



ROYAL COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION

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Consultation Colleagues

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CHOICE OF TOPIC FOR THE RCEP'S 26th REPORT

The Royal Commission is considering the choice of subject for its next study. The study will overlap with its current major study, 'The Environmental Effects of Marine Fisheries' and will start in mid-2003. Four possible subjects are under consideration. These are:

- The Environmental Effects of Food Production;
- Tourism and the Environment;
- The Urban Environment;
- Waste Recycling and Recovery Policy.

I attach a note of the criteria the Commission applies to selecting topics for future study and brief statement outlining how the Commission envisages each of these subjects might be approached.

Before Members take a decision, they would like to have your comments on both the appropriateness of the subjects identified and these initial thoughts about their treatment. Please let me know if there are other relevant major studies carried out by other bodies that we have overlooked which might help (or, indeed, reduce the need for) a Commission study of these subjects.

Following the success of the recent Special Report, 'The Environmental Effects of Civil Aircraft in Flight', the Commission is also considering the possibility of carrying out another Special Report. Members are considering the topic of Business and the Environment, considering the opportunities presented to business by the environmental agenda and how the UK might best take advantage of them. We would welcome any views you might have on this topic.

I would be grateful if you could send your comments to me at the above address, preferably electronically, by 30 May.

This letter has been sent to a wide range of interested parties (see attached list), and will be posted on the Commission's website at www.rcep.org.uk. If you think that we have missed any individual or organisation that might like to contribute, feel free either to contact me or to pass a copy on to them directly.

Yours sincerely

Georgina Burney
Assistant Secretary

The Environmental Aspects of Food Production

Issues

Food production is one of the essential human activities. It occupies a large part of the land area of the UK, even though much of the food eaten in the UK is produced, or uses ingredients produced, in other countries. Although agriculture has been and is being studied in various fora, the Commission has already pointed out that the long-term environmental implications of the processes at work from farm to plate are not getting sufficient attention. In terms of energy balance of the agricultural system, the energy input for modern farming is far greater than the energy content of the food output.

A Commission study could consider:

- Inputs into agriculture and food processing and the scope for reducing those inputs.
- The environmental implications of 'food miles' and the energy use of transport, storage and distribution.
- The energy balance of agricultural systems.
- A comparison of different agricultural systems (for example intensive, integrated and organic systems).
- The environmental costs of packaging and food wastage.
- Marketing issues including the effects of supermarket buying policies, the demand for organic produce and the negative public reaction to GM food.
- The impact of food production for the UK in less developed countries, the effects of trade liberalisation, globalisation and fair trade.
- The potential for food labelling schemes.

Geographical scope/Audiences

The primary focus would be on the UK environment, but the implications for the environment elsewhere would also be taken into account. What might be the best practicable environmental option for providing the UK's food? These issues would need to be addressed at local, regional, national, and global levels, and especially within the context of the European Union and the CAP.

Previous Royal Commission studies

The Commission's Seventh Report (1979) was on *Agriculture and pollution*, the Sixteenth Report (1992) covered some aspects of agricultural pollution of fresh water, whilst the Nineteenth Report (1996) dealt with the effects of agriculture on soil and the spreading of sewage sludge on agricultural land. The Thirteenth (1989) and Fourteenth (1991) Reports both looked at GMOs and February 1999 the Commission produced a statement on the framework for overseeing developments in biotechnology. The Twenty-third (2002) Report considered the future of the countryside and the role of environmental impact assessment for agriculture. The Commission cooperated with other European environmental advisory committees to produce a position paper, "A sustainable agricultural policy for Europe", issued in October 2002.

Studies by other bodies

In recent years there have been many studies of particular parts of the picture, but there seems to have been little work done to relate the various parts of the picture to each other and take a long-term view of future prospects.

Sustain (the alliance for better food and farming) published a 90 page report entitled 'Eating Oil: Food Supply in a changing climate' in December 2002. This report provides some interesting statistics and makes policy recommendations.

Defra's Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food was launched at the end of 2002, heavily informed by the Curry report and the consultation based on that to which the Commission submitted a response. The government is currently conducting a tripartite consultation on GMOs including separate scientific, economic studies and a public debate on issues surrounding this subject area.

Following the Agenda 2000 mid-term review of the CAP, a Regulatory Impact Assessment is being carried out. This will assess the effects and implications of the proposals on agricultural businesses and on UK farmers, production, consumers, and the national administration of the CAP and should be available by the end of May 2003.

Tourism and the Environment

Issues

Tourism is a growing industry and a contributor to wealth and well-being, but it needs to be managed sustainably or it will damage the very assets upon which it depends. In appropriate areas, development to serve the tourism industry can often be of important economic benefit and, if managed correctly, can enhance the local environment. However, tourism can have attendant environmental problems, both at a local and global level.

Areas the Commission could consider include:

- The resource use (particularly land and water) involved and waste generated by the development and running of tourist destinations and amenities.
- The effects of coastal tourism and amenity development on coastal processes and water quality.
- The effects on ecosystems including biodiversity and habitat loss.
- Changes to the local environment and features of the region caused by tourism, for example the erosion damage caused in the Peak District by walkers destroying protective vegetation.
- The effects of emissions from the transport used for holidays.
- The implications for tourist destinations of climate change.
- The growth in ecotourism (i.e. tourism which contributes actively to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation, contributing to their well-being) and what value it can offer.

A report in this area would seek to find means to manage resources in such a way that the benefits of tourism could be achieved, while maintaining the quality of the environment.

Geographical scope/Audiences

The geographical scope of this study would cover the environmental effects of tourism in the UK but might include the effects of British tourists abroad. Larger scale effects such as climate change would clearly be considered at a global level.

Previous Royal Commission studies

The Commission would build on work done on transport in the 2002 Special Report on Aviation and the Eighteenth (1994) and Twentieth (1997) Reports. Many of the issues raised in other previous reports will be relevant although this study would be looking at these issues from a new perspective.

Studies by other bodies

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the English Tourism Council have published several reports including *Tomorrow's Tourism - a growth industry for the new Millennium* and *Measuring Sustainable Tourism at the local level*.

There is considerable international attention paid to this issue. The United Nations declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, and UNEP published Principles on Sustainable Tourism and the EU has a Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas. The World Tourism Association has also published several relevant documents recently, including *Voluntary initiatives for Sustainable Tourism* and *Sustainable Development of Ecotourism: A Compilation of Good Practices*.

The Urban Environment

Issues

The environment is often thought of in terms of green open countryside, but 80% of the UK population live in cities or towns. These areas experience particular environmental problems.

Some particular aspects that could be included might be:

- Noise pollution – from transport, industry or nuisance noise from neighbours. City-dwellers are more likely to be exposed to higher levels of noise than the rural population. This is an issue of great concern to the general public with complaints rising steadily.
- Light pollution – this causes night-time vision to be impaired which can be dangerous to motorists and pedestrians as well as causing damage and confusion to flora and fauna. Light pollution can also remove an individual's privacy, cause sleep disturbance and has even been linked with health problems.
- Odour pollution and other statutory nuisance – this subject area includes dust and bonfire nuisance, efficacy of regulation and monitoring.
- Urban Air Quality – impacts of particulates and NO_x, indoor air pollution and the effectiveness of regulation. Nearly half of all the UK's road transport emissions of airborne particles arise in urban areas.
- Water Pollution – impacts of sewage and industrial waste, rehabilitation of water sources and prevention.
- Biodiversity – the biodiversity in urban habitat patches, the effects of vehicle emissions on the wildlife and conservation programmes.
- Soil Contamination – means of decontamination and regeneration.
- Local environmental quality - litter, graffiti, fly-tipping, abandoned cars, the loss of play areas and footpaths.

This is a broad subject area and could be approached from several angles but would clearly need considerable focus. The Commission may wish to consider the impacts on the urban population from various locations for example, the pollution in streets and public places, the work place, the home and in transport. The health concerns raised by several of these issues might arguably fall outside the Commission's traditional role and would probably not play a great part in the study, although the problems could not be ignored.

Geographical scope/Audiences

The geographical area covered by this study would clearly be the UK. Many of the issues concerned with urban pollution are subject to EU regulation and so action in some areas would have to be negotiated internationally.

Previous Royal Commission studies

The Eighteenth (1994) and Twentieth (1997) Reports considered transport noise. The Twenty-Third (2001) Report considered ways of realising the potential of urban communities, dealing with contaminated land and improving parks and open spaces.

Studies by other bodies

Because of its importance to every day life, and its central role in the work of local authorities and health authorities, the topic (or group of topics) has been extensively studied.

The Urban White Paper was published by the DETR in November 2000 and since then the Urban White Paper Implementation Plan has been set up and is regularly updated.

The European Environment agency have carried out work on the urban environment and have published 'Towards an urban atlas: Assessment of spatial data on 25 European cities and urban areas' disseminating the first results of a research project dedicated to measuring and assessing urban dynamics through the creation of land use databases for 25 cities.

NERC are conducting a research programme entitled URGENT - Urban Regeneration and the Environment, which aims to stimulate the regeneration of the urban environment through understanding and managing the interaction of natural and man-made processes.

Waste Recycling and Recovery Policy

Issues

In England and Wales industry, commerce and households produce over 100 million tonnes each year. This is growing at around 3% each year.

The revised EU Landfill Directive requires major changes in the handling of waste in the UK, and the government's waste strategy, the main focus for such changes, is now in urgent need of improvement. All means for achieving changes in waste production and disposal are faced with serious challenges needing to be addressed if they are to play their full part. There are problems of public perception to be overcome if incineration (which the Commission advocated in its Seventeenth Report) is to be a viable option. A Commission study might discuss whether targets for recycling and incineration represent the best practicable environmental option (BPEO) or consider planning for and investing in recycling and recovery infrastructure nationally, the acceptability of energy from waste plants, the potential of life cycle analysis to help the assessment of BPEO for particular waste streams, or charging for household waste.

Requirements set in EU Directives appear to bear little relation to the existence or development of the infrastructure needed to achieve them. The waste management hierarchy – reduce, re-use, recover, dispose – forms the basis of the national and EU waste strategies. However it only excites public interest in this country when people feel threatened by nearby waste management facilities (incinerators, composting plants, etc). A study could examine ways of securing better public commitment to the sound management of their waste, including ways of driving the fundamental need to reduce waste production. Public attitudes towards incineration, the likely effect of the new landfill directives and the environmental costs and benefits of recycling would all make interesting topics. There are several waste streams which merit particular attention, such as clinical waste, electrical equipment and CFC-containing goods.

Geographical scope/ Audiences

Given that the EU sets the legal framework for most action in this field, the similarity of the problems throughout the EU area and the interaction with international trade issues (particularly through the Basle Convention), a study would look beyond purely UK concerns. Recommendations are likely to be addressed to EU, national, regional and local authorities

Previous Royal Commission studies

The Commission's Eleventh Report, *Managing Waste: The duty of care*, 1985, Seventeenth Report, *Incineration of Waste*, 1993, and Nineteenth Report, *Sustainable Use of Soil*, 1996, dealt with various aspects of waste.

Studies by other bodies

A study to identify and estimate the disamenity costs of landfill in Great Britain - was produced by Cambridge Econometrics in association with EFTEC and WRc in February

2003, updating a 1994 study that formed the basis for the landfill tax.

The government published its Waste Strategy in 2000, and the Strategy Unit's waste study *Waste not, Want not* was published in November 2002. The Environment Agency (and predecessor organisations) has published a series of waste management papers.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF TOPICS FOR STUDY

In 1993, the Commission published the following list of criteria that guide it in choosing topics for study (although any one study will not necessarily meet all the criteria):

- a.* the topics chosen should be what the Commission's First Report called 'priorities for enquiry': issues which require detailed and rigorous analysis before satisfactory policies can be adopted;
- b.* they should raise wide issues, both intellectually (in the sense of spanning several disciplines) and organisationally (in the sense of not falling within the terms of reference of any other single body);
- c.* they are likely to involve general issues of principle;
- d.* they should not normally duplicate other studies already in progress or planned in the near future;
- e.* there should be a reasonable prospect that worthwhile conclusions can be produced within two years with the resources likely to be available to the Commission.

The implication of these criteria is that the Commission generally undertakes complex and challenging studies covering broad cross-disciplinary issues.

In choosing topics, the Commission also seeks to take into account trends in environmental policy at European and global levels which seem likely to have significant implications for the UK.

LIST OF BODIES CONSULTED

The Commission would welcome comments from any other interested bodies.

Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment
Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
British Embassy, Washington
British Medical Association
Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales
Chairman of the Presidents of the Royal Colleges
Chief Medical Advisor, Health Protection Agency
Chief Scientific Advisor, Office of Science and Technology
Confederation of British Industry
Confederation of British Industry, Northern Ireland
Confederation of British Industry, Scotland
Confederation of British Industry, Wales
Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
Council for the Protection of Rural England
Country Land and Business Association
Countryside Agency
Countryside Council for Wales
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
Department for International Development
Department for Transport
Department of Agriculture & Rural Development, Northern Ireland
Department of Environment and Rural Affairs, The Scottish Executive
Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department of Health
Department of the Environment, Northern Ireland
Department of Trade and Industry
Economic and Social Research Council
English Heritage
English Nature
Environment Agency
Environment Directorate, The European Commission
Environment, Planning and Transport Committee, National Assembly for Wales
European Environment Agency
European Environmental Advisory Councils
Food Standards Agency
Friends of the Earth
Friends of the Earth, Cymru
Friends of the Earth, Northern Ireland
Friends of the Earth, Scotland
Green Alliance
Greenpeace UK
Health and Safety Executive
Health Department, The Scottish Executive
House of Commons Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
House of Commons Select Committee on Environmental Audit

House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology
House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union
Institute of Directors
Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Local Government Association
National Assembly for Wales
National Farmers Union (UK & Wales)
National Farmers Union of Scotland
National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection
Natural Environment Research Council
Northern Ireland Environment & Heritage Service
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
Research Directorate, The European Commission
Royal Academy of Engineering
The Royal Society
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
The Royal Society of Edinburgh
Royal Town Planning Institute
Scottish Environment Protection Agency
Scottish Landowners' Federation
Scottish Natural Heritage
Scottish Trade Union Congress
The British Academy
Trades Union Congress (UK)
UK Environmental Law Association
Ulster Farmers Union
Welsh Trade Union Council
World Wide Fund for Nature UK