Subject: Heavy pollution of the River Segura (Spain)

In 1998, the Spanish River Segura was tested at 13 points between Murcia and the sea, and found to contain extremely toxic metals and products. The tests were carried out by the Agricultural Chemical Pedology Department of the University of Orihuela (Alicante), and the findings have now been backed up by a recent report by Julia Martínez Fernández, an environmental biologist at the University of Murcia. Her report, which has been made public by the Orihuela ‘Pro Río’ Committee, claims that the waters of the Segura are not even suitable for agricultural use. The levels of cadmium are frighteningly higher than the Community and Spanish legal limits (176 mg as against the legal 5 mg).

Although the Commission requested at the time that the waters of the Segura be analysed to see whether there was a case for taking Spain to the European Court, the resolution of this extremely serious environmental problem is proving extremely protracted, particularly given that the deadline for starting work on the urban waste water collection and treatment systems was 31 December 1999.

Given the urgent need to find solutions for a river which is getting more toxic with every day that passes, I advised the Commission of the situation as long ago as September 1997 (Question E-2683/97) (1), again in June 1998 (E-1906/98) (2), while my question of March last year has yet to receive an answer.

Will the Commission inform me what stage it has reached with its investigation of the major environmental problem represented by the pollution of the River Segura?

Has the Commission taken Spain to the European Court over this matter?

Does the Commission believe that the number of purification plants which the Spanish authorities intend to install in the towns concerned will be enough to ensure that the river will be perfectly clean? Does the Commission intend to demand that the Spanish authorities also ensure the purification of the industrial waste which factories discharge straight into the river?

(1) OJ C 117, 16.4.1998, p. 44.

Answer given by Mrs Wallström on behalf of the Commission

(14 April 2000)

With regard to the pollution of water by dangerous substances in general, the Commission is aware of the problems relating to the implementation in Spain of Council Directive 76/464/EEC (1) of 4 May 1976 on pollution caused by certain dangerous substances discharged into the aquatic environment of the Community. It should be noted that the Commission initiated infringement proceedings under Article 226 (ex Article 169) of the EC Treaty and the Court of Justice ruled against Spain for having failed to implement programmes to reduce the pollution of water by certain dangerous substances in list II in the Annex to Directive 76/464/EEC, contrary to the provisions of Article 7 thereo. (2).

The Commission has also initiated infringement proceedings against Spain for failure to comply with the provisions of Directive 76/464/EEC, in response to other pollution problems reported in complaints and Parliamentary questions. The pollution of the river Segura is covered by these proceedings and the Commission has sent Spain a reasoned opinion. The Commission would like to see the studies on the current state of the river Segura to which the Honourable Member refers. Once the additional information has been evaluated it may be used as supporting evidence.

The Commission is currently examining the river basin plans notified by the Spanish authorities after the Court delivered the judgment referred to above. They maintain that these plans include pollution reduction programmes for the inland waters concerned.
As regards Council Directive 91/271/EEC (1) of 21 May 1991 concerning urban waste-water treatment, agglomerations with a population equivalent (p. e.) of more than 15 000 (the population equivalent is a unit of measurement corresponding to the average amount of organic pollution produced per person each day) which discharge their urban waste-water into the river Segura must be provided with collecting systems and biological treatment systems by 31 December 2000 at the latest. For agglomerations with a population equivalent of between 2 000 and 15 000 the deadline is 31 December 2005. At the beginning of next year the Commission will check whether this requirement has been met in respect of the largest agglomerations.

Concerning industrial waste water, there is a clear obligation under Council Directive 76/464/EEC for the authorisation of discharges containing list I and list II substances. Consequently there is a requirement for purification of industrial waste water if emission limit values in the discharge of water quality objectives are exceeded.

The Commission, as guardian of the Treaties, will take the necessary measures, using the instruments available, to ensure that Community law is complied with in the case in question.


WRITTEN QUESTION E-0726/00
by Inger Schörling (Verts/ALE) to the Commission
(17 March 2000)

Subject: Homeopathic medicines in stock farming

Under a new Regulation (Council Regulation (EC) No. 1804/1999 (1) of 19 July 1999 supplementing Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 (2) on organic production of agricultural products and indications referring thereto on agricultural products and foodstuffs to include livestock production), organically reared animals are, primarily, to be treated with homeopathic and herbal medicines, provided they are effective.

It is very constructive that homeopathic and herbal medicines are now accepted and are to be used but, in Sweden, veterinary surgeons have protested against the rule as they are not permitted to use homeopathic medicines as long as there is no scientific evidence that such preparations are effective. In contrast, anyone who is not a veterinary surgeon is allowed to treat sick animals with homeopathic medicine.

The consequence of this situation is that it is left to farmers first to make a diagnosis and then to try a homeopathic treatment. There is a great risk in this process that a correct diagnosis and professional treatment will come too late. There is also a greater risk of spreading disease.

What does the Commission intend to do to ensure that animals in all countries receive professional and appropriate treatment and that veterinary surgeons are also allowed to use homeopathic and herbal medicines?


Answer given by Mr Liikanen on behalf of the Commission
(18 April 2000)

Under Council Regulation (CE) no 1804/1999 (1), sick or injured animals reared in organic farming should be treated with veterinary medicinal products of plant origin or homeopathic products, provided their therapeutic effect is effective and adapted to the sickness and to the animal species. If this is not the case, the use of chemically synthesised allopathic medicinal products is allowed under the responsibility of a vet.