Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources

European Parliament resolution of 25 April 2007 on a Thematic Strategy for the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources (2006/2210(INI))

The European Parliament,

— having regard to the communication from the Commission ‘Towards a Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources’ (COM(2003)0572),
— having regard to the communication from the Commission ‘Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources’ (COM(2005)0670),
— having regard to the Review of the EU’s Sustainable Development Strategy — Renewed Strategy (1),
— having regard to the Convention on Biological Diversity adopted in Rio de Janeiro in 1992,
— having regard to Articles 2 and 6 of the EC Treaty, which stipulate that environmental protection requirements are to be integrated into the various sectors of Community policy with a view to promoting environmentally sound development of economic activities,
— having regard to Article 174 of the EC Treaty,
— having regard to the Sixth Community Environment Action Programme (6th EAP) (3),
— having regard to the communication from the Commission ‘Taking sustainable use of resources forward: A Thematic Strategy on the prevention and recycling of waste’ (COM(2005)0666),
— having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
— having regard to the report of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (A6-0054/2007),

A. whereas, in the decades ahead, rapid demographic change in the world will bring ever greater pressure to bear on the climate, natural resources and biodiversity, and whereas this evolution is also related to the disparity in prosperity between the industrialised world and developing countries,

B. whereas sustainable economic development, combined with fair and equitable sharing of the benefits derived from natural resources and access to resources and markets are necessary to alleviate poverty and increase human well-being,
C. whereas, because of the rapid growth of the world population, by 2010 an additional 400 million people will be living on Earth; whereas in a world in which mutual dependence is constantly increasing we cannot continue to produce and consume in the present way and whereas, worldwide, 15 500 species of plants and animals are seriously endangered; whereas in recent decades nearly all types of ecosystem and all species have already suffered very badly and whereas fresh water is also a valuable resource, which is under pressure; whereas the worldwide water crisis is a threat to human life and sustainable development and ultimately also to peace and security,

D. whereas, worldwide, the average ecological footprint (1) is now 2.2 hectares per capita, although it should not exceed 1.8 hectares in order to remain within the limits of the Earth's biocapacity; whereas, worldwide, human beings are using 25% more than the Earth produces in a year, or in other words, the Earth needs a year and three months to produce what we have used in a single year (2003) (WWF Eco-report 2006),

E. whereas, according to the UN 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, there has been a decline in two thirds of all ecosystems since the beginning of the 1960s and whereas demand for natural resources has risen by 70% over the same period,

F. whereas according to the European Environment Agency, Europe’s ecological footprint exceeded its own biocapacity in 1960 and is to date twice as large as its biocapacity; whereas this is not compatible with equitable sustainable development,

G. whereas the failure so far to assign a value to natural capital, in particular ecosystem services, is a serious impediment in the overall efforts to establish a framework for sustainable use of natural resources,

H. whereas the interests of commerce and the environment need not be in conflict; whereas, however, sustained economic prosperity in the future will only be possible in a market-based system in which all forms of capital, including natural capital, are fully valued, and the costs of damage to human health and the environment are fully internalised into product prices,

I. whereas rising economic growth in developing countries will increase pressure on the environment still further,

J. whereas progress in the field of know-how and technology is crucial in order to attain a balance between economic growth on the one hand and social and ecological sustainability on the other,

K. whereas pursuant to Article 6 of the Treaty, bolstered by the Cardiff Process, environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the formulation and implementation of EU policy,

L. whereas there is little complementarity and insufficient coordination between the different international fora responsible for sustainable development (Convention on Biological Diversity, Kyoto Protocol, Convention to Combat Desertification, etc.); whereas, furthermore, there are no tools to enforce these agreements worldwide,

M. whereas the EU Strategy for Growth and Jobs (2) endorsed by the Spring Summit of 2005 gives high priority to more sustainable use of natural resources and calls for the EU to take the lead in the move towards more sustainable consumption and production in the global economy,

N. whereas the guiding principles for sustainable development adopted by the European Council of 15/16 June 2006 should form the basis for sustainable development, particularly those relating to the quality of life and solidarity between and within generations,

(1) ‘Ecological footprint’ is an expression of the extent to which human beings consume the Earth’s resources in terms of hectares of productive land.

O. whereas, in its communication on the review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy — a platform for action (COM(2005)0658), the Commission states that:

— the EU and Member States must continue to invest in research and technology to find new cost-effective and resource-efficient ways of production and consumption,

— the EU must position itself as a world leader in eco-efficient and energy-saving technologies in order to reduce the high level of dependence on natural resources,

— the EU must safeguard the earth’s capacity to support life in all its diversity, respect the limits of the planet’s natural resources and ensure a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment,

— by 2012, 12 % of Member States’ energy consumption must come from renewable sources,

— by 2010, 21 % of Member States’ electricity consumption must be met by renewable sources,

P. whereas in June 2006, the European Council demanded inter alia the following in the Renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy:

— the EU strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources should be complemented by a number of targets and measures at EU level,

— to improve resource efficiency to reduce the overall use of non-renewable natural resources and the related environmental impacts of raw materials use, thereby using renewable natural resources at a rate that does not exceed their regeneration capacity,

Q. whereas the 6th EAP:

— lays down a programme whose objectives accord with the key priorities of the Community, namely climate change, nature and biodiversity, the environment, public health and the quality of life, natural resources and waste,

— requires the promotion of changes to subsidy schemes which have a substantial adverse impact on the environment and are not compatible with sustainable development,

— states that thematic strategies must include relevant qualitative and quantitative environmental objectives and timetables,

— and inter alia explicitly asks for a review of the efficiency of policy measures and the impact of subsidies relating to natural resources and waste, as well as for the establishment of goals and targets for resource efficiency and the diminished use of resources, decoupling the link between economic growth and negative environmental impacts,

R. whereas the Annex to the Thematic Strategy states that:

— if an annual improvement in resource productivity of 3 % is achieved, while the economy grows at 3 % per year as well, resource use will be more or less stable,

— everything else being equal, stabilising material use will not be enough to reduce economy-wide environmental impacts and achieve decoupling,

S. whereas in its resolution of 16 November 2005 on Winning the Battle against Global Climate Change (1), the European Parliament stated that strong emission reductions, i.e. 30 % by 2020 and 60-80 % by 2050, need to be undertaken by developed countries,

T. whereas agriculture uses 50 % of all land and consumes 30 % of all water and 20 % of all fuel,

U. whereas transportation is the fastest growing end-use sector and is responsible for 40 % of all energy use worldwide and for approximately 40-80 % of all air pollution and for 28 % of all CO₂ emissions in Europe,

(1) OJ C 280 E, 18.11.2006, p. 120.
V. whereas an enhanced understanding of how natural systems work will open up new opportunities for ecologically sound production and consumption systems; whereas there are already more than 2000 patented technologies inspired by nature (‘biomimicry’),

W. whereas one of the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2000 was that of ensuring a sustainable environment before 2015 by integrating sustainable development into national policy and programmes, halting the loss of natural resources and halving the number of people without access to safe drinking water; whereas by 2020 the living conditions of at least 140 million slum-dwellers must be significantly improved,

X. whereas every year between 5 and 6 million people — mainly children — die of diseases caused by water and air pollution; whereas 370 000 premature deaths are caused by air pollution in Europe,

Y. whereas sustainable use of natural resources is a ‘conditio sine qua non’ for long-term prosperity,

Z. whereas the basis of most environmental problems is the unsustainable use of natural resources,

AA. whereas a transformation of the present system of production and consumption is urgently needed;

AB. whereas society depends primarily on products made up of a set of different materials, i.e. biological, mineral and synthetic materials, which are often combined to produce composite materials, and whereas these materials ought to be used and handled in such a way that, when the useful life of the products is over, they do not become useless waste,

AC. whereas by 2015 at the latest better management and avoidance of overexploitation of renewable natural resources such as fish stocks, biodiversity, water, air, soil and the atmosphere must result in the recovery of damaged marine ecosystems, in accordance with the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation adopted at the United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002,

AD. whereas our industrial system feeds on distant ecosystems by means of trade and is often insensitive to their degradation; whereas therefore the natural resource strategy must be based on the application of the ecological footprint methodology and have as a primary goal to reduce the ecological footprint of the EU in the world, and to take a leading role and encourage other non-EU countries to do the same,

AE. whereas by 2010 at the latest the loss of biodiversity must be halted, in accordance with the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation,

AF. whereas there are major disparities between Member States as regards the productivity of resources; whereas eliminating these disparities alone would mean that the improved productivity would reduce the amount of natural resources used and consequently reduce pressure on the environment and improve the competitive position of the Member States,

AG. whereas economically developed and service orientated Member States have exported a large amount of their energy and natural resource consuming activities to less developed EU and non-EU countries; whereas the Commission should take into consideration that different Member States use different amounts of natural resource to reach the same economic growth rate,

AH. whereas the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation also called for a decoupling of economic growth and environmental degradation by improving efficiency and sustainability in the use of resources and production processes and by reducing resource degradation, pollution and waste,
AI. whereas the abovementioned European Union Environmental Technologies Action Plan:

— notes that efficient use of resources and materials reduces costs to industry and households, thereby releasing funds and making the EU economy less dependent on scarce resources and highly unstable markets,

— notes that scarce resources often cause regional conflicts in developing countries,

— draws attention to the need to promote technologies which serve to prevent natural disasters or activities which can lead to the destruction of natural resources or damage to them,

AJ. whereas a policy can only be implemented if the public and consumers are also encouraged to alter their consumption patterns to take account of environmental and health requirements;

1. Takes reluctant note of the abovementioned communication from the Commission ‘Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources’, and regrets the lack of a clear vision on how to meet the overall objective; considers that it should be seen as a first step in a process eventually leading to a comprehensive strategy for the sustainable use of natural resources;

2. Considers that the Commission’s action platform for the study of the Sustainable Development Strategy is too cautious and limited in scope and that, in its present form, it will not be able to persuade the public or political decision-makers to pursue the crucial goals for which it provides;

3. Calls on the Commission to establish goals and targets at political and at sectoral level for resource efficiency, and speed up the work on appropriate tools to maintain progress;

4. Notes with regret that the Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources (Thematic Strategy) fails to pursue the objectives of the European Community’s 6th EAP; considers that the objectives of the 6th EAP relating to the sustainable use of natural resources will remain unattained unless the concerted actions presented in the Thematic Strategy are made more effective; considers that this applies particularly to the objective of ensuring that the use of natural resources and their impact do not exceed the carrying capacity of the environment;

5. Calls on the European Union to step up its efforts and take decisions with a view to becoming the most efficient economy in the world in terms of its use of resources and energy; stresses that the attainment of such aims would permit greater independence and security of supply of resources and energy and a decoupling of economic growth from the exploitation of natural resources;

6. Stresses that pollution, the increasing scarcity of natural resources and raw materials and the increasing difficulty of gaining access to them constitute a threat to the conservation of biodiversity and will cause price rises on such a scale as to more or less completely destabilise the economic and social systems of the European Union and third countries, and will give rise to risks of conflict; urges the Commission and the European Union to respond in ways commensurate with the situation;

7. Considers that, even if there is a need for more specific data in certain fields, this should not be taken as an excuse for postponing measures which need to be taken to ensure sustainable use of natural resources; notes, furthermore, that the knowledge currently available is sufficient to permit practical action to be taken now to improve the sustainable consumption of natural resources;

8. Stresses the essential objectives of sustainable use of natural resources, including a high level of protection of the environment and public health, the availability of natural resources for future generations, a contribution to the stability and prosperity of our economic and social system and limiting the use of resources in order to reduce and stabilise environmental impact;
9. Considers that the Commission should take Parliament, European public opinion and the environment seriously, and calls on the Commission to set binding targets and timetables for natural resources in the following way:

(a) to develop and implement best practices for every production chain,

(b) to achieve a quantitative greenhouse gas reduction of at least 30% by 2020 and of 80% by 2050 against 1990 levels;

10. Encourages the Commission to define best practices for the major product groups, starting with the 'top-ten' (defined by the Commission), to be completed within three years. The Data Centre for Natural Resources (proposed in the Thematic Strategy) shall be responsible for defining best practices;

11. Encourages the Commission to propose Community policies in order to:

— foster stakeholder interaction and promote application of life-cycle assessments (LCA) and/or other methods among companies and provide information upon request,

— develop CO₂ targets on a national and a sectoral basis;

12. Considers that the Thematic Strategy should include guidelines explaining the necessary measures for certain sectors and required changes proposed for policies to reach a sustainable or more efficient resource use;

13. Considers that, by postponing practical action, the EU will surrender its competitive position in the field of innovation and trade in new eco-efficient technologies;

14. Considers that the European Union should take the lead in the search for innovative solutions and in promoting more efficient use of resources, and that it should aim to be the world leader in eco-efficient technologies; notes that the market for sustainable products will have to grow in order to meet the increasing demand from a rapidly growing 'middle class' for consumer goods and services which respect regional and global carrying capacity;

15. Welcomes the acknowledgement by the Commission that policy on the sustainable use of natural resources has so far proven inadequate;

16. While acknowledging that working towards the sustainable use of natural resources is a long-term process, considers that a time horizon of 25 years as outlined in the Commission's communication is too long;

17. Welcomes the Commission's focus on life-cycle thinking throughout the Communication and encourages the Commission to follow this approach through to concrete policy action;

18. Stresses that R&D efforts must be geared towards enhancing our understanding of how natural systems work so as to structure production and consumption systems along biological lines, thereby improving resource productivity and reducing pollution;

19. Considers the establishment of a European Data Centre before 2008 to be useful if its remit is to periodically assess and optimise the known indicators and in addition to establish which further indicators are still needed to facilitate the pursuit of the urgent objective of reducing the environmental and health impact of the use of natural resources to a minimum;

20. Does not agree with the Commission that no indicators are known which would enable specific, clear and time-tabled objectives to be included in the Thematic Strategy now; notes that indicators which are already known include GDP (Gross Domestic Product), DMI (Direct Material Input) and DMC (Domestic Material Consumption); other indicators as available and detailed as the ones mentioned above would be
related to various aspects of the quality of life, such as public health conditions, social inclusion, social awareness of decision-making processes and an environmental 'footprint'; the challenge would be to improve the quality of life by pursuing more immaterial goals with the support of information and communication technologies, and in general less demanding technologies, and therefore reducing the pressure on natural resources;

21. Proposes that the Commission perform within three years an assessment regarding the possibilities and the instruments for decoupling natural resource use from economic growth. The revised Thematic Strategy should include these decoupling instruments. This approach should also be implemented in the revision of existing policies;

22. Stresses the need to develop a complement to the GDP — focusing on the qualitative aspects of growth — and in this process specifically develop methodologies to assign a value to natural capital;

23. Considers that, if reductions in the use of natural resources are accompanied by a switch to an alternative, research should first be conducted into the environmental impact of the alternative in question;

24. Calls on the EU to ensure that all Community instruments and legislation contribute overall to the conservation of natural resources and the pursuit of sustainable development in the EU and countries outside the EU; the EU should encourage the establishment of resource strategies in non-EU countries, which should also be reflected in its funds and aid policy;

25. Considers it important to tackle not only Community use (use within the EU) of natural resources but also imports of resources from third countries;

26. Stresses the need to address the obvious shortcomings of the current economic model with regard to assigning a value to ecosystem services, and to present a policy framework giving priority to resource efficiency and production systems progressively structured along biological lines;

27. Considers that by 2030 the use of primary non-renewable resources in the EU must be reduced by a factor of 4, or the use of natural resources must be halved by 2030 while simultaneously increasing worldwide prosperity; notes that the following indicators can be used: TMR (Total Material Requirement), DMI (Domestic Material Input) and DMC (Direct Material Consumption); notes that these indicators show what quantities of resources are used in an economy and that by dividing GDP by these indicators it is possible to measure the productivity of natural resource use;

28. Agrees that at present there are very few aggregated impact indicators that are already widely accepted for measuring the progress of reductions in the environmental impact of resource use, the so-called eco-efficiency indicator; considers that these need to be finalised as soon as possible and at the latest by 2008; notes that in this respect the further development of ‘environmentally weighted material consumption’ (EMC) should be actively supported;

29. Considers that market instruments and subsidies, particularly of a fiscal nature, can be used to reduce the use of environmentally damaging resources, particularly by means of a re-allocation of subsidies and by reducing in stages, but quickly, any subsidies to unsustainable activities and supporting the introduction of ecotaxes; abolishing harmful subsidies on resource use should be incorporated in the Commission’s preparation of a roadmap as demanded in the Sustainable Development Strategy;

30. Considers that a re-allocation of subsidies, for example more subsidies for small-scale hydroelectric power, as well as for wind power and solar energy, would promote the use of new technologies and improve Europe’s competitive position in the world, as well as reducing dependence on fossil fuels imported from other parts of the world;
31. Notes that the decoupling of economic growth and improvement of the efficiency of resource use is already regarded as a political objective in nine Member States (including Germany and Finland) and Japan; considers that relative decoupling is not sufficient, given that absolute consumption of natural resources remains too high; stresses therefore that a political programme relating to the sustainable use of natural resources should concentrate on decoupling of economic growth from the use of natural resources that brings about an absolute reduction both in the resources used and in the environmental impact of resource use;

32. Stresses that the EU should adopt a clear target for the absolute reduction of resource use, given that the analysis in the Annex to the Thematic Strategy indicates that we need to go beyond a 3% annual resource efficiency improvement, and that halving resource use in the period 2005-2030 requires almost 6% annual resource efficiency improvement;

33. Considers that the adverse impact of the total use of resources in the EU per category of resource must be halved, for example by means of a sectoral approach in the construction industry, transport and other sectors, in order to reduce the impact of the use of these resources and dependence on them;

34. Considers that the Thematic Strategy should aim to make more efficient use of natural resources, improve their management and the management of waste, adopt more sustainable methods of production and patterns of consumption, and ensure that the use of natural resources does not exceed the potential burden which the environment can withstand;

35. Proposes that targets be set for resource use reduction in the following sectors: food, housing and transport, as according to recent studies these cause the highest negative impacts;

36. Therefore calls on the Commission to undertake three key actions:

(a) identify and develop specific policies and actions for the top 20 resources (materials) with the largest impacts; these should be proposed at the latest by 2008,

(b) prepare stakeholder dialogues on the most resource-intensive extraction and production sectors in order to identify sectoral targets and appropriate measures for improving resource efficiency,

(c) develop benchmark criteria for sustainable management and harvesting of biotic resources (e.g. wood, fish, agricultural products);

37. Calls on the Commission to actively encourage the development of new models of offering products through, for example, product service systems, providing utility to consumers through the use of services rather than products, thereby optimising the use of both energy and materials;

38. Stresses that efforts to use natural resources more efficiently must be implemented with full attention being paid to the impact of trade and have as a goal to progressively reduce the ecological footprint of the EU in the world;

39. Considers that the Thematic Strategy should be integrated at various levels of policy and across all relevant policy areas; to this end EU waste prevention, re-use and recycling targets must play a fundamental role;

40. Asks the Commission to promote technologies focusing on durable, repairable, re-usable and recyclable products;

41. Considers that repair and re-use of products extends the product life and is a sustainable measure to achieve a reduction in waste generation and to increase resource conservation; therefore asks the Commission and the Member States to actively encourage a ‘re-use society’ by educational, economic and structural measures, such as support to re-use and repair organisations and networks;
42. Supports the Thematic Strategy's approach to analyse existing policies to raise the Strategy's effectiveness, but proposes to select already in this phase the most relevant existing policies and the ones under preparation (e.g. Thematic Strategy on the Prevention and Recycling of Waste, Integrated Product Policy); the Thematic Strategy should be consistent with the Lisbon objectives as well;

43. Proposes the identification of the deficiencies in current European policies which hamper the sustainable use of natural resources;

44. Notes that the Commission envisages a regular review of the Thematic Strategy beginning in 2010 and continuing every five years thereafter; considers this to be of value but stresses the need for this review to include proper analysis of actions taken towards achieving the sustainable use of natural resources and to take into account the constant need for policy in this area to evolve in relation to scientific developments; the review should also examine the effects in third countries of actions undertaken at EU level;

45. Considers that agricultural policy, in particular, should be geared partly to reducing pressure on the environment by means of the sustainable use of natural resources including, but not confined to, land, water and fuels;

46. Stresses the importance of the global dimension of European policy on the sustainable use of natural resources and the need to ensure that any move towards sustainable resource use in Europe does not lead to increased environmental impacts in third countries;

47. Considers that, in agriculture, genuine progress needs to be made in research into ecological production methods, regulation and monitoring relating, inter alia, to the use of fertilisers, pesticides and water, promotion of short chains, internalising external costs and attaching environmental conditions to economic support;

48. Considers that the pioneering role and responsible use of natural resources in organic and sustainable farming should be acknowledged and supported;

49. Considers that, as various fish species are currently among the most threatened long-term resources, and as the disappearance of species may result in further ecological changes, a responsible and strict fisheries policy is called for;

50. Considers that the Member States must implement the EU's biodiversity strategy, both in fisheries and in other fields, and, in cooperation with the Commission, must take measures to attain the objective of halting the decline of biodiversity by 2010;

51. Welcomes the proposal for the international panel which will include participants from developing countries and which will, inter alia, develop sustainability benchmarks for extracting, harvesting and transporting materials and products coming from outside the EU, including not only material quality standards but also production quality standards, taking account of social and environmental issues;

52. Stresses the need for aid to developing countries, to non-EU Eastern European and West Balkan countries, by means of, but not confined to, sharing technology and know-how; adds that Europe cannot decently import biocapacity from other countries without the sustainable use of resources likewise becoming an objective for those countries and without ensuring that it is not importing resources which are over-exploited or threatened;

53. Considers that developing countries should be helped to meet EU standards and labelling requirements;
54. Stresses the importance to this Thematic Strategy of the requirement already incorporated in other policy strategies that by 2010 an average of 12% of energy consumption within the EU and 21% of electricity consumption within the EU should be derived from sustainable natural resources, and that the lower of these figures should rise to 15% by 2015;

55. Aims to align the EU norm for green public procurement with the standard currently achieved by the Member State which performs best;

56. Considers, in line with policy on renewable energy consumption, that by 2010 an average of at least 12% of the renewable raw materials used in the EU should be derived from sources which are demonstrably managed sustainably, a figure which should rise to at least 15% in 2015; at the same time underlines the importance of the EU target of 20% energy savings by 2020;

57. Considers that the EU should do everything possible to provide consumers and producers with proper information on the sustainable use of natural resources, that environmental education, particularly concerning sustainable consumption, should form part of elementary education, and that consumers and producers should be involved in ideas concerning changes which could lead to sustainable use of natural resources;

58. Considers that producers should supply information to the public on the origin and production methods of their products and services and the production chains involved, including information about the environmental impact throughout the cycle through which the product and the resources used in the production process pass; as well as the extent to which the product is repairable, re-usable and recyclable;

59. Considers that EU policy should be so framed as to encourage Member States to adopt more ambitious approaches — and certainly not discourage them from doing so — with a view to improving the sustainable use of natural resources;

60. Considers that the Commission should submit by 2008 a roadmap for reform, per sector, of subsidy schemes which have a substantial adverse impact on the environment and are difficult to reconcile with sustainable development, with a view to their gradual abolition;

61. Welcomes any Commission initiatives which could result in the sustainable use of natural resources and reduce the adverse impact of the use of natural resources on the environment;

62. Draws attention to the need to improve communication between retailers and consumers; calls on the Commission in this connection to extend the present energy label (refrigerators, cars, buildings) to all energy using product groups by 2010;

63. Proposes that the Commission develop, within three years, a methodology to measure the environmental impact of every production chain;

64. Proposes that the Commission monitor on a three-yearly basis the progress in improving resource efficiency;

65. Recommends using the international panel (proposed in the Thematic Strategy) to extend best practices and CO₂ targets to global level;

66. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and Commission.