COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Brussels, 27 May 2008

9930/08

ENV 325

NOTE

from :	General Secretariat
to :	Delegations
Subject :	Outcome of the Conference "Bridging the Gap" (Portorož, 14–16 May 2008) – Information from the Presidency

Delegations will find annexed information from the Presidency on the above subject, which will be dealt with under "other business" at the meeting of the Council (Environment) on 5 June 2008.

ANNEX

Bridging the Gap

Responding to Environmental Change: From Words to Deeds

The fourth Bridging the Gap Conference was held at Portorož, Slovenia from 14th to 16th May 2008. It was sponsored by the European Commission, the European Environment Agency, The Environment Agency for England and Wales, The Environmental Protection Agency of Ireland and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and was attended by about 300 delegates from 25 countries.

The headline issues for the Conference were:

- The need for urgent action
- Putting the environment at the heart of economic decision making
- Improving communication between scientists, policy makers, politicians, business and civil society

and its main conclusions were:

The need for urgent action

The environment is changing rapidly in many respects, from climate to biodiversity to ecosystems of every type, and to respond we need **a paradigm shift** in the thinking that underlies political, economic and social policy development and planning. To achieve this it is necessary to **engage the wider, non-scientific community.** There is a real sense of urgency for many reasons. A few major reasons were discussed during the various sessions. Firstly, the stress on our energy resources is becoming severe. Stress on food resources is also becoming visible, through the increase in food prices. However, in Western urban societies there are the beginnings of a re-connection between people and the natural world which can be exploited to gain acceptance for the position that the environment impacts on every sphere of life. This will support and strengthen stakeholders and their communities, thus building **a consensus on possible options for the future** and increasing their active participation, their ability to act and their acceptance of the compromises required in order to accept the consequences of the environmental dimension.

Putting the environment at the heart of economic decision making

This requires us to connect together and put to use all the existing information and expertise (lay, local and scientific), and all the available tools and methods (e.g. scenarios, sustainability impact assessment). Both private and public institutions must engage and must overcome the inaction caused by the question: who must act first, business or policy makers? We must radically improve integration and connections across activities and sectors, including:

- using more **spatial planning** which is at the heart of effective management of biodiversity and ecosystem services and the sustainable use of natural resources which support climate change adaptation and economic decision making
- taking a **leadership role** in protecting biodiversity & ecosystems services as the EU did on climate change before Kyoto
- promoting biodiversity and ecosystems in the development of sectoral policies
- promoting **inter-disciplinary research** and funding to address issues concerning food, water, air, energy, climate change, biodiversity-ecosystem services and poverty
- considering the solutions to climate change and the choice of energy sources in a global context
- fully including environmental and social criteria when allocating EU structural and cohesion funds
- developing the concept of the non economic value of what matters - going beyond GDP.

Improving communication between scientists, policy makers, politicians, business and civil society.

The investment of resources in improved data and information quality, reach and accessibility emerged as key issues. There are major societal sectors (such as health) where the available information is woefully inadequate in all these respects. There are other areas (such as meteorology and cartography) where the information quality and reach are excellent but where accessibility is only excellent within the closed community of the discipline. Cross-sectoral access to these data and this information is vital to the full social and economic exploitation of the public investments already made in gathering and managing them. Steady progress is being made on the mechanics and technology required for this to happen. Initiatives such as SEIS, INSPIRE, GMES & GEOSS and the PSI Directive need to be integrated to deliver, on all scales of space and time, timely, targeted information and facilitate the development of services to maximise its use.

The marginal costs of the further exploitation of public data are low and the economic rewards of doing so could be huge. The European Environment Agency showed a potential return to central exchequers measured in billions of Euro from the commercial exploitation of environmental data if they were freely available. However, many of the current data gathering and exchange programmes are examples not of free access and distribution but of the careful protection of data within a restricted (public service) user community. This protectionism is driven by internal political requirements to recover or off-set investments, but it creates gaps between the generating community and a wider user base. These gaps can be hard to bridge but if fully adopted and funded, the EU initiatives referred to above have the potential to do so and to facilitate the development of a vast new e-commerce economy. However, user needs, free access to products and the encouragement of the e-economy so as to empower the users driving these initiatives, at levels down to the individual citizen, conflict with the data use and protection policies now in place in several important sectors. Unless these conflicts are resolved at a political level, it may be difficult for the concepts as now envisaged to come to fruition.

Communication between the scientific community and both the political and the wider civil community is an area of weakness. The scientific community must learn to deliver its message through a succinct, understandable “story” without the use of jargon and presumed knowledge. It has to be able to talk people's hearts. This is a difficult task and in general science is ill equipped for it. There is a need for positive action to enhance and develop this skill within the science base. This is of vital importance if the developing world is ever to be persuaded that the model which created wealth for the developed world is unsustainable and that a different path is necessary for the future.

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