

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament Integrated Product Policy Building on Environmental Life-Cycle Thinking'

(2004/C 73/10)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament Integrated Product Policy — Building on Environmental Life-Cycle Thinking (COM(2003) 302 final);

having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 18 June 2003 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 2 July 2002 to instruct its Commission for Sustainable Development to draw up an opinion on this subject;

having regard to its opinion on the Green Paper on Integrated Product Policy (COM(2001) 68 final — CdR 98/2001 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

having regard to its opinion on the Communication on the sixth environment action programme of the European Community — Environment 2010: Our future, our choice — the Sixth Environment Action Programme — and the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down the Community Environment Action Programme 2001-2010 (COM(2001) 31 final — CdR 36/2001 fin) ⁽²⁾;

having regard to the draft opinion adopted by the Commission for Sustainable Development on 29 September 2003 (CdR 159/2003 rev.) (rapporteur: Mr Tilman Tögel, [member of Saxony-Anhalt Landtag — DE, PES]);

Whereas:

1. integrated product policy (IPP) can be instrumental in the implementation and operation of sustainable development and responsible resource management, because the environmental policy regulations hitherto in force in respect of the production and disposal of products are no longer in tune with the requirements of a sustainable environmental policy and are supplemented by provisions which take account of the complete life cycle of the product, including the use phase;
2. regional and local authorities represented on the Committee of the Regions are particularly keen for IPP to work effectively and well as such a policy can substantially assist and support them in their task of setting up and maintaining efficient waste treatment and waste disposal facilities;
3. IPP can be implemented only through a well co-ordinated, synergistic mix of instruments, including voluntary measures, regulatory approaches (requirements and prohibitions), supply-side measures (product design), demand-side tools (public procurement, consumer information) and incentives (such as ecolabelling and life-cycle analyses);
4. recommendations and considerations that are now being looked at in connection with integrated product policy have been under discussion for many years (product compatibility, technology impact assessment, resource conservation, the internalisation of external environment costs etc.) and are a key factor in the development of sustainability strategies and specific measures to achieve the objectives of sustainable development, i.e. to meet the needs of the present generation with due regard for resource conservation and environmental protection so that future generations are not left to pick up the costs involved and have adequate scope to meet their own needs,

adopted the following opinion at its 52nd plenary session of 19 and 20 November 2003 (meeting of 20 November).

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 357, 14.12.2001, p. 53.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 357, 14.12.2001, p. 44.

1. The Committee of the Regions' views

The Committee of the Regions

1.1. recognises the European Commission's commitment to make integrated product policy a key tool of sustainable environmental policy;

1.2. regrets that the CoR was not explicitly included in the list of bodies that have set out their views on the Green Paper, and hopes that, with the adoption of the draft European constitution, the Commission will take greater cognisance of the Committee of the Regions as an advisory body (see Part I, Title IV, Chapter II, Article 31(1); Part III, Title VI, Chapter I, Article 292 et seq.; Protocol on application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality);

1.3. stresses in this connection that the regions and local authorities are key players in the implementation and operation of IPP, firstly because, in most Member States, regional and local authorities are responsible for waste disposal and thus constantly have to deal with products that have reached the end of their life cycle, and secondly because, as market customers, they can do much to secure the success of a procurement policy based on an IPP approach;

1.4. explicitly welcomes the fact that a handbook for green public procurement is to be drawn up and recognises its duty to act as a relay body for promoting green public procurement;

1.5. is convinced that the voluntary and cooperative nature of IPP is a basic condition for its success;

1.6. feels, however, that there is an urgent need for a mandatory legal framework to implement environmentally-friendly approaches and actions;

1.7. deplores the fact that the Commission has now abandoned the use of VAT policy in relation to IPP, a measure which was treated as a promising approach in the Green Paper;

1.8. considers that there is a need to bring together the various IPP instruments set out by the Commission and welcomes the communication platform which the Commission is making available for that purpose;

1.9. points out by way of clarification that the Commission does not pursue the issue of product and producer liability as a potential means of including waste treatment costs in the price and thus of applying life-cycle thinking right up to the final stage of a product's lifespan under the IPP approach;

1.10. and, in that context, asks the Commission to specify in its future communication the product areas in which determined application of environmental liability is possible in order to ensure that environmental costs are effectively included in product prices.

2. Committee of the Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions

2.1. notes that, as far as waste management is concerned, the Communication from the Commission Towards a thematic strategy on the prevention and recycling of waste and the IPP communication should be considered as a single entity. In particular, the objectives and tasks of waste avoidance should be pursued primarily through IPP, as IPP is a much more focused way of achieving these objectives than by deploying waste management tools;

2.2. reiterates its proposal made in point 2.22 of its opinion on the Green Paper on Integrated Product Policy⁽¹⁾ to put in place a European scheme to collect experiences of local and regional authorities' waste management and to use the feedback thus obtained to prevent waste in the design and consumption phases;

2.3. considers it expedient to define the term 'life cycle' as the impression is emerging that the life cycle that is the subject of this communication ends when the product ceases to have any useable value and does not therefore include waste avoidance and waste disposal. It should also be established whether semi-finished stages of a product are to be included in the life cycle;

2.4. considers it necessary for the Commission to pursue actively and consistently the objective of internalising external environmental costs so that prices reflect products' environmental impact accurately;

2.5. calls on the Commission also to make official information such as the practical handbook for IPP-based procurement fully available to those players who are involved only occasionally in public procurement and thus do not have the technical capacity to use the Commission's online communication platform;

(1) CdR 98/2001 fin.

2.6. advocates in particular making sufficient changes to the conditions of tender so that local and regional authorities can meet the expectations placed on them and pursue a policy of green procurement. In that connection, the Committee of the Regions would draw attention to point 2.18 of its opinion on the Green Paper and reiterate its call to exclude suppliers who fail to meet local, regional, national or European environmental standards from being eligible to supply public goods or services;

2.7. would stress the key role of consumers when considering environmental impact within the life-cycle of a product;

2.8. considers it necessary to take up measures, goals and resources developed in the field of consumer protection and apply them not only to foodstuffs but also intensively as part of the IPP strategy. Strategies should thereby be developed to drive home to consumers the need to buy environmentally sound products, to use them in a way that keeps environmental impact to a minimum and to dispose of them properly;

2.9. asks the Commission to adopt back-up measures to alert consumers to the issues involved at an early stage and to develop consumer information and consumer education projects that encourage people to 'buy green' and raise environmental awareness. In that process, the Committee of the Region acknowledges its responsibility to proactively advocate, through regional and local players, the incorporation of environmental issues into school and even pre-school education and learning;

2.10. asks the Commission to consider whether existing European and national environmental labels are suitable for IPP and, in doing so;

2.11. to bear in mind, on the one hand that the European environmental label is still less well-known and not as successful as national labelling schemes (e.g. the German 'Blue Angel' scheme that has been in place for twenty-five years);

the aim can only be to find synergies, not to abolish national labels; and

2.12. on the other, to be sensitive to the fact that in the interests of effective consumer information, European and national environmental labelling schemes need to be harmonised and made considerably more consumer-friendly. It is vital not to flood consumers with excessive information as that would be contrary to the IPP approach. The European energy label can serve as a successful example of a consumer-friendly label;

2.13. urges that, alongside encouraging voluntary action by companies and producers to provide reliable product information in the interests of a transparent product life-cycle analysis, producer liability be invoked to ensure the provision of environmental information;

2.14. calls for even more effective support for the IPP pilot projects mentioned in point 6.1 from the EU financial instrument LIFE-environment;

2.15. asks the Commission to extend considerably the deadline for suggestions for voluntary pilot projects — at least until December 2003. To that end, it is also necessary to make the public more aware of the Commission's call for voluntary pilot projects. In any case, the October 2003 deadline for suggestions is too short;

2.16. suggests a review of whether the proposed project operating period of twelve months really gives sufficient opportunity to consider products' life cycles thoroughly;

2.17. notes the Commission's commitment to deal with services subsequently, while focusing for the time being on products and stresses the urgent nature of this issue. In many cases, especially in the transport sector, the environmental impact of various types of service is so diverse as to be incomparable. The Commission must therefore address these issues decisively.

Brussels, 20 November 2003.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Albert BORE