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## **Europe's contribution to improving water management**

Recommendation 1731 (2006)

Reply from the Committee of Ministers

adopted at the 965<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (24 May 2006)

1. The Committee of Ministers has paid particular attention to Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1731 (2006) on Europe's contribution to improving water management. It has drawn it to the attention of governments of member states, and to the Committee of Senior Officials of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CEMAT), whose comments appear in Appendix 2 to this reply.

2. The Committee of Ministers shares the Parliamentary Assembly's opinion that a major aim of water policy must be to ensure access for all, particularly those in need, to water services and sanitation. To meet this challenge, a global and integrated approach to water resource management should be developed. It should be based on shared responsibility and participation by all – parliaments, governments, local and regional authorities and civil society. As recommended by the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers accordingly adopted a message to the 4th World Water Forum (Mexico City, 16-22 March 2006). The Message appears in Appendix 1 to this reply.

### *Appendix 1 to the reply*

#### **4th World Water Forum (Mexico City, 16-22 March 2006) – Committee of Ministers' Message**

The Council of Europe, which groups together 46 member states, fully supports the 4th World Water Forum, organised in Mexico City from 16 to 22 March 2006. We welcome this unique opportunity to promote a water management policy in tune with human needs, present and future, on a worldwide scale. We call upon all parties concerned to seize this occasion, not only in the interest of sustainable development of the planet, but also of world peace and stability.

A major aim of this policy must be to ensure access for all, particularly those in need, to water services and sanitation. To meet this challenge, we consider it essential to develop a global and integrated approach to water resource management, based on shared responsibility and participation by all – parliaments, governments, local and regional authorities and civil society.

At the pan-European level, the Council of Europe has rallied to the cause, taking every opportunity, at every level, to draw attention to water resource issues, to ensure that water, which is so essential to life itself, is acknowledged as a decisive aspect of the preservation of our planet's natural resources.

Several instruments developed by the Council of Europe have made a precious contribution to good water resource management and could, as appropriate, be a source of inspiration in the setting-up of a worldwide water policy. Thus, the European Charter on Water Resources (2001) draws governments' attention to the need to manage and protect water resources through a common, integrated approach. An integrated water resource management strategy, such as is embodied in the Council of Europe's Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development, should include, *inter alia*, the protection of surface and underground water, the supervision of fertilisation and irrigation practices in agriculture and the treatment of wastewater.

In view of the worldwide urgency to find a durable, joint solution to the water problem, and in the interest of future generations, we consider that the 4th World Water Forum has a special role to play in promoting better knowledge and raising awareness of the enormous challenges involved in water policies and in developing a common response to these challenges.

We will consider, with attention, the follow-up which the Council of Europe could give to the results of this event.

*Appendix 2 to the reply*

**Opinion by the Committee of Senior Officials of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CEMAT)**

The 11th European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CEMAT) held in Limassol, Cyprus, in October 1997 focused on “sustainable regional/spatial planning in Europe and the protection of water resources”. Three resolutions were adopted at the conference, one of which related to “Strategies to be implemented within a comprehensive regional/spatial planning framework for protecting and managing freshwater resources”.

The Council of Europe is actively committed to sustainable regional development, in accordance with Recommendation Rec(2002)1 of the Committee of Ministers to the members states on Guiding Principles for sustainable territorial development of the European continent – GPSSDEC-CEMAT. For these states and their regions and municipalities, the Guiding Principles amount to a reference document and a flexible, forward-looking framework geared to co-operation. Their aim is to reconcile the social and economic side of regional planning with its environmental and cultural functions and contribute in this way to large-scale spatial development. They constitute a vision or a guiding concept for the sustainable development of the whole European continent, which also takes account of international co-operation on the world level, as co-ordinated by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.

Two sections in the Guiding Principles, one on “enhancing and protecting natural resources and the natural heritage” and the other on “flood plains and water meadows,” are particularly relevant to the question of water resources.

***Enhancing and protecting natural resources and the natural heritage***

The Guiding Principles recognise that natural resources contribute not only to properly balanced ecosystems but also to the attractiveness of regions, their recreational value and the general quality of life. They provide that natural resources must therefore be protected and enhanced. Integrated strategies for managing water resources should cover, among other things, the protection of surface and ground water, monitoring of farmers’ use of fertilisers and irrigation, and sewage treatment. Interregional transfers of water should only be considered when local resources are insufficient or cannot be used at an economically reasonable price. Where it comes to protecting the quality of drinking water from underground sources, it is stated in the Principles that it must be ensured that any expansion in water supply networks is matched by an equivalent increase in drainage and sewage treatment and disposal facilities.

***Flood plains and water meadows***

The Guiding Principles underline that flood plains and water meadows present a particular challenge to spatial planning, as they are concentrated on relatively narrow strips of land. They are characterised by significant and highly valuable natural resources (water courses, wetlands with rich and sensitive ecosystems, high quality landscapes, etc) and by intensive and diverse human activities such as industrial production and urban settlement, transport infrastructure and traffic flows, energy production (including hydroelectric and nuclear power stations), sand and gravel quarries, regulated water courses, drainage and recreational facilities and activities. They often form landscapes that have been shaped over the course of centuries and have major economic and ecological potential. Spatial planning still does too little to reduce the periodic flooding to which many European river systems are prone. The Guiding Principles argue that it is important to take account of the whole catchment area and that this is a way of reducing the economic impact of floods.

Conflicts between the different functions of flood plains should be anticipated and reduced through integrated spatial planning, which should concentrate in particular on the following aspects:

- protecting particularly vulnerable ecosystems;
- more sustainable management of the water system in the whole catchment area, paying particular attention to water quantity, which should be related to retention, infiltration and the resistance of the river bed of the main river and of its tributaries;
- the incorporation of management of the water system in the whole catchment area and spatial planning at all the different levels involved;
- preventing flooding and water pollution by encouraging co-operation on the integrated and sustainable management of transfrontier and transnational river basins;
- limiting the expansion of towns in environmentally valuable areas and sites prone to flooding;
- drawing up programmes to preserve the very small number of natural or semi-natural river courses which still exist in Europe, particularly in the new member states.

In a section on “Broadly-based participation of society in the spatial planning process”, it is pointed out that, as early as 1983, the European Regional/Spatial Planning Charter drew attention to the need for active public participation in the spatial planning process. In addition to involving the public in local, regional and supra-regional projects, it is necessary to encourage the participation of Europe’s civil society and socio-economic forces, for example through non-governmental organisations. Public involvement at an early stage increases the planning process’s chances of success and avoids unproductive investments. Not only is social consensus important for the success of local and regional projects but it also creates a dynamic setting for outside investors and economic players. Involving the younger generation in the planning process increases the opportunities for the public to take an interest in the long-term planning of their home region and play an efficient and innovative part in this area.

#### ***Ljubljana Declaration on the territorial dimension of sustainable development***

The 13th Session of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for regional planning (CEMAT) held by the Council of Europe in Slovenia in September 2003 was one of the recent political high points in sustainable spatial development and the implementation of the Guiding Principles, particularly with regard to water. The Ljubljana Declaration on the territorial dimension of sustainable development adopted at the end of the conference makes a special mention of natural hazards, including floods and drought.

At the conference, the Ministers also adopted a resolution on the prevention of floods and better co-ordination of all activities designed to minimise the risks and the consequences of disastrous floods. In this document, they undertook:

- to draw up guidelines on the acceptable use of land likely to be flooded;
- to set up an international working group to prepare a model for transfrontier co-operation which could serve as the basis to promote sustainable spatial development in each of the river basins concerned, in close co-operation with the relevant national, regional and local authorities;
- to support work to devise an initial overall strategy for more effective co-operation in the area of flood prevention through spatial planning, including a fairer apportionment of the benefits and the costs resulting from preventive action.

At the same conference, the Ministers responsible for regional planning from Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro and Ukraine signed an Initiative on the sustainable spatial development of the Tisza/Tisa river basin and adopted a Declaration on co-operation concerning the Tisza/Tisa river basin. They stated their intention to promote the Tisza/Tisa river basin as a “CEMAT innovative region” with transfrontier characteristics. In this connection, the parties stated that they had a shared vision of integrated transfrontier spatial development and intended to devise and implement a strategy to achieve this goal. They set up a Joint Commission to promote effective co-operation in this particular area of central and eastern Europe.

The European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CEMAT) of the member states of the Council of Europe takes the view that water resource management is inextricably linked with sustainable regional development and that the availability of good quality water in sufficient quantities is a crucial factor in the quality of people’s lives. Consequently, it will continue to implement the recommendations of the 4th World Water Forum (Mexico City, 16-22 March 2006) by fully incorporating the Forum’s findings into its work programme and activities.