



European Environmental Bureau

Speech by Commissioner Dimas at the press conference to launch the EEB Environmental Policy Handbook

Eurovillage Hotel, Brussels

Thursday 3 November 2005

Good morning.

I would like to begin by congratulating the European Environmental Bureau and all the authors involved in producing the EU Environmental Policy Handbook. It is a remarkable achievement!

One of the main conclusions of the Handbook is that “Existing environmental legislation represents a unique attainment for European values”. I agree and I think that this legislation – and the high level of environmental protection that it delivers - is something that every European should be proud of and should treasure.

Of course the Handbook is not an exercise in self congratulation and it goes on to make a number of constructive criticisms. For instance, the book takes the opinion that EU environmental legislation has not brought about any “structural change” and that little progress has been made in integrating the environment into other policy areas. I am not sure that I would be as pessimistic as this – but it is quite true that these are areas where further work is needed.

And this is exactly why the Commission has been following the approach of developing Thematic Strategies. Our intention is that these strategies will represent a new generation of EU environmental policy-making. They cut across all policy areas and address all the impacts and threats. They provide the Member States with a common framework, within which they will draw up coherent measures at the most appropriate level.

The Strategies innovate the way environmental policy is prepared and implemented. They are based on an in-depth assessment of the impact of present EU legislation. All stakeholders, first and foremost the environmental NGOs, have been associated in this

preparatory work. Their participation in the implementation is actually embedded into the Strategies.

In addition to new initiatives, like the strategies, our bread and butter work is the implementation and enforcement of existing laws. To be effective, the body of EU law must be fully and correctly implemented. All aspects and details of this legislation must be respected. And checking the way it is implemented at national level is an essential task for the Commission, as guardian of the Treaty.

In an enlarged Europe of 25 Member States, the Commission has become more strategic in its approach to implementation and enforcement. We now place more emphasis on transposition and conformity issues and are trying to act preventively. We are improving the way we cooperate with the Member States, in order to identify problems at an earlier stage. The Member States, in particular the new ones, will benefit from the Commission's legal and technical assistance.

We would advise NGOs to do the same and use the complaints system in the most strategic way possible - for example, by giving priority to cases which have the greatest practical and political potential. Another way of being strategic is to assemble several cases into a single cluster so that, beyond the specific instances of bad application, we also address the structural problems which are inherent to a particular directive.

The Commission is looking forward to an ever more structured dialogue with NGOs. This will help identify genuine problems in the Member States. In this respect, we very much welcome the initiative taken by the EEB on air issues. We would like to have a similar kind of dialogue in all of our priority areas, notably nature protection, waste, water and environmental impact assessments, where there are also significant numbers of infringements.

To conclude, let me once again congratulate the EEB for having produced this handbook. I hope it will become an indispensable tool and work of reference for everyone interested in EU environmental policy.