# Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on 'The future of the trans-European inland waterway network'

(2002/C 80/04)

On 31 May 2001, the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up opinion on The future of the trans-European inland waterway network.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 18 December 2001. The rapporteur was Mr Levaux.

At its 387th plenary session on 16 and 17 January 2002 (meeting of 16 January) the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 90 votes to two.

## 1. Introduction

1.1. The Committee wishes to examine the conditions for the development of the trans-European inland waterway network to ensure that in 20 years' time it is able to accommodate the sharp increase in demand for goods transport.

1.2. For the most part, the trans-European inland waterway network stretches over six countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Germany and Austria, whose networks form an interconnected whole. Other countries too have significant networks: Italy, Finland, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Portugal.

1.3. Following enlargement, the network will cover six more countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland, which have a network totalling 9 000 km of inland waterways.

1.4. The economic growth of the European Union and enlargement will encourage trade over the coming decades and will lead to an increase of approximately 40 % in the volume of goods transport from 2010 onwards. Over the following decade the reinforced effects of enlargement and the need to open up to trade with the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the other eastern countries will have a multiplying effect on trade and thus on the demand for goods transport. The existing networks, roads and railways will not be able to absorb these increases in traffic, even if they are upgraded.

1.5. At the same time, it will be necessary to reduce pollution, especially that produced by transport. Most countries are gradually working in this direction by implementing the Kyoto protocol.

1.6. The European Union is therefore confronted with a two-fold challenge:

— how to assure the sustainable development of trade and thus meet the sharply rising demand for goods transport; and

— how to protect the environment, by restricting greenhouse gas emissions and cutting down on the use of non-renewable fossil fuels.

1.7. Wherever possible, waterways should be used for goods transport as, in conjunction with other traditional modes of transport, they have a number of advantages in terms of cost, environmental protection and reliability. The fourth section of this opinion will describe these advantages in more detail.

1.8. Studies have been conducted over a number of years to assess the benefits of goods transport by waterway.

1.9. In 1996, on a proposal from the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council adopted Community guidelines for the establishment of a trans-European transport network including the inland waterway network. The objectives to be met in relation to the existing network are:

— the bottlenecks that need removing;

— the wide-gauge links to be built rapidly in order to join up the following river basins (Seine-North, Seine-East, Moselle-Saône, Rhine-Rhône, Elbe-Oder-Danube and Danube-Po);

— the connections to be made with the networks of third countries in Eastern Europe, in particular via the Rhine-Main-Danube, or towards Poland, east of Berlin (purely indicative).

1.10. The Commission White Paper on 'European transport policy up to 2010', published on 12 September 2001, suggests policy lines for making better use of inland waterways.

1.11. The Committee, too, has published a number of opinions:

— own-initiative opinion, 14 September 1994 ([1])

— opinion, 13 September 1995 ([2])

— opinion, 13 September 1995 ([3])

— opinion, 23 November 1995 ([4])

— opinion, 2 December 1998 ([5]).

1.12. Recently, in France, in an opinion dated 21 May 2001, the Paris region's economic and social council came out in favour of the Seine-Nord link, which will secure the continuity of the trans-European network by removing a major bottleneck.

## 2. **Scope of this opinion**

2.1. This opinion focuses mainly on the inland waterways that are considered to be a means of goods transport between the six European Union countries mentioned above (pt. 1.2), while also taking into account probable trends with enlargement.

2.2. The Committee would however mention that there are also major navigable waterway networks in Italy, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal and Finland. In these countries, the use of these contained networks is considered a serious alternative or complementary option. The development of such networks should also be studied and encouraged for goods transport as well as tourism.

2.3. Furthermore, with a view to efficiency throughout the inland waterway network, the Committee recommends that all the options for entering inland areas from coastlines using available inland waterways should be researched and developed. It would basically be a matter of cataloguing sites that linked up hinterlands with coastlines in bygone times. In Decision No. 1346/2001/EC ([6]), the Council and European Parliament identified these coastline-hinterland links on maps. Working from that starting point, the Committee would like to see an individual study of each of these sites, in order to assess the technical and financial conditions for their redevelopment, with a view to promoting trade links as far inland as possible.

2.4. More generally, inland waterway transport should be seen as a natural extension of coastal shipping and combined inland-waterway and sea transport. The Committee would suggest that any initiative aimed at the ongoing integration of these modes of transport should be encouraged. Container transport has great potential in this respect as it minimises interruptions for loading, unloading and reloading.

2.5. The Committee would also mention that the European inland waterway network is not made up of wide-gauge channels alone. It includes several thousands of kilometres of canals whose capacity is smaller but which can carry significant volumes of local transport. In France, for instance, these canals account for over 10 % of the total tonnage transported.

2.6. Furthermore, this part of the network is of considerable interest for tourism activities, which in many countries have expanded in a major way over the last 10 years. Inland waterways are also very often used for irrigation, for regulating the discharge from catchment areas and for supplying water for cooling systems, electricity generation plants and industrial activities.

2.7. The Committee would therefore stress that, between now and 2020, consideration must be given to maintaining, modernising and in some cases renewing all wide-, medium- and narrow-gauge waterways with a view to restoring and preserving their full potential.

## 3. **Inland waterway transport — a real option**

3.1. The Committee would point out that all too often goods transport by waterway is an option whose importance is underestimated.

([1]) OJ C 393 of 31.12.1994, p. 60.
([2]) OJ C 301 of 13.11.1995, p. 20.
([3]) OJ C 301 of 13.11.1995, p. 19.
([4]) OJ C 39 of 12.02.1996, p. 96.
([5]) OJ C 40 of 15.02.1999, p. 47.

([6]) Decision No 1346/2001/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 May 2001 amending Decision No 1692/96/EC as regards seaports, inland ports and intermodal terminals as well as project No 8 in Annex III (OJ L 185 of 6.7.2001, p. 1) — ESC opinion: OJ C214 of 10.7.1998, p. 40.

3.2. In 1999, inland waterways held a 6,8 % share of the European Union's goods transport market with a total of 120,4 billion tonne-kilometres.

3.3. Road transport accounted for 74,7 %, rail for 13,4 % and pipelines for 5,1 %.

3.4. To reduce road use for goods transport, the Committee would suggest that more must be done to integrate competing modes of transport more effectively. Taken together, rail, pipelines and inland waterways currently carry a quarter of goods traffic and have reserve capacity that could be expanded if they were made to complement each other better.

3.5. Inland waterways are always compared to other forms of goods transport in a global manner. However, whereas road and rail networks cover the majority of the European Union, inland waterway networks run through only a relatively small area of a few European countries or regions.

3.6. This means that inland waterways' share of the market is under-estimated, and comparisons between modes of transport ought to be adjusted accordingly. Where inland waterways exist, they claim a large market share. For instance, measured in tonne-kilometres, the market share in 1999 was 11,8 % in Belgium, 12,8 % in Germany and 41,6 % in the Netherlands.

3.7. In France, if comparisons are made for individual 'départements' served by waterways, the market share reaches 9 %, with high points of 15 % in the Paris basin and 20 % in the Rhine-Moselle basin. It should also be noted that the fact that the French river basins are not interconnected with each other or with the European wide-gauge networks is a grave disadvantage to inland waterways.

3.8. Lastly, in the countries bordering the Danube, where the collapse of three bridges has meant that river traffic is temporarily only possible on Sundays, the financial losses for shipping companies, shipyards and ports are estimated at EUR 30 million per month.

## 4. **Inland waterways and their plus points**

4.1. In the Committee's view, inland waterway transport is the most environmentally-sound form of goods transport, owing to both the low level of pollution produced by boats and their low fuel consumption levels.

4.2. Their energy consumption is low compared with other modes of transport, as each boat or train of craft can replace several hundred lorries or wagons. With five litres of fuel, it is possible to carry one tonne of goods 500 km. The same tonne would travel 330 km by rail and only 100 km by road.

4.3. Furthermore, the studies available show that major energy savings could be made by encouraging research into improving engine performance. The development of more efficient engines will happen as and when the existing fleet is renewed. This will occur more rapidly once the market grows.

4.4. Inland waterways are also particularly environment-friendly because they do not use much space or generate much noise. The quality of boat engine fuel should nevertheless be improved.

4.5. Inland waterways offer the best possible safety guarantees and accidents are extremely rare. That makes them especially appropriate for transporting dangerous products.

4.6. With an average speed of 15 km per hour, inland waterway transport is comparable with rail transport and even road transport over certain distances. It also offers a high level of consistency in journey times and operates around the clock, providing arrangements are made for locks to be manned permanently, either by alternating shifts or through greater automation.

4.7. Inland waterways are especially well suited to meeting the requirements of intermodality with all other modes of transport at specially-designed platforms. For instance, there are plans to build a facility at Rotterdam port to accommodate container ships carrying between 10 and 12 thousand units. The containers could then be sent on to their final destination by road, rail or waterway.

4.8. Container transport, which grew remarkably fast over the last decade, meets most of the new demands in the area of goods transport. There are no consolidated European statistics, but take for instance the significant rates of growth for container transport:

— in France: from 1999 to 2000, overall growth of +56 %, the Rhine accounting for 63 %;

— in the Netherlands and Belgium: from 1997 to 1999, overall growth of +41 %, with 2 902 million TEU. The forecast for 2020 is in the 4,5 to 7,5 million TEU bracket.

4.9. Inland waterways will enable this growth to continue and several European centres are already planning new investments to receive and handle a higher number of containers. (Antwerp is building a new terminal that will handle 5000 containers per day. A decision was taken in October 2001 to build a terminal in Strasbourg to handle barges loaded with four rows of containers.)

4.10. Lastly, although inland waterway transport cannot provide the door-to-door service offered by road transport, it is on a par with rail transport. Individual waterway links can be built to access production and delivery sites in a similar way to rail. This requires a policy of setting up and developing multimodal platforms and industrial sites in areas accessible by waterway.

## 5. The Commission White Paper on 'European transport policy up to 2010: decision time' [1]

5.1. In the White Paper, the Commission sets out its broad policy lines and states specifically: 'As demand for transport keeps increasing, the Community's answer cannot be just to build new infrastructure (...). The transport system needs to be optimised to meet the demands of enlargement and sustainable development.'

5.2. Subject to the opinion that will be issued on the White Paper as a whole, the Committee subscribes to this view. It believes that the principle of optimisation should be applied to all modes of transport, starting with inland waterways, the utilisation of which meets the economic, environmental and social demands of sustainable development.

5.3. Inland waterways have considerable reserve capacity for goods transport, providing useful measures are taken at a price that is compatible with the resulting improvement in network productivity. The Committee supports a number of the measures included in the White Paper for encouraging the development of inland waterway transport:

— removing existing bottlenecks;

— harmonising technical and social regulations to allow healthy competition;

— lifting administrative constraints, such as customs formalities within the European area;

— setting up specific financing arrangements for investments in inland waterways;

— building the objectives to be met to modernise the existing network into a realistic timescale of 20 years, while looking more generally at joining up the networks and filling in the last missing links by 2040. These deadlines are compatible with the nature of the investments needed, providing the decision-makers give their full commitment to the plan.

5.4. The Committee regrets that the Commission's white paper does not include a separate chapter for inland waterways as it does for road, rail and air transport. As a result, inland waterways appear to be confined to the role of a supplement or top-up for other modes of transport. The white paper addresses inland waterways in Chapter 2, 'Linking up the modes of transport', in close connection with cabotage, which along with the 'motorways of the sea' is one of the Commission's stated priorities.

## 6. The Committee's suggestions and recommendations

6.1. The stakes for goods transport over the next two decades will be high. The priority will be to meet the transport needs generated by the economic development of the European Union.

6.2. The success of enlargement also depends on meeting demand for transport so that the new member countries have every opportunity to trade.

6.3. At the same time, trade with the whole of eastern Europe should open up much further in the run-up to 2020. This will be the key to balanced relations, development and peace.

6.3.1. In order to prepare more effectively for a trade policy with eastern Europe, for which one of the goods transport corridors is the Danube, river traffic on the Danube should be restored within the next three years by:

— clearing the debris of the three bombed bridges and removing any unexploded ordnance present in the FRY section;

— removing the pontoon bridges which have been installed temporarily and which block the river on weekdays;

[1] COM(2001) 370 final, of 12.9.2001.

— rebuilding bridges, particularly the Sloboda bridge at Novi Sad in Serbia.

6.4. Meeting the growing demand in terms of transport cannot be divorced from the need to protect the environment, in the context of sustainable development commitments.

6.5. To this end, while maintaining the competition necessary for growth, it is time to promote every possible form of complementarity between the various modes of transport.

6.6. Each of these modes of transport has advantages and meets a portion of demand.

6.7. In addition to land transport in the European Union, international trade with other continents is conducted via maritime and air transport. All possibilities for interconnections at this level should be exploited.

## 7. The Committee's proposals for the development of inland waterway transport over the next two decades

7.1. The Committee would encourage all initiatives designed to step up the harmonisation of administrative, customs-related, technical and social regulations with regard to inland waterways.

7.2. The Committee would ask that the Commission — while abiding by the rules of subsidiarity — recommend that the Member States earmark a sufficient annual budget for inland waterways in order to renovate and modernise existing networks.

7.3. The Committee calls on the European Union to provide funding for investment in new facilities, taking into account both the relative importance of the various modes of transport and the targets for striking a new balance between them that are to be set for the next 10 and 20 years.

7.3.1. The Committee asks the European Union to confirm its budgetary commitments by providing 85 % of the funding needed for clearance work on the Danube, and would like the members of the Danube Commission to provide the remaining 15 % in the form of national contributions.

7.3.2. The Committee would also like the European Union to provide 100 % funding for the rebuilding of the Sloboda bridge at Novi Sad.

7.4. The Committee would like to see an increase in the share of European funding in projects to improve and develop the inland waterway network. European subsidies for work on removing bottlenecks should be doubled from 10 to 20 %. In the same ways as for rail, the urgent removal of bottlenecks on the existing networks should be a priority, as it is essential for stimulating the market.

7.5. On this note, when it examines the white paper [1] as a whole, the Committee will have to evaluate the sum of the Community contribution rate earmarked 'specifically' for 'cross-border rail projects', and 'projects with the aim of eliminating clearly identified rail bottlenecks at borders with candidate countries ... on a one-off basis'. The Committee will then confirm that between now and 2020 inland waterways should benefit from the same Community contribution provisions as rail projects when the aim is to eliminate all bottlenecks, wherever their geographical location in the European Union or on its current external borders (Danube, Elbe, Havel-Oder, etc.).

7.6. The Committee would like to see encouragement for the creation of multimodal interchange platforms near inland waterway networks, which should be treated as structural facilities in terms of regional planning. In particular, this means establishing land reserves to allow for future centres of economic activity to be set up on the banks of inland waterways, with the possibility of dedicated river or rail links.

7.7. The Committee would suggest that to translate these policies into practice, the Commission should propose the introduction of specific European subsidies (of the Marco Polo kind) to finance up to 20 % of multimodal platform development projects involving access to waterways.

7.8. A move of this kind in financing procedures gives a clear and strong signal of the European Union's intention to develop a new — environmentally friendly — strand in its goods transport policy, while also encouraging the States concerned to accelerate their development projects.

7.9. Lastly, the Committee would point out that all the individuals and organisations consulted in the preparation for this opinion stressed the lack of up-to-date information.

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[1] See Part 2, article II A, third paragraph.

7.10. Currently, for instance, at European level, there is no available, detailed, up-to-date list of bottlenecks. Likewise, in the economic domain, although it is possible to estimate the level of activity, there are not enough forward studies to assess the future market for goods transport. Finally, there are no economic data available on waterway tourism or waterway-related activities, despite the fact that these activities have clearly grown in importance.

7.11. For this reason, not only is there an unawareness of the importance of the sector, but it is also difficult to secure recognition of its potential. Similarly, there is still no clear prediction of the investment required in infrastructure, facilities, materials, boats and staff training.

7.12. The Committee would therefore ask that before it publishes the new updated TEN guidelines for 2004, the Commission use funds available from the transport budget, the regional policy budget, or any other form of financing to take the following European-level initiatives:

— conduct a study taking stock of the exact position of the existing inland waterway network — eastern Europe included — in order to optimise utilisation, by drawing up an exhaustive list of bottlenecks with the estimated cost of the work needed to remove them; the cost of this work could be usefully compared to that of work to be carried out for other modes of transport in order to respond to market demand;

— carry out forward studies for 10 and 20 years' time, taking enlargement eastwards into account, in order to predict trends in the tonnage and type of goods transported by water and the types of packaging, so as to target the necessary investment more effectively;

— send the Committee the conclusions of the University of Hamburg study ordered by the Commission, in order to look at intermodality between the various modes of goods transport and the rebalancing needed;

— make Hamburg a permanent observatory, which will present an annual report including recommendations for improving the balance between the various modes of transport.

## 8. **Conclusions**

8.1. To ease the circulation of goods in today's 15-member EU and in the future enlarged Union of 26 members, various incentive measures will have to be taken before 2010 to ensure that by 2020 there is a network of navigable inland waterways that meets internal market demand, while respecting the principles of sustainable development.

8.2. The Commission should study the up-to-date and exhaustive list of bottlenecks in detail so as to establish:

— the type of bottleneck;

— the desired dimensions and the technical work to be done;

— progress on technical surveys or work under way, including the necessary capital budget;

— the planned timetable with the duration of the work, specifying whether it will be completed before or after 2020;

— financing mechanisms, distinguishing between three categories of bottleneck:

  — those receiving a 20 % Community financial contribution as for rail;

  — those benefiting from Structural Fund or Cohesion Fund aid (regional policy);

  — and those supported by the PHARE and central European programmes.

8.3. *For intermodality*

— Transport companies and public authorities or companies should be encouraged to increase freight volumes by boosting European or national financial aid. This would stimulate initiatives and projects to promote intermodal transport, of which inland waterways are one element.

— The Commission should finance an outline plan of all the intermodal transit platforms over a certain annual tonnage, to be decided. That plan should provide for European subsidies, the sum of which should be in proportion with the number of modes of transport (air + coastal + inland waterways + rail + road).

8.4. In the area of regulations, customs and duties, the Commission should submit, within four years, a series of practical measures to the Council and the Parliament, with a view to facilitating the development of inland waterway transport, as suggested in the white paper:

— removal of unjustifiable charges collected by sea ports for any assistance provided, so as not to put river transport and combined inland waterway and sea shipping at a disadvantage vis à vis competitors;

— abolition of the special charges levied on new boats as part of the 'old for new' rule that finances the scrapping fund, from 2002, without waiting for the 2003 deadline;

— implementation of a system of customs controls on departure and arrival of boats only, to facilitate combined inland-waterway and sea traffic, as traffic can now be monitored reliably via the Galileo programme;

— establishment of a single Community certificate, enabling bargemen to travel on all European inland waterways, following the example of heavy goods vehicle drivers.

Brussels, 16 January 2002.

*The President*

*of the Economic and Social Committee*

Göke FRERICHS

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**Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on:**

— **the 'Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Decision No 1719/1999/EC on a series of guidelines, including the identification of projects of common interest, for trans-European networks for the electronic interchange of data between administrations (IDA)', and**

— **the 'Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Decision No 1720/1999/EC, adopting a series of actions and measures in order to ensure interoperability of and access to trans-European networks for the electronic interchange of data between administrations (IDA)'**

(2002/C 80/05)

On 12 November 2001, the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 156 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned proposals.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 18 December 2001. The rapporteur was Mr Bernabei.

At its 387th plenary session (meeting of 16 January 2002), the Economic and Social Committee unanimously adopted the following opinion.

1. **The IDA II programme: evaluation and proposed amendments**

1.1. The IDA programme originated in 1993-1995, but it has had prolonged periods of difficulty owing to the absence of a legal basis, following the Court of Justice's judgment of 28 May 1998 annulling Decision No 468/95/EC that had formalised the Commission's 1993 proposal, on which the Committee had issued an opinion [1].

[1] OJ C 249 of 13.9.1993.