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Autor: Cavadini, Pietro
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Effects of the EEA on Swiss environmental protection

EC environmental protection is better than its repute

Europe is growing together in economic and political terms – but also in terms of establishing effective environmental protection. Situated as it is at the heart of Europe Switzerland cannot afford to stand aside from this integration process. The first step towards a wider Europe, covering the whole of the western part of the continent, has now been taken with the agreement on the EEA treaty. But it should be clear that in spite of the present state of Eurooptimism Switzerland's very progressive environmental protection regulations must not be allowed to go by the board.

While the purely economic advantages of Switzerland going along with European integration are obvious enough, many Swiss citizens are afraid that too deep an involvement will backfire on the environmental front. The European Community has the reputation of limping far behind Switzerland in matters ecological.

Environmental protection in the EC is well advanced

However, the clouded image of the EC's environmental policies is not really justified. Particularly since the European Single Act came into force, enormous progress has been made in the field of environmental protection. And even before the single act it has to be admitted than in a number of areas the Community was more advanced than Switzerland. An example was the so-called "Seveso directive", in which regulations governing cross-border movement of wastes and regulations aimed at

mental organisation which will be responsible for such supervision.

Environmental aspects of the EEA

What will be the environmental effects of Switzerland's participation in the EEA? It is not widely enough known that during the three years of intensive EEA negotiations not all discussions were about the famous free movement of persons, goods, services and capital. Verbal exchanges were just as vehement on matters such as maintaining high standards in fields like environmental, health and consumer protection. Of all the EFTA countries Switzerland was the most determined in these matters.

And not without success. Environmental aspects have a central role in the EEA treaty. For example, alongside health protection the contracting parties not only commit themselves to protecting and maintaining the environment but also to improving it. In addition,

*The incredibly rapid development of computers and their increasingly wide distribution soon led to a tremendous waste management problem
(Photo: Docuphot).*



preventing industrial accidents were applied in the Community long before they were even thought of in Switzerland. And the Community is also well ahead of Switzerland in the fields of public access to information relevant to the environment, genetically-modified organisms and uniform supervision of the execution of environmental regulations. The EC even plans to set up a central environ-

responsible use of natural resources is also required by the treaty provisions.

Exceptions

In the field of products Switzerland requested a number of exceptions from the obligation to take over immediately the whole body of EC law. Almost all these exceptions were finally accepted. For example, the EC has allowed a

two-year transition period for compliance with the exhaust and noise regulations for motor vehicles as well as those relating to the classification and labelling of dangerous chemical substances and products.

In a number of areas it was even possible to push through permanent exceptions, which will be maintained until the EC catches up with Switzerland. This was particularly true of limitations and prohibitions relating to substances and products harmful to the ozone layer, asbestos, pentachlorphenol, cadmium, the heavy metal content of batteries, phosphate fertilisers, etc.

Not an ecological island

However, fears that Switzerland could lose its vanguard role in the further development of environmental protection regulations are in fact partly grounded. Wherever product standards are relevant to the approaching single market, autonomous further development of our environmental protection regulations will not be possible. But in any case the idea that Switzerland should become an island of ecological purity at the centre of Europe is naive. From the general environmental point of view it would be much more likely to produce lasting results if Switzerland were to get together in the EEA or perhaps even in the EC with the other EFTA states and with the more environment-conscious of the EC states to ensure an environmental breakthrough for the whole of western Europe. We should not forget that environmental regulations in the EC will affect an area in which more than 320 million people live. At the end of the day the regulations which affect this huge territory are vastly more important – even to us – than those touching only tiny Switzerland.

Pietro Cavadini

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Treuhand Sven Müller
Birkenrain 4
CH-8634 Hombrechtikon ZH
Tel. 055/42 21 21