As at the time of the Erika disaster, the Commission offered its assistance to the national authorities but also took the opportunity created by the increased public awareness of the risks of transporting heavy fuel oil by sea to react with forceful measures to help protect the coasts of the European Union.

The assistance system set up between the Commission and the appropriate disaster response organisations which exist at national level enabled immediate access to the pollution-control resources available Community-wide. The French, Portuguese and Spanish authorities were able to benefit very quickly from the available assistance, particularly ships and other special equipment to control the pollution. In addition, the Commission said it would be ready to co-finance an assessment of the impact of the pollution on the coast affected.

Moreover, in the fastest possible time, the Commission drew up and, on 3 December 2002, adopted a communication on improving safety at sea in response to the Prestige accident (1). The conclusions adopted by the Transport Council on 6 December 2002 supported Commission initiatives aimed at preventing a recurrence of this type of disaster and dealing with the aftermath.

The Commission therefore adopted, on 20 December 2002, a proposal for a Regulation banning the carriage of heavy fuel oil by single-hull vessels to or from European Union ports and on the accelerated phasing-in of double-hull to replace single-hull oil tankers (2). The proposed Regulation is now before the co-legislators.

The Commission also plans to grant special aid to repair the disaster damage. While stressing that the damage should be covered primarily by international mechanisms, particularly the International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund (IOPCF), the Commission has already initiated action to help Spanish fishermen deal with the situation. Thus, on 20 December 2002, the Council adopted a Regulation instituting specific measures to compensate the Spanish fisheries, shellfish industry and aquaculture affected by the oil spills from the Prestige (3).

Assistance may be available from the European Union Solidarity Fund if the Commission considers that the conditions of the Regulation for mobilising the Fund (particularly the ‘regional’ criterion) are met (4). Aid from the Cohesion Fund may also be forthcoming. As part of the overall amount allocated to Spain for the period 2000-2006, environmental projects may be submitted to the Commission to help combat the effects of the disaster.

In this connection, the Copenhagen European Council of 12 and 13 December 2002 acknowledged the Commission’s prompt response and welcomed the action it had undertaken to deal with the effects of the disaster within the current financial perspectives as well as its intention of examining the need for new initiatives.


WRITTEN QUESTION E-3367/02
by Daniela Raschhofer (NI) to the Commission
(27 November 2002)

Subject: Sapard programme

The most recent annual report of the European Court of Auditors shows, inter alia, that only 9.2% of the total Sapard appropriations available to the applicant countries were paid out, of which only EUR 1 million, or 0.1%, was transferred to the final beneficiaries.

1. Why were only 9.2% of the appropriations paid out? Does the reason for the low payment rate rest with the Commission, or are the beneficiary countries responsible?

2. Has the Sapard programme started up in all the applicant countries?
3. 0.1% of the appropriations actually reached the final beneficiaries. Does the Commission see the Sapard programme as being a success?

4. If not, will the Commission take steps in the period leading up to accession to prepare farmers in the applicant countries for that accession?

5. If the Commission is planning to adopt such measures, what form will they take?

6. Apart from the figures, the criticism of the Sapard programme voiced by the Court of Auditors has not changed by comparison with previous reports. Why has the Commission not yet found any suitable way of resolving the problems?

**Answer given by Mr Fischler on behalf of the Commission**

(7 February 2003)

1. Payments to an applicant country under the Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (Sapard) instrument are legally possible only when the country concerned has built the structures to administer it and obtained a Commission decision conferring management of aid on the relevant implementing agencies. By the end of 2001, the year covered by the latest report from the Court of Auditors, several countries accounting for the bulk of Sapard budget resources had not reached this stage and so no payments to them could be made. A second element that limited payments is that the amounts paid on account were limited to half the legal maximum. This was done on grounds of sound financial management as there was no objective reason to pay at the legal limit. This point and all others mentioned above are explained in section 7 of the Commission Sapard Annual report for 2001.

2. Yes, the last one, Hungary, has secured its conferral decision on 26 November 2002.

3. The figure quoted relates to the situation at the end of 2001. Since then the amount paid to beneficiaries has increased substantially. Moreover the Commission, as stated in the Sapard Annual report for 2001, considers that an assessment of the instrument in terms of payments risks giving a distorted image particularly at this stage. It should be noted that one of the two main objectives of Sapard is to contribute to the implementation of the ‘acquis communautaire’ concerning the common agricultural policy and related policies. Building the structures for managing Sapard will greatly facilitate the implementation of the ‘acquis’ in many areas upon accession.

4. and 5. Other things being equal the Commission would also have preferred a more rapid implementation of Sapard. Where specific difficulties in programme implementation are encountered these are usually considered in the monitoring committee meetings, and where appropriate tackled by amendments of programmes. In addition the Commission in June 2002 sponsored a seminar involving all ten countries to deal inter alia with this issue. It has also, by letter of 13 June 2002, invited Candidate Countries to submit suggestions to simplify the legal framework. As regards expenditure developments, the declarations for the third quarter 2002 show that implementation is rapidly increasing for most countries which obtained their conferral decisions in 2001.

6. The criticisms made by the Court of Auditors, apart from the budget uptake remarks already commented upon, all received reasoned responses. Some remarks concerning management of the instrument have now been reflected in the Multi-Annual Financing Agreement between the Community and each Candidate Country (reporting of interest and better definition of the competence of the monitoring committee). As regards the ‘shortcomings in Commission’s methodology for approving national management of Sapard’ cited by the Court of Auditors, the Commission has expressed its commitment to correct these elements.