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EUROFOCUS

TRANSPORT: Coming - high-speed European trains

The Twelve agree on the policy of a European master plan for high-speed trains.

Europe is staking the future of its railways on high-speed trains. At their last meeting the European Community's transport ministers gave the go-ahead to the master plan for a European network of high-speed trains proposed by the European Commission. Once completed the network will be unique in the world. Before 2010 it will link Scotland to Sicily, Lisbon to Berlin and Copenhagen to Seville, by means of trains running at more than 200 km. per hour.

To achieve this the Twelve envisage 9,000 km. of new lines, improvements to 15,000 km. of existing lines, so that they can take high-speed trains at 1,200 km. of rail links between the main lines. The prospect is one of a gigantic undertaking, to which must be added the 15 key links seen by the Twelve as a priority and which imply very substantial investments. These links, which are often located in border areas, are vital for the transformation of the different national networks into a genuine European network, without which there can be no Community funding.

The high-speed European train is about to enter the station. The French network, already well developed, will soon link up with Germany via Belgium, and England via the Channel tunnel. Within two years trains will cover the distance between London and Paris in four hours. These high-speed trains will also draw Europeans closer together.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS: A European cordless telephone for 1992

The Twelve agree to coordinate their efforts.

One of the practical applications of Digital European Cordless Telecommunications (DECT) will be "European" cordless telephone for homes and offices at the end of 1992. With this entirely computerized system it will also be possible to transmit data throughout the European Community using portable instruments. European Community ministers reached agreement in mid-December on a "European law" and the technical measures which will allow all Community countries to introduce the system at the same time, on the basis of a common standard, to be finalized by the end of this year.

The "European" car telephone poses greater problems, however. It should be in service by the middle of this year in principle, but work remains to be done as regards standards and the mutual recognition of national authorizations. European Community ministers have asked their experts to speed up matters and the European Commission must present a green paper in the course of the year.

AERONAUTICS: A Community loan for the next Airbus

ECU 149mn.* for the European consortium.

The European consortium building the Airbus received a loan of ECU 149.1mn. from the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Community's own bank for long-term lending, at the end of December. The loan will enable the consortium to complete work on its next model, the A-321, until the aircraft is licensed to fly at the end of 1993. The A-321 is a successor to the A-320. It, too, could be used over short and medium distances. It will carry 24% more passengers, in order to reduce the problems arising from airport congestion.

This is the first EIB loan to the economic interest group that is Airbus Industrie, which brings together companies established in four EC countries - British Aerospace (UK), Aerospatiale (France), CASA (Spain) and MBB (Germany). The EIB has already provided loans to individual members of the group, which is often held up as an example of European industrial cooperation.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.71 or IR£0.77

COMPETITION: A tiger in your engine? Yes, but not just any tiger

Motorcar manufacturers have a say when it comes to the quality of motor oils used within their distribution networks.

Motor vehicle manufacturers can prevent motor oils which do not meet the minimum quality standards set by them from being used in the distribution networks they have set up. Such a ban is not incompatible with the competition rules of the EEC Treaty, according to the European Commission.

The Commission's decision follows a complaint lodged by d'Ieteren, the sole official Belgian importer of Volkswagen and Audi (VAG) cars. At the end of 1987 d'Ieteren sent a circular to its dealers and repair shops, asking them to meet the quality standards for motor oils laid down by the VAG group. D'Ieteren followed this up by asking the Commission for negative clearance - that is a statement that the circular in question did not violate the Community's competition rules.

The Commission was guided in its decision by the interests of European consumers. In granting the negative clearance, it held that the quality standards imposed by the motor vehicle manufacturer were technical and objective in nature, designed to improve the performance and durability of the engine, to reduce both pollution and consumption and - in a word - serve the interests of owners of Volkswagen and Audi vehicles.

The Commission therefore held that once the standards were applied without discrimination by dealers and repair shops, and that the specifications were available to both producers and suppliers of motor oils, the obligation to meet the standards set by the manufacturer did not constitute an obstacle to the competition rules of the EEC Treaty.

ENVIRONMENT: NORSPA and MEDSPA to protect north and south Europe

After receiving the green light for MEDSPA (Mediterranean region), the European Commission launches NORSPA, aimed at protecting northern Europe.

Less than a month after the Twelve gave the green light to the MEDSPA programme, designed to protect the environment throughout the Mediterranean region, the European Commission presented the Twelve with NORSPA, aimed at the environmental protection of the coastal zones of northern Europe.

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The European Community's environment ministers adopted MEDSPA, which is due to the initiative of the European Environment Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana, on December 21, 1990. With a budget of ECU 25mn.* for the first two years, MEDSPA will provide backing for projects designed to improve the environment in the entire Mediterranean region, including non-Community countries.

The European Commission has now followed this up with a somewhat similar programme, aimed this time at protecting the environment of the coastal regions of northern Europe (Irish Sea, the Baltic and the north-eastern area of the Atlantic Ocean).

The programme it has sent the Twelve will run for 10 years and is divided into two stages, each of five years. The budget for the first two years is ECU 10mn. During the first stage the emphasis will be mainly on preventive measures aimed at reducing the release of nutritive or dangerous substances and speeding up the implementation of the emission standards for pollutants from such industries as the paper, fertilizer and pharmaceutical. Measures to conserve and protect species and natural habitats are also envisaged, together with steps to strengthen the cooperation between the countries that border the seas in question, including certain non-Community countries.

In concrete terms the Commission will provide backing for the transfer of technologies which are either totally or largely "clean", together with technical assistance in setting up suitable policies and action programmes. The Commission will also encourage the establishment of administrative and statutory structures in the environmental field.

For Mr Ripa di Meana, NORSPA is a pragmatic response by the Community to the problems raised during the international conferences on the protection of the North Sea. The Commissioner claimed he was convinced of being able "to reach the results which will allow us (the Community) to await the next millennium in the firm conviction that our legislation is better (as regards environmental protection) than the legislation we inherited."

Thanks to the MEDSPA/NORSPA tandem the Community will soon have at its disposal an effective instrument for protecting the environment, both on land and sea, and in its northern as well as southern regions.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.71 or IR£0.77

RESEARCH: ECU 890mn.* for three Community programmes covering ... the environment, the marine sciences and telematic systems.

The environment, which is now one of the main concerns of Europeans according to recent polls, is rapidly assuming importance in the European Community's scientific activities. European Community ministers agreed on December 21, 1990, to devote ECU 411mn. to a research programme aimed at finding out more about the environment and the dangers which threaten it, the better to protect it. The programme will run from 1990 to 1994.

It will be carried out partly in the laboratories of the European Commission, and some ECU 150m. have been earmarked for this purpose. It will also be undertaken by companies, research institutes and universities in the EC countries, under contracts concluded with the Commission. These bodies will receive ECU 261mn. in all from the EC and will contribute as much from their own funds.

The main area of research will deal with climatic change, whether natural or as a result of human activities, and its ecological consequences. The ozone layer will also be studied. European scientists will also look at natural and technological risks, paying particular attention to the possible desertification of areas of the Mediterranean. The programme will also make it possible to improve the techniques for assessing the quality of the environment and monitoring it on a permanent basis. Finally, some of the research will deal with economic and social aspects of environmental issues.

The EC Council of Ministers adopted at the same time another research programme which has a bearing on the environment. Its subject is marine science and technology; it too will run from 1990 to 1994 and will have a budget of ECU 103mn. It will provide a better understanding of marine processes and improve our ability to predict change. As a result, the EC's political leaders will dispose of the information they need for effective management, protection and exploitation of marine resources. The programme also provides for the study of coastal zones, aimed at improving and harmonizing the design concepts involved in the construction of ports, piers and embankments.

The third European research programme adopted by the Twelve on December 21, 1990, will benefit a range of activities based on telematics, the technology which uses telephones and computers to handle large quantities of information at high speed. The "specific programme in the field of telematic systems" will also run from 1990 to 1994, with the help of ECU 378mn. in Community funds.

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The programme will encourage the use of telematics throughout the European Community in road transport (the DRIVE programme), health care (the AIM programme), distance learning (DELTA), communications between the civil service in the 12 EC countries, the operation of libraries and linguistic research and learning. In addition, specific projects will allow rural areas, often at a disadvantage in relation to cities from this point of view, to be equipped with telematic systems.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.71 or IR£0.77

CONSUMER PROTECTION: A principle, not a pretext

The Community's judges uphold the principle of the free circulation of goods.

In the run-up to the single European market Member States still have the right to keep out goods from their Community partners, in the interests of public health and the defense of "their" consumers - in which case the interests of consumers must really be at stake and the measures taken by the Member States must be in relation to the objective. This, broadly speaking, is the viewpoint of the European Community Court of Justice, which handed down two rulings in mid-December, in cases involving demands from trading companies and professional bodies for the application of restrictive measures in order to protect consumers.

The first case pitted a French manufacturer of artificial sweeteners - SARPP - against the organization representing French sugar refiners and processors and several French importers of artificial sweeteners. At the heart of the dispute was a French law of 1988 which bans the use of the word "sugar", as well as references to the qualities of natural sugar, in the labelling and advertising of artificial sweeteners.

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At the beginning of 1989 a French court ordered the withdrawal from the market of the sweetener "Sucrandel", sold by SARPP, on the grounds that the label on the packet referred to sugar. SARPP lodged an appeal, arguing that the French law was contrary to the Treaty of Rome, the EC's "Constitution". The court of appeal turned to the Court of Justice in Luxembourg.

The European Court found that the French law could in practice keep out of the French market artificial sweeteners made in other Community countries, several of which allow the use of the word "sugar". The law was contrary, therefore, to the free movement of goods provided for by the Treaty of Rome. As for the protection of consumers, the Court held that the French law went beyond the provisions of the Community law on the labelling of foodstuffs. The latter bans misleading packaging. In the Court's view it is enough in practice to ban "any mention which indicates, suggests or leads one to believe that artificial sweeteners possess properties similar to those of sugar, when they do not." Consequently the very general ban contained in the French law cannot be justified.

As for advertisements for artificial sweeteners, the Court held that the French authorities can forbid French manufacturers to refer to "sugar", but they cannot extend the ban to manufacturers in other countries. The fact is that there is no precise "European law" in this area, so that the Member States can require "their" producers to comply with national regulations, provided they do not hinder trade with other Community countries.

In a somewhat similar case involving two firms selling blood filters in Germany, the Community Court of Justice held that the German ban on products bearing the symbol for a registered trade mark - the letter R with a circle around it - but not registered in Germany, was incompatible with the Treaty of Rome. This symbol is officially recognized in several EC countries but not in Germany. But the Court took the view that consumers are not especially concerned to know in which country a trade mark has been registered.

CONSUMERS: Information, the consumer's first line of defense

Commissioner Van Miert inaugurates the first European agency for consumer information.

The European consumer will soon find the traditional boundaries of his local market spreading outwards from national or regional borders to the Community's external frontiers. But he will need to find out as much as he can about the characteristics of the goods and services on offer in this new environment and, above all, to protect it.

This is the vocation of the European agencies for consumer protection. They will provide information to consumers living in such transborder areas as Lille (France), where the European Commissioner for consumer affairs, Mr Karel Van Miert, has just opened one of these centres. These agencies will also be able to provide consumers information on the legal and commercial systems they will encounter in Member States other than their own.