

EESCopinions

European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/220  
Sustainable use of natural resources

Brussels, 28 April 2004

OPINION

of the European Economic and Social Committee  
on the  
Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European  
Parliament: Towards a thematic strategy on the sustainable use of natural  
resources  
COM(2003) 572 final

On 1 October 2003, the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament  
-Towards a thematic strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources  
COM(2003) 572 final.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 5 April 2004. The rapporteur was Mr Ribbe.

At its 408th plenary session on 28 and 29 April 2004 (meeting of 28 April), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion

by 54 votes to one; with six abstentions:

Preliminary remarks

This communication must be considered as the Commission's first, preparatory step towards a strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources that is to be submitted in 2004 and is due for adoption in 2005. The communication seeks to launch a debate with all the stakeholders concerned – thus also including sections of civil society – with the ultimate aim of arriving at a broadly coordinated and widely accepted strategy paper.

To advance this coordination process, the Commission has, for instance, set up a Stakeholder Forum that has now started in-depth consultations<sup>1</sup>.

The purpose of the upcoming strategy is to develop and set out ideas for a

further, necessary reduction in the environmental impacts of resource use. The essential aim is to substantially step up moves to decouple future economic growth from resource use.

The scheme is thus to be understood as a kind of "substrategy" designed to give practical shape to the EU's sustainability strategy that is currently being revised.

The upcoming strategy is to be built on three strategic components:

ongoing knowledge gathering about the often interconnected impacts throughout the life cycle of the resources used (from extraction, through use, to the waste phase);

a policy assessment, designed, among other things, to demonstrate that "there is currently no mechanism for assessing how far policy choices ... are compatible with the overall aim of decoupling economic growth from the impacts

of resource use"; the resource strategy will be calculated to set matters to rights on that front in future;

policy integration, i.e. to integrate resource-related environmental issues more fully into other policy areas.

In material terms, this paper must be considered in close connection with two other initiatives launched, like this strategy, by the Commission as part of the implementation of the sixth environment action programme – i.e. the framing of (i) a strategy on the prevention and recycling of waste and (ii) integrated product policy. The European Economic and Social Committee adopted opinions on both those issues at its December 2003 plenary session<sup>2</sup>.

The timescale given for the strategy is twenty-five years.

#### General comments

The Commission paper begins by defining the term "natural resources". Natural resources include the (renewable and non-renewable) raw materials necessary for human activities, and the different environmental media, such as water, soil, air and the landscape.

The Commission paper explicitly refers to the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development where it was agreed that, "protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development are overarching objectives of, and essential requirements for, sustainable development."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, sustainable development is impossible without the proper protection and sound use of resources. The Commission therefore also explicitly views the planned strategy as one (of a number) of ways in which environmental protection can help foster sustainable development.

In findings that may come as a surprise to many people with an interest in environmental protection and are likely to fuel much controversial debate during the framing of the strategy, the Commission considers that, while some renewable resources, such as fisheries and freshwater, face major difficulties, non-renewables are seen as giving much less cause for concern.

Given that, in the 1970s and 1980s, so many basic studies of the then nascent environmental movement focused on the impending depletion of non-renewable resources<sup>4</sup>, statements such as "the fact that a given resource

is finite does not automatically imply that this resource will become scarce" not only require some detailed explanation, but are also liable to send out the wrong political signal and be misconstrued as somehow giving the all-clear.

In the long-term, of course, such statements are clearly without any foundation. Despite continued finds of new non-renewable resource deposits over the past few years, and the fact that earlier forecasts about the timeframes for expected resource depletion have not proved wholly accurate<sup>5</sup>,

it is clear that, for instance, oil, coal and other non-renewable raw materials are finite. To compound matters, although moves to decouple resource consumption and growth have already seen some success over the past

few years, that has not yet been enough to resolve the overall issue. One reason is that worldwide growth rates have more than made up for any successes on this front.

The Commission's comments can thus only be considered in conjunction with the strategy's timeframe. In fact, in the coming twenty-five years, there may not yet be any critical shortages of non-renewable resources. Indeed, the Committee feels that, for a sustainability strategy and for the potential implementation of the "factor ten" project touched on by the Commission,<sup>6</sup> a twenty-five-year timeframe is much too short.

Hence, the strategy must also carry a clear message about non-renewable resources that looks beyond that timeframe, as it is vital, even at this stage, to prepare the ground for an appropriate sustainable policy in this sector too.

The Commission is undoubtedly right to point out that, as far as non-renewable resources are concerned, the main environmental problem is not, for instance, their continued availability, or otherwise, in the ground. As the examples of coal, oil and gas show, the real environmental problem lies not in whether these raw materials are available or not, but rather in how they are actually used (extraction and, in this case, combustion, with the resultant carbon dioxide emissions).

In terms of sustainable development – which is undoubtedly the Commission's point at issue here – the question of availability is certainly

of relevance, because even if it were possible to limit or even eliminate the environmental impacts of resource use, we have a duty to future generations not to allow resources to be depleted or exploited in what is, in historical terms, such a short space of time.

The EU is currently working on a range of (necessary) new strategies or revising existing ones. As well as the overarching sustainability strategy, these cover areas such as waste avoidance and recycling, integrated product policy, the protection of the marine environment, aquacultures and the field

of health and the environment. The Committee endorses all these initiatives but would ask the Commission to consider the risk that those parties not directly affected might lose sight of the overall picture and find it difficult to see which issues are addressed by each particular strategy – and how each one fits into the "hierarchy" of the various strategies that are in place.

The Committee therefore feels it would be useful

to detail exactly how each strategy fits into the overall policy framework; to identify the links to the other strategies and topical policy areas at EU level and in the Member States; and to set out where and how the various strategies ultimately come together. The Committee, however, has no doubt that the sustainable development strategy is paramount and that it is from that that the resource strategy – and other strategies – must be derived.

The Committee also considers it vital to outline in the broadest possible terms the practical impact of each of the planned strategies on potential stakeholders. That also includes setting out the responsibilities involved and identifying which players are responsible for which specific issues at which political level – and the degree of authority they enjoy – as well as what the issues that have to be addressed actually are. The Committee thus expects that the upcoming strategy will not only set out in detail the scope

for EU action in the field of natural resource use, but will also identify the responsibilities that accrue at the level of the Member States (or the local and regional authorities as the case may be).

The Committee sees conveying the relevant knowledge to broad sections of the population as a key task.

The strategy must focus strongly on the potential impact on industry, working life and the labour market. At numerous junctures and in many different documents, the Commission has consistently stressed that job creation and environmental protection are not opposite poles, but can complement each other effectively. This strategy must prove that to be the case. Companies are right to want, as far as possible, long-term legal

certainty and the security to plan ahead. The strategy must indicate what companies have to expect in the coming years.

It is of course also important to signal the changes needed in the overall framework in order to facilitate synergies of this kind. Clarification is needed as to whether new initiatives on taxes and charges can promote the sustainable use of natural resources. As regards the development of the use of economic instruments, more environmental taxes and charges have been used in the last few years, and there is a slow but growing move towards environmental tax reform as some countries change their tax base, reducing labour-related taxes and increasing taxes and charges on environmental pollution, resources and services<sup>7</sup>.

The EESC's specific comments

The Committee very much endorses this paper. A resource strategy is sorely needed to achieve the goal of decoupling resource use (and the concomitant environmental impact) even further from economic growth.

The Committee feels that the twenty-five year timescale is clearly too short. It backs moves by the Commission to focus on difficulties that can be resolved in the short- and medium term. However, that must not mean more or less shelving already identified long-term issues.

It is essential, therefore, to insert a section on long-term issues, which are, in the main, likely to relate to non-renewable resources, as otherwise misunderstandings might arise about the strategy as a whole. Consideration should thereby be given not only to the environmental difficulties involved, but also to issues of overall physical and/or political availability. The Committee therefore welcomes those sections of the communication that address regional and European availability. The problem with oil, for instance, relates not only to how much of it there actually is. Availability (and thus dependence) are very serious political issues, as witnessed by the oil crisis of the 1970s and a number of other, more recent events. The main global economic blocs appear to have very different approaches to this question.

The Committee feels that the strategy focuses too much on tangible resource use and that too little attention is paid to the protection aspect, i.e. the intangible dimension of the issue. The Committee therefore recommends not only expanding the title of the strategy to include a reference to protection, but also to give a higher profile to the concept of protection overall. This could also be tied in with the Johannesburg deliberations (see also point 2.2 above).

Landscapes are clearly another example of key resources. The Alps, for instance, have a sensitive ecosystem and are also a tourist attraction<sup>8</sup>. The strategy must also address the overuse of landscapes (e.g. through spiralling traffic levels). Specific examples such as these would also make it possible to clearly establish the links to other policy fields (e.g. agriculture) and to the areas of responsibility mentioned above. The diversity of European landscapes – the result, among other things, of highly heterogeneous agricultural land use – is an important part of European culture and identity, and must be preserved.

As the Commission rightly points out, some renewables are being overexploited at an alarming rate. In the case of wood, for instance, the Commission notes that only part of the annual growth is actually exploited, leaving considerable potential for its further (environmentally sound) use as a raw material. On the one hand, this is no doubt true, but two points also have to be borne in mind. Forests, like all ecosystems, not only have a tangible function, but are also of key intangible importance as, for instance, ecosystems or recreational areas. These considerations – and

forests' protective role, for instance, in flood and avalanche control - may well clash with any all-out commercial exploitation by the forestry industry. On the other hand, forest resources are distributed very unequally and the tremendous forest damage in parts of the accession countries (e.g. in the Erzgebirge/Krušné hory, Krkonoše and Jizerské hory mountains) has not only destroyed potentially useful local resources but, along with other factors, was also to blame for some of the torrential flooding on the rivers Oder, in 1997, and Elbe, in 2002.

Brussels, 28 April 2004.

The President  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

Roger BrieschThe Secretary-General  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

Patrick Venturini

1 Also involving the European Economic and Social Committee.

2 Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission: Towards a thematic strategy on the prevention and recycling of waste, COM(2003) 301 final, and the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Integrated Product Policy, building on environmental life-cycle thinking, COM(2003) 302 final, OJ C 80, 30.3.2004, p. 39-44.

3 Plan of Implementation of the world Summit on Sustainable Development, Introduction, paragraph 2

4 Cf. The Limits to Growth: a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind, 1972

5 For instance, the forecasts of the Club of Rome (see footnote 4) or the US Council on Environmental Quality, Global 2000 - Report to the President, 1980

6 Under which the same level of economic performance is to be achieved in future while cutting resource use to just a tenth of current levels.

7 See, for example, the latest Eurostat publication: Environmental Taxes in the

European Union 1980-2001: First signs of a relative "green tax shift" - Eurostat 2003.

8 Cf. Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the future of upland areas in the EU, OJ C 61, 14.3.2003, p. 113-122.

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