

Questions and Answers on Resources Strategy

1. What is the objective of the Resources Strategy?

The overarching goal of the resources strategy is to de-couple economic growth from environmental degradation. To achieve this it will develop a framework and measures that allow resources to be used in a sustainable way without further harming the environment, while achieving the objectives of the Lisbon strategy (3 % economic growth).

2. What are the main problems with resource use?

Contrary to widespread belief, today the main problem generated by current patterns of resource use is their environmental impact and not the possible scarcity of certain non-renewable resources. For example, the seemingly limitless availability of fossil fuels and consequently their extensive use to generate energy has produced some of the most serious environmental problems: air pollution and global warming. This also applies to many other non-renewable resources such as metal ores and other minerals. Falling prices on the world market and regular discoveries of new reserves show that their availability is currently not under threat. On the other hand, their use causes a variety of environmental problems. In the case of renewable resources, scarcity in itself constitutes an environmental problem. For example, the extinction of certain species means loss of biodiversity, and land take means loss of habitats.

3. Does the Resources Strategy cover all natural resources?

Yes. Natural resources include both the raw materials necessary for most human activities and the different environmental media, such as air, water and soil, which sustain life on our planet.

4. How is the Commission going to develop the final strategy?

The publication of the Communication 'Towards a thematic strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources' marks the first step in the development of the Resources Strategy. With this as a starting point, the strategy will be developed in an open and collaborative process involving the Community institutions and public and private stakeholders. An Advisory Forum, chaired by the European Commission, will be established to steer the policy development process. Working Groups will be established to address specific resources or key issues and analyse them from the three – environmental, economic and social- perspectives of sustainable development. The European Commission will invite different services and stakeholders to chair and co-chair these working groups.

5. What is envisaged to be the core elements of the strategy?

The Communication identified three core elements:

1. Knowledge gathering

Knowledge about resource use patterns and impacts is presently dispersed between many actors, and significant gaps exist. This function should ensure that knowledge is readily available to decision-makers and that gaps are being filled.

2. Policy assessment

The use of natural resources is influenced by numerous (environmental) policies. This function will assess whether policy choices in these different areas are compatible with the overall aim of decoupling economic growth from the impacts of resource use, and suggest alternatives wherever possible.

3. Policy integration

Concrete actions will need to be taken on the basis of the information generated by the previous functions. This will involve political judgements to rank the relative importance

of different impacts and to prioritise environmental targets on the basis of an overall policy for sustainable management of natural resources. This function will therefore work towards increasing the integration of resource-related environmental issues into other policies, in particular under the Cardiff Process.

6. What is the timetable for action?

Implementing new policies and adapting existing ones in order to achieve the necessary decoupling of resource-related environmental impacts from economic growth will be a long-term process. Businesses, consumers and institutions need time to develop and adopt production and consumption patterns with lower impacts. They will also need public policies with clear long-term objectives in order to plan investment and innovate. For this reason the time scale for the strategy is 25 years.

7. What is the added value of the strategy, considering existing legislation and policies?

Traditionally, environmental policy has focussed on point sources of environmental impact and developed prescriptive legislation to reduce these impacts. The use of end of pipe technologies played an important role in this. In order to deal with more diffuse sources of environmental impacts such as from transport, products, heating devices, etc., clear long term targets are required, as well as instruments that create incentives for change towards the more sustainable production and consumption patterns. The Resources Strategy will provide guidance to this new phase of environmental policy making by proposing clear long term targets, the use of market based instruments and other flexible approaches. Moreover, the Resources Strategy will bring relevant policy areas together to develop commonly accepted goals, taking into account the need to consider the economic, environmental and social aspects of policies, as the concept sustainable development demands.

8. Will the resources strategy result in new regulation?

The resources strategy will build on existing policies within the broader context of the Sustainable Development Strategy. It will not attempt to implement specific initiatives in environmental areas that are already covered by well-established policies.

9. Will the resources strategy produce quantifiable targets?

The ongoing work on the Thematic Strategy on Sustainable Use of Resources will lead to concrete targets for the use of resources and the related environmental impacts.

10. Will the Resources Strategy set limits to resource use?

If alternative ways can be developed to reduce the environmental impacts of resource use, it may not be necessary to reduce the quantities we are using.