

Environment, Energy and Food

The European Union has significant influence over many of the policy areas that affect our environment – from controlling carbon emissions to shaping the way in which farmers and fishermen produce the food we eat. The EU's role is particularly important in co-ordinating the response to issues that cross national borders. Environmental policy concerns not only the maintenance of clean surroundings, but also key questions about how we meet our energy and transport needs, and ensuring the *sustainable development* of the economy. There is strong popular support for the EU playing a leading role in environmental policy, although some members of the business community criticise the effect of environmental regulations on their ability to compete in the global marketplace.

EU Environment Policy

The EU became engaged with environmental regulation in 1972 when it published its first Environmental Action Programme (EAP). The EU's role in environmental protection was subsequently extended under the Single European Act (1986), Maastricht Treaty (1992), Amsterdam Treaty (1997) and Lisbon Treaty (2007). The current EAP, which runs from 2002-12, reflects a broader approach to environmental protection. It identifies four areas for priority action: climate change; nature and biodiversity; environment, health and quality of life, and natural resources and waste. The EU has passed legislation aimed at improving the quality of water, tackling air and noise pollution, assuring the safety of chemicals, setting standards for waste disposal and protecting the EU's native wildlife and plants. Its most ambitious project was to set up the *Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS)* to help meet its Kyoto Protocol obligation to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 8% by 2012, compared to levels in 1990. This target was subsequently raised to 20% by 2020 at an EU summit meeting in March 2007. Varying commitment to using cleaner fuels has been shown by EU countries. The EU attended a UN Climate Change Conference in 2009, but the talks ended in disappointment when divisions between developed and developing nations hindered negotiations.

EU Energy Policy

Deciding how European countries will meet their demand for energy in the future is a key issue facing all member states – the EU imports over 80% of its oil and over 50% of its gas supplies. There was no common energy policy at the EU level prior to the Lisbon Treaty, primarily because most member states had different energy priorities and used a different mix of energy sources. In December 2008 the EU adopted a series of measures aimed at guaranteeing a future energy supply to all member states. The need for secure energy supplies was highlighted when Russia stopped the flow of gas into the Ukraine in 2006 and Belarus in 2007 (both countries act as transit states for supplying gas to many European countries). A similar energy supply crisis occurred in 2009, when the Russian gas supply to 18 EU member states was restricted.

In November 2010 the EU adopted the 'Energy 2020' initiative, which defines the energy priorities for the next ten years, and sets the actions to be taken in order to tackle the challenges of saving energy, achieving a market with competitive prizes and secure supplies, boosting technological leadership, and effectively negotiating with other countries. Controversy ensued in 2011 when Germany announced the closure of its nuclear energy plants, resorting instead to less environmentally friendly fossil fuel energy and snubbing the possibility of pursuing more renewable energy resources due to implementation costs.

Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) have a major impact on environmental management. When they were established in the 1960s and 1970s, their primary aims were to support the production of food by EU farmers and ensure equal access to fish stocks. However, the growing awareness of the environmental impact of food production and fishing in recent decades has resulted in a shift of emphasis. Since the 1990s, the EU has forced member states to reduce the sizes of their fishing fleets to combat over-fishing. Meanwhile, since 2005, the CAP system of *subsidising* agricultural production is being phased out in favour of direct payments to farms linked (amongst other things) to environmental standards. However, both policies are still subject to heavy criticism – the environmental impact of the CFP may actually be negative because catches of fish that do not conform to quotas are typically dumped back into the sea.

EU Transport Policy

Since the signing of the Single European Act (1986), the EU has been working towards a common transport policy. This has placed major emphasis on promoting greener ways of travelling, particularly through updating rail and waterways networks to help move traffic off the roads. The EU also provides money for roads to be upgraded in order to carry the increasing amount of cargo traffic that has resulted from the development of the single market. From 2012, aircraft emissions will be added to the ETS.

Technical Terms

Sustainable Development: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS): the EU limits the amount of CO₂ that businesses can emit. Businesses are then allowed to pay to buy extra CO₂ emissions allowances from companies whose emissions are under the maximum limit.

Subsidy: government money used to keep down prices.

Links

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