

The European Union's Environmental Policy

Page 1

Pollution has no respect for national borders; it carries on the wind and water and damages environments far distant from its point of origin. That is why the European Union's policy in this area has greatly developed in the last two decades and this is why global agreements on environmental protection are now a part of the international agenda. The Union's current policies extend far beyond air and water quality to include the protection of soils, habitats, and fauna and flora, as well as the conservation of wild birds.

When the Rome treaty was written in 1956–1957, its authors saw no need to provide for a common policy on the environment because they did not perceive any common threat. It was not until *October 1972 that a conference of Heads of State or Government* insisted that a common policy was needed, and since then more than 200 items of Union legislation on the environment have been enacted. These are the products of action programs which the Council of Ministers have been endorsing since 1973.

Environment policy was built into the *Treaty by the Single European Act of 1987* and its scope was extended by the treaty on European Union in 1992. This allowed the use of majority voting on environmental legislation and introduced as a principle of treaty law the concept of sustainable growth which respects the environment. While leaving plenty of scope for national action and allowing member states to take even tougher protection measures than those agreed at Union level, the treaty says that Union policy should contribute to the pursuit of:

- Preserving, protecting and improving the quality of the environment
- Protecting human health
- Ensuring a prudent and rational utilization of natural resources
- Promoting measures at the international level to deal with regional or worldwide environmental problems

The treaty requires Union policy to aim at a high level of protection, at rectifying environmental damage at the source, and to be based on taking preventative action and making the polluter pay.

Toward Sustainable Development—the Evolution of EU Environmental Policy

During the 1970s and 1980s, legislation in the form of directives was mainly concerned to set limits on emissions of specific pollutants such as motor vehicle exhaust gases and wastes from agriculture and industrial plants. But by the mid-1980s it was clear that broader strategies were needed which focused on regulating the consumption of natural resources. These began to emerge during the 1990s and took the form of “horizontal” directives regulating many environmentally sensitive activities, with flexibility for member states to implement them according to local conditions.

Sustainability is defined as maintaining continuity of economic and social developments while respecting the environment and without jeopardizing future use of natural resources. Five key sectors were targeted because of their environmental impact: industry, tourism, transport, energy, and agriculture.

Key Instruments of the Union's Environmental Policy

Environmental Impact Assessment: This directive lays down a systematic procedure for assessing the potential damage which might be caused by individual projects and requires that the public must be involved in the process. Recently provisions were included which require cross-border consultation on the construction of installations such as power stations and incineration plants for hazardous waste and on the deforestation of large areas.

The European Union's Environmental Policy

Page 2

European Environment Agency: This agency is designed to study the need for reliable data by:

- Providing the Union, member states, and third countries with objective information for drawing up and implementing effective environmental protection policies
- Supplying technical, scientific, and economic information required for laying down, preparing, and implementing measures and laws related to environmental protection
- Developing forecasting techniques to enable appropriate and timely preventative measures to be taken
- Ensuring that European environmental data are incorporated into international environmental programs

Free Access to Information on Environmental Pollution: This directive requires national authorities to make information on the environment available to any natural or legal citizen on request without the person concerned having to prove an interest.

Eco-label for Environmentally Friendly Products: This regulation provides that the manufacturer or the first importer of a product may apply for an eco-label to the competent body in the member state. This body decides whether to award the label after assessing the product and consulting widely.

Eco-audit: A voluntary environmental auditing scheme which requires participating companies to incorporate environmental protection standards into their production processes. Member states have the task of coordinating the scheme, receiving applications to participate and drawing up a list of approved “verifiers” who can decide on compliance with the regulation.

The LIFE Regulation: Is designed to provide financial incentives for Union projects in the environmental field.

Where Union Legislation is Most Active

Water Pollution: A number of directives have been approved dealing with the protection of surface and underground water, both fresh and salt. Quality standards have been set for bathing water, drinking water, fresh water suitable for fish life and water used for rearing shellfish. This discharge of toxic substances is strictly controlled. The Union is a participant in several conventions designed to reduce pollution in international waterways such as the Rhine River, the North Atlantic, the North Sea, and the Mediterranean.

Atmospheric Pollution: Despite the adoption of a series of directives, further progress is being sought by the Commission to deal with pollution from large combustion plants, particularly power stations, and the emission of gases from motor vehicles. A proposed carbon/energy tax aimed at reducing CO₂ output and increasing energy efficiency is being considered. Concern about the depletion of the ozone layer led the Union to adopt a series of measures to phase out the production and consumption of CFCs and other substances thought to be responsible for this phenomenon.

Noise: Directives have been adopted fixing the maximum noise levels for cars, trucks, motorcycles, tractors, subsonic aircrafts, lawnmowers, and building site machinery. The noise level of household equipment must be stipulated on its packaging, and proposals are under way concerning helicopters and rail vehicles.

Chemical Products: After an accident in northern Italy in 1977, measures have been taken to reduce the risks arising from the manufacture and disposal of chemical substances. Directives regulate, among other things, the classification, packaging, and labeling of dangerous substances, and the composition of detergents. Since 1986 there has been a group which lists all chemical products on the market, enabling them to be subject to a general procedure for notification, evaluation, and control. Member states are obligated to inform authorities about substances, plants, and possible locations of accidents.

The European Union's Environmental Policy**Page 3**

Waste Disposal: The EU produces more than two billion tons of waste every year and its collection, disposal, recycling, and processing is regulated by a number of directives. Specific measures have also been taken to control transboundary shipments of wastes, as well as in individual areas, such as waste from the titanium oxide industry, waste oils, the dumping of waste at sea, and radioactive waste.

Nature Protection: The Council of Ministers has adopted several directives on the conservation of wild birds and habitats, on banning imports of products made from the skin of baby seals, and on the control of scientific experiments on animals. Financial support is given to projects to conserve natural habitats.