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European Voice

13 - 19 January 2000 Volume 6 number 2

A WEEKLY VIEW OF THE UNION

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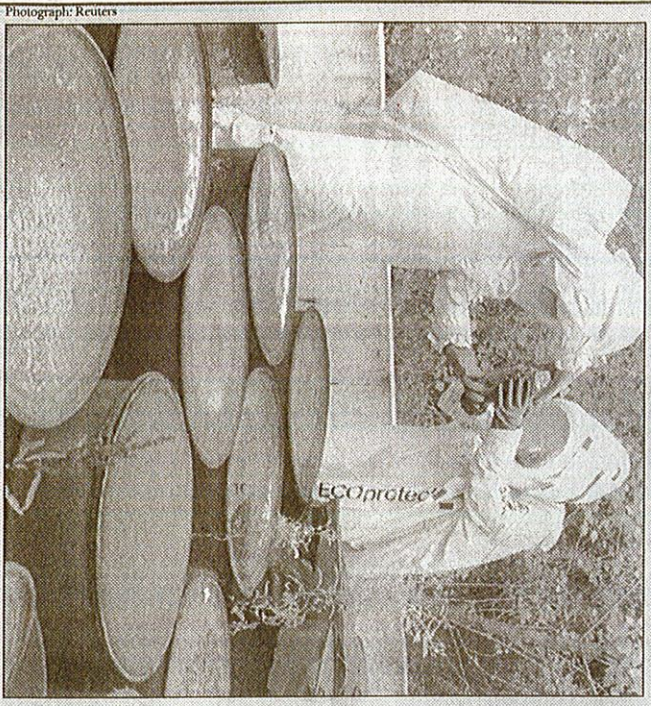
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Photograph: Reuters

Wallström pushes ahead with 'polluter pays' plan

By GARETH HARDING

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The latest draft of the highly controversial paper urges EU governments to sign up to a legally-binding directive covering the pollution of sensitive natural areas and the contamination of sites caused by dangerous activities. However, unlike most other liability schemes in the world, the responsibility for cleaning up environmental damage would not be applied retroactively.

Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström believes that a strict liability scheme would prevent environmental damage occurring in the first place and encourage firms to act more responsibly.

But she has had a hard time getting the much-delayed paper adopted by the full Commission. The follow-up to the EU executive's 1993 Green Paper was originally due to be rubber-stamped last year, but fell victim to internal wrangling between the institution's departments.

The European employers organisation UNICE is fiercely opposed to many of the ideas mooted in the paper and has successfully lobbied the Commission to water down some of the text's more contentious proposals. Industry is particularly concerned that a prescriptive liability scheme will damage competitiveness, stifle innovation and be difficult to manage.

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Clamour for action to bolster Union scientists' credibility

By RENÉE CORDES

THE European Commission is coming under mounting pressure to crack down on members of EU scientific committees who do not disclose work for firms which would be directly affected by the panels' decisions.

More than 50 interest groups have written to the Commission demanding greater transparency in the scientific committees' working practices and asking the EU executive to clarify its policy concerning the way members are selected and how they take their decisions. They argue that loopholes in the current system risk undermining the panels' credibility.

The Commission insists the experts on these committees are required to abide by strict ethical standards and that the decisions they take are fair and open. But interest groups, industry and politicians argue that not enough is being done to ensure that the rules are properly enforced.

The escalating row threatens to embarrass Commission President Romano Prodi, who pledged to make EU institutions more transparent following the Santer team's resignation last year and has also made restoring battered public confidence in food safety a high priority.

Under the existing regulations, panel members have to sign an annual declaration of interests and to reveal any activities which could prejudice the committee's decision when particular topics are discussed at meetings. But it is left up to individuals

to decide precisely what details to disclose and to each committee to decide what action to take if a potential conflict of interest arises.

When a member declares an interest in the subject under discussion, it is up to the committee chair and other members to decide whether to ask the expert concerned to contribute factual information without trying to influence the outcome of the debate, refrain from taking any part in the discussion or even leave the meeting when the item is discussed. Declarations are also supposed to be included in the minutes of the meeting.

British Labour MEP Glenys Kinnock, who is planning to write to Consumer Protection Commissioner David Byrne asking what he intends to do to make the work of the scientific committees more transparent, says that while the existing rules "represent some progress", she is not entirely satisfied.

"In the current climate of reform, this can only be the beginning of more in this direction," she told *European Voice*.

Kinnock argues that there is a need for a common set of rules for all the committees, more specific regulations to govern what interests have to be declared and penalties for members who do not comply fully with these rules.

Concern over the issue has been fuelled by claims that "commercial interests" may have influenced the decision to adopt the 1999 directive

on dietary foods designated for medical purposes, which covers breast milk substitutes for babies with health problems.

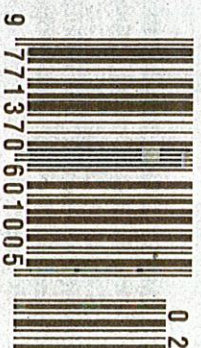
UK-based lobby group Baby Milk Action, which campaigns against the "unethical marketing" of breast milk substitutes, claims that a member of the committee which considered the proposals failed to disclose the full extent of his work for a company which makes baby milk substitutes.

"For consumers to have confidence in decisions, it is vital that policy-makers have access to truly independent advice and that any commercial influences are out in the open," said policy director Paul Rundall.

However, in a letter due to be sent to interest groups within days, Industry Commissioner Erkki Liikanen will insist the legislation was adopted with the full involvement of all the 'stakeholders' affected by it.

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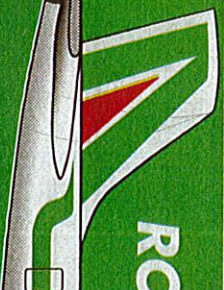
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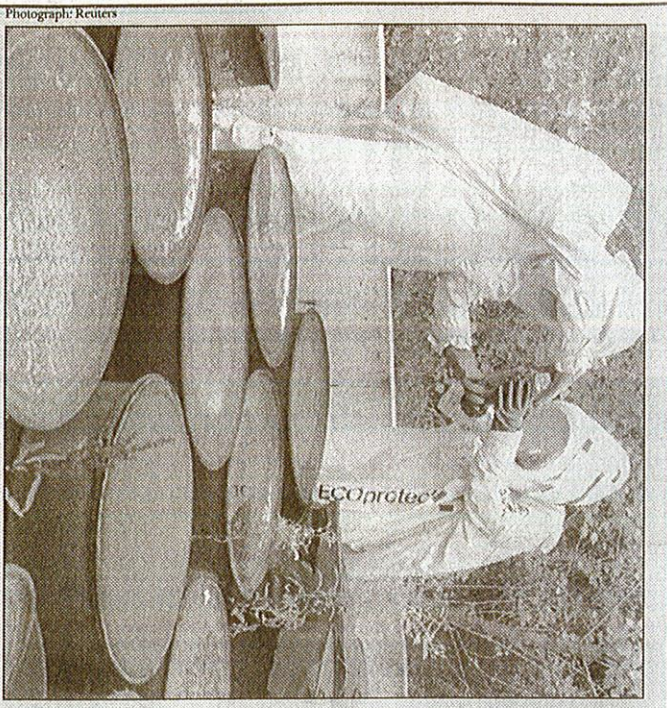
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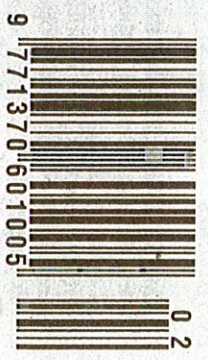
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Nestlé gets TV documentary halted

John Hooper in Berlin

A German television company has suspended its transmission of a documentary which accuses the multinational food company, Nestlé, of unethical practices.

The move by ZDF, one of Germany's largest networks, follows representations by a senior executive of the Switzerland-based company.

Allegations made by a former Nestlé employee, Syed Aamar Raza, formed the basis of the programme, which was due to be broadcast on Wednesday.

He accuses the firm of violating an international code of conduct in order to boost sales of its breast milk substitutes.

Mr Aamar Raza, who worked for Nestlé in Pakistan for almost three years until 1997, claims that the company provided gifts to doctors and had direct contact with mothers.

He also says that his pay as a "medical delegate" for Nestlé was linked to local sales of its products.

All these activities would be in contravention of the 1981 international code of marketing of breast milk substitutes, which Nestlé endorses.

But Nestlé dismisses Mr Aamar Raza's claims, and accuses him of blackmail. The company's head of corporate communications, François Perroud, said: "I emphatically deny these allegations."

He said that Mr Aamar Raza was "guilty of an attempt at blackmailing the corporation and of having gained employment by presenting a false diploma".

Mr Perroud said that Nestlé possessed a tape recording which proved its allegation of blackmail and which it planned to make public at an unspecified date.

A spokesman for ZDF, which is funded by a combination of public subsidy and advertising revenues, said: "There was some new information and we couldn't check it before the planned broadcast."

He stressed that it had not yet been decided to scrap the report altogether.

Mr Perroud said that he had

been interviewed for the programme early last week in Berlin.

"The impression was very clear that the particular person interviewing me was not receptive to the information we could provide," he said.

He had therefore decided to speak to "other people" in ZDF. Asked whether he had gone to the network's headquarters, which are in Mainz, Mr Perroud added: "I have no intention of saying how I spent my days or with whom I spoke". But he confirmed that his discussions had been "elsewhere in Germany".

Mr Perroud said: "ZDF made what I consider to be a rational journalist's decision over which I had no influence."

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