

Environment, Energy and Food

The European Union has significant influence over many of the policy areas that effect 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 ensure *sustainable development* of the economy. There is strong popular support for the EU playing a leading role in environmental policy, although some in 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 Plan (EAP). The EU's role in environmental protection was subsequently extended under the Single European Act (1986), Maastricht Treaty (1992) and Amsterdam Treaty (1997). The current EAP, which runs from 2002-2012, 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; 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 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. The EU Commission has also proposed that environmental 'crimes' be punished by equal penalties across the EU.

EU Energy Policy

Deciding how European countries will meet their demand for energy in the future is a key issue facing all member states. Currently there is no Common Energy Policy at the EU level, primarily because most Member States have different energy priorities and use a different mix of energy sources. However, concerns over the EU's increasing dependence on Russian gas led the European Council to propose an Energy Plan for Europe (EPE) in April 2006. This prioritises creating a common energy foreign policy, liberalising the energy sector and promoting the use of renewable energy. As yet the EPE has been only a limited success, due to varying commitment shown by EU countries to 'breaking up' the energy sector. However in April 2008 the EU negotiated a deal to receive natural gas from Turkmenistan and the EU is now attempting to secure an energy agreement

with Iran. To increase the use of cleaner fuels, EU leaders have agreed that 20% of the EU's energy should come from renewable resources by 2020, although no clear strategy for this has yet been agreed. The EU's target for 10% of road fuel to be composed of biofuel by 2020 has been criticised for causing global food prices to rise as crops are used for energy instead of food.

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 heavily criticised – the environmental impact of the CFP may actually be negative because catches of fish that do not conform to quotas are typically dumped back in 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 Commission has also introduced plans to force car manufacturers to cut carbon emissions by at least 20% in the next 5 years. However, the EU also provide money for the upgrading of roads to carry the increasing amount of cargo traffic that has resulted from the development of the single market. In the field of air travel, in 2008 the EU decided to add aircraft emissions to the *ETS* from 2012.

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): A scheme to cap emissions of carbon dioxide by allowing firms that exceed their emissions limits to buy extra allowances from firms whose emissions are under target levels.

Subsidy: government money used to keep down prices.

Links

- http://ec.europa.eu/policies/index_en.htm
- <http://www.euractiv.com/en>