COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NOTE

from:	General Secretariat
to:	delegations
Subject:	**Invasive alien species: proposal for concerted action within the European Union**

Delegations will find attached a note from the Spanish delegation on the above subject, which will be dealt with under "Other business" at the Environment Council meeting on 23 October 2006.

INVASIVE ALIEN SPECIES:
PROPOSAL FOR CONCERTED ACTION WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The spread of invasive alien species is considered to be the second most important cause of biodiversity loss in the world, outstripped only by the destruction or alteration of natural habitats. It is not by chance that invasive alien species are believed to be responsible for 40 % of the loss of animal species in the past five centuries.

From an ecological point of view, when a species settles in a new area, outside its natural distribution area, it invades an already occupied niche and upsets the environmental balance, thus producing severe alterations in the ecosystem whose intensity and magnitude depend on the biological characteristics of the invading species and the receiving ecosystem. The consequences of the arrival of invasive alien species include, *inter alia*, predation impacts on native species, displacement of native species, destabilising effects on the food web, transmission of disease and alteration of the gene pool further to hybridisation. The combination of these alterations can produce synergies with knock-on effects on the ecosystem which ultimately result in a net loss of biological diversity.

Because they are fragile and isolated, some ecosystems, such as river basins and islands, are particularly vulnerable to the introduction of these species. The disastrous effects of the appearance of very aggressive species in archipelagos, rivers and lakes, leading to the loss of thousands of species, are all too well known.

The situation is no less alarming in the marine environment, where ballast water and organisms attached to the hulls of boats (hull fouling) are the main vectors for the spread of invasive alien species, along with the use of certain alien species in aquaculture.

Furthermore, one climate-change scenario predicts an exponential increase in cases of invasive behaviour by alien species introduced both intentionally and unintentionally.

The ecological problems are compounded by the severe economic impact of invasive alien species, as a result of both the damage they often cause to crops, forests and infrastructure and the costs of controlling them. In five countries alone (United States, India, Brazil, United Kingdom and South Africa), the costs generated by invasive species are estimated at EUR 250 billion per year while just one species – rabbits – accounts for EUR 360 million a year in damage and control costs.

Zebra mussels, which are native to the Caspian and Black Seas, were accidentally introduced into the North American Great Lakes region in 1988. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, by 2002 they were thought to have caused damage amounting to USD 5 billion as a consequence of the extinction of native mussel populations and the deterioration of water-related infrastructure.

In the past, species were in many cases introduced by humans seeking to exploit them outside their natural distribution area without having sufficiently assessed their possible impact on ecosystems. Today, however, the appearance of invasive species is much more frequently due to an unintentional transfer related to the transport of persons and goods. Such is the case for the zebra mussel, which arrived in the Ebro river only recently but is already causing severe environmental and economic damage.

With a view to combating this rising threat, the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity have established alien species as a specific issue, resulting in the adoption, in 2000 and 2002 respectively, of Decisions V/8 and VI/23, which urge the Parties to adopt strategies and action plans in that area in accordance with common guiding principles.

Various initiatives regarding invasive alien species have been taken in Europe as well. The Council of Europe, within the framework of the Bern Convention, has drawn up a European Strategy; the European Commission has commissioned various studies and analyses of the situation, focusing on legal aspects in particular, and has drawn on Community funds to cofinance control and eradication projects; and many States have taken *ad hoc* action against specific species. Nonetheless, if this contamination – which does not stop at borders – is to be tackled with some chance of success,

steps must be taken and measures adopted at Community level, since action at national level is not sufficient in most cases.

Oddly, existing Community legislation is diffuse and inconsistent, with unjustifiable lacunae: Community legislation adopted under the International Plant Protection Convention deals fairly comprehensively with the problem of invasions affecting plants, but invasions affecting animals are covered in a clearly insufficient manner, and then only through incidental mention in the Birds and Habitats Directives and the CITES Regulation. For other taxons, there is even less. Consequently, it has to be emphasised that an efficient instrument to coordinate the European Union's overall policy on the matter is still lacking, which runs counter to the objective of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010. An all-encompassing Community instrument in this area would actually be a decisive step towards achieving that objective.

Thus, its is essential and urgent for the Commission promptly to propose measures to put in place - and to coordinate implementation of - an efficient comprehensive Community legislative framework to tackle this major threat to both the environment and our economies.

Information on the problem due to the recent appearance of the zebra mussel (Dreissena polymorpha) in Spanish continental waters

Zebra mussels were first detected in Spain, in the lower course of the Ebro River, in the Riba-Roja-d'Ebre reservoir's waters, during the summer of 2001. Shortly afterwards, the species was also found in another reservoir on the same river, namely the Mequinenza reservoir.

Following discovery of the problem, the *Confederación Hidrogáfica del Ebro*, the organisation responsible for management of the river basin, set up a working group bringing together the *Comunidades Autónomas* and *ENDESA*, the company running the Ascó nuclear power plant. In order to prevent the zebra mussel from spreading, a number of preventive measures were put in place, including legislation making it compulsory to clean the hulls of any boats plying in Ebro reservoirs, in addition to awareness campaigns designed to alert the population which were especially targeted at those communities most affected.

Despite these measures, the zebra mussel's distribution area in the Ebro has currently spread to cover a major part of the river, leaving only its headwaters uncontaminated. The mussel was further detected in two places along another river basin, namely the *Cuenca Hidrográfica del Júcar*.

Apart from the major environmental and economic problems regularly caused by this species, its presence in Spain is posing a serious threat to the survival of Spanish freshwater bivalve molluscs, particularly the severely threatened endemic *Margaritifera auricularia*, currently only to be found in a few places along the Ebro basin.

In order to analyse the situation regarding this species in Europe and to compare control experience with countries that have been confronted with the zebra mussel for a much longer period of years, a seminar was held in Zaragoza last week on strategies for action in zebra-mussel infested waters. The seminar's conclusions are attached.

I would like to take this opportunity of informing you that as part of Expo Zaragoza 2008 (14 June to 14 September 2008), an international congress will be held in Zaragoza on invasive alien species linked to continental aquatic systems, and it is my pleasure here and now to invite you all to attend.