Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on:

— the 'Proposal for a Council Regulation (EC) amending Regulation (EEC) No 3528/86 on the protection of the Community's forests against atmospheric pollution', and

— the 'Proposal for a Council Regulation (EC) amending Regulation (EEC) No 2158/92 on the protection of the Community's forests against fire' [1]

(97/C 66/19)

On 11 September 1996 the Council, acting in pursuance of Articles 43 and 198 of the Treaty establishing the European Community asked the Economic and Social Committee for an opinion on the above-mentioned proposals.

The Committee appointed Mr Kallio as rapporteur-general for preparing its work on this matter.

At its 340th Plenary Session held on 27 and 28 November 1996 (meeting of 27 November 1996) the Committee unanimously adopted the following opinion.

The Committee endorses the two proposals for Council Regulations under review, subject to the observations set out below.

1. Observations

1.1. The Committee points out that it is essential to prolong the validity of the two regulations in order to achieve the underlying objectives. There is a need to take account of the long-term nature of forest lifecycles in order, above all to attain the objectives of the regulation on protection of forests against atmospheric pollution.

1.2. The Committee also bases its observations on its 1992 opinion on the first extension of the two regulations. The Committee has also been able to keep abreast of developments in European forestry, via annual reports on the forest condition in Europe and via papers on research into forest fires.

1.3. The Committee notes that:

— the EU measures to protect forests against atmospheric pollution accord with the objectives of EU agricultural policy and the goals set out in the 1993 Fifth Community Programme of Policy and Action in relation to the Environment and Sustainable Development. The proposed measures also help the EU to honour its international obligations (Rio conference of 1992);

— support for Member States' fire protection measures is concentrated on at-risk regions and EU cooperation on improving fire protection systems is in future to be promoted by extending the information system. This information system is also of considerable importance with regard to monitoring work and research.

2. General comments

2.1. Forests are of fundamental importance for the long-term maintenance of ecological balance, particularly with regard to soil and soil fertility, water management, climate and animal and plant life. The forests' role in providing protection also constitutes an important precondition for the long-term fertility of agricultural land.

2.2. The economic importance of forests derives from the fact (a) that they produce renewable raw materials and (b) that they create jobs in both forestry and the wood industry. Furthermore, other economic sectors, such as tourism and leisure tap the attractions offered by forests. Forest management creates the necessary infrastructure.

2.3. Forests constitute, by virtue of their major ecological, economic and social functions, an important factor in the development of the EU.

2.4. The Committee therefore regards European forests as a strategic resource, the maintenance of which requires an integrated structural policy. This policy also ties in with the EU's contribution to the protection of ecosystems and the achievement of sustainable development on a world-wide level.

2.5. EU policies must take appropriate account of the importance of Europe's forests to people, the environment, the economy and the countryside. Further-

[1] OJ No C 268, 14. 9. 1996, p. 7-8.

more, forestry must be provided with incentives in order to secure lasting protection for forests and to ensure that they are developed in keeping with their surroundings.

2.6. The Committee is pleased to note that the European Parliament too, has, since 1992, been devoting more time to the issues of forest conservation and development and forestry resources (EUROFOR Study 1994, EP Initiative 1996).

2.7. The Committee is pleased to note the coordinating role played by the Standing Forestry Committee at both EU level and world-wide level.

2.8. The Committee also welcomes the Commission's proposal that an advisory committee on forestry be set up.

3. Specific comments on the proposed EU measures to protect forests against atmospheric pollution

3.1. The Committee welcomes the reports on the forest condition in Europe published since 1992 by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE) and the EC Commission. These reports do, however, indicate that, in spite of regional improvements, damage to forestry at overall European level is increasing.

3.2. The Committee also notes with satisfaction that an increasing number of Member States are taking part in national and cross-frontier inventories of forest conditions (Level I) and that in addition to the crown condition surveys carried out between 1991 and 1995, further surveys have been organized of forest soil conditions and analyses of the chemical content of needles and leaves.

3.3. The Committee also welcomes the establishment, throughout the EU, of permanent observation plots (Level II) in which much more intensive investigations are carried out. It is intended to use the relevant findings to shed light on the complicated links between damage to forestry and atmospheric pollution.

3.3.1. It should be pointed out in this context that initial findings from permanent observation plots will be not be available until 1997. In order to identify clear-cut trends monitoring must continue for a further ten years at least, as particular surveys can only be carried out every five to ten years.

3.3.2. The assessment of data from the intensive monitoring, the standardization of methods of measurement and the ongoing exchange and comparison of information with other research centres at international level involves close cooperation at EU level.

3.3.3. The objectives of the intensive monitoring programme will be most readily attained if a large number of states participate. The states already taking part should therefore continue to be supported and encouragement should be given to other states who express an interest in participating.

3.4. A number of national reports indicate that a wide range of factors are responsible for damage to forests and that when they affect forests, complicated linkages emerge between these factors. The influence of these biotic and abiotic factors on the vitality of forests and the interaction between these factors should in future be subject to more intensive analysis. The Committee therefore recommends that steps be taken to make measures in respect of such factors eligible for EU aid.

4. Specific comments on the proposed EU measures to protect forests against fire

4.1. EU fire-protection measures will only be meaningful if they are implemented under a coherent forestry policy. At European level such a policy should fall within an overall development policy for rural areas, as defined in the Cork Declaration [1]. The protection of forests against fire is of considerable importance in the context of land-use planning policy.

4.2. The Committee warmly welcomes the information system on forest fires, which was planned on the basis of a pilot study [2]. The system currently covers a large number of areas in the southern Member States of the EU. The Committee welcomes the information system as it provides an improved basis for our — so far inadequate — knowledge about the causes of forest fires.

4.2.1. The Commission states that over the last ten years, there has been an improvement in the effectiveness of fire-protection measures in the EU Member States (and hence in the European Union): the overall area damaged by fire has decreased and the average area covered by individual fires, along with fire brigade reaction time, has also been cut. The considerable increase in the number of fires is however a matter for concern. In over 50 % of cases the cause is unknown, and more research should therefore be carried out into this area. It would be a worthwhile exercise to analyse the socio-economic aspects involved, such as farming, the flight from the land and tourism.

4.3. It is pointed out that 60 % of the afforested areas which pose a fire risk are in private hands. Bearing in mind that these afforested areas — particularly those located in southern Europe — have an intrinsically low level of profitability, the cost-intensive fire prevention

[1] European Conference on Rural Development held in Cork (Ireland) on 7-9 November 1996.

[2] European Commission: Forest fires in the south of the European Union; Pilot project in preparation for setting up the Community forest fire information system, Brussels, 1996.

measures jointly financed by the EU are justified in the case of privately-owned forests where other sources of funding are not available. The proposed additional funding for the extended life of the regulation is adequate.

4.4. With a view to supplementing action at EU level, steps should be taken to establish suitable plans at both national and regional level for reducing the impact of fires on forests.

4.5. In this context, the Committee would also highlight the importance of the Standing Forestry Committee and the proposed advisory committee on forestry; these committees could provide vertical channels of information between regions, Member States and the Commission.

Brussels, 27 November 1996.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Tom JENKINS

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on 'The impact of the introduction of new technologies on employment'

(97/C 66/20)

At its meeting of 21 February 1995, the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on 'The impact of the introduction of new technologies on employment'.

At its meeting of 21 December 1995, the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 19(1) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to set up a sub-committee to prepare the Committee's work on the subject.

The sub-committee adopted its draft opinion on 11 October 1996. The rapporteur was Mr Cal and the co-rapporteurs were Mr Bernabei and Mr Ramaekers.

At its 340th plenary session of 27 and 28 November 1996 (meeting of 27 November 1996), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 80 votes to five, with five abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Economic and Social Committee held a special plenary session on employment in October 1995. In the course of this plenary session a number of Opinions were discussed [1] which had been prepared by the relevant sections on matters directly relating to debates in Community bodies and which had one aspect in common, namely, their impact on employment (see special brochure on this subject).

1.2. The present own-initiative opinion aims to enlarge on, update and study in greater depth the subjects under discussion and look specifically at the impact of the introduction of new technologies on employment. This subject has been dealt with extensively by various Community and international bodies; some pieces of work stand out, such as the recent OECD study on 'Technology, productivity and job creation', the European Commission's Green Paper on the information society [2] and reports by the Consultative Group on Competitiveness [3], the Forum on the information

[1] OJ No C 18, 22. 1. 1996, p. 37, 42, 54, 68, 74 and 83.

[2] COM(96) 389 final.

[3] Advisory group set up by the Commission in February 1995 as indicated at the Essen European summit. It comprises 13 experts representing private and public sector banking, major companies and social groups, chaired by Mr C.A. Ciampi, former Italian Prime Minister and Governor of the Bank of Italy, together with a permanent representative of the Commission.