pay, reinforced by appropriate fiscal measures and public procurement policies;

calls for the strategy to address social inclusion and environmental justice. Full account should be taken of the impact of the Strategy on different groups in society, ensuring that adverse effects do not fall disproportionately on those least able to bear the burden, and that the Strategy complements EU actions to tackle discrimination and social exclusion;

advocates giving more weight to issues of enlargement and the international dimension. The Strategy should reaffirm support for the WSSD Plan of Implementation, and set European sustainable resource use in the context of the increased resource consumption needs of poorer countries and people living in poverty. The Strategy should adopt the Kyoto Protocol approach of allowing growth in poorer countries (including the Accessing Countries), while remaining within global carrying capacities and guiding countries away from unsustainable paths of resource use and resource intensity;

calls for the long-term perspective to take into account intergenerational justice. Taking into account the long term and a global perspective, the Strategy should address the depletion and security of supply of non-renewable resources as well as the depletion and degradation of renewable resources including biodiversity, fish stocks and carbon sinks;

urges that policy priorities are determined having regard to the vulnerability of resources, resources with the most damaging environmental impact; and carrying capacities.

2.8 proposes that the role of local and regional government in the Strategy is recognised, along with other public agencies, given its interest in such matters
as planning, waste, local biodiversity and habitat protection, transport and education.

2.9 calls the European Commission to take adequate account of the principle of subsidiarity in policy proposals. Community-level action, including Local Agenda 21, often provides the greatest driver towards resource protection. Policy must be designed to ensure the optimal level of flexibility for local and regional authorities to undertake action at the local level, without being constrained by policy developed elsewhere.

Brussels, 22 April 2004

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

Peter Straub
The Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Gerhard Stahl