



HEADLINES

EU / Energy: European Council approves binding targets for renewables

The European Council Spring Summit of 8-9 March 2007 saw European heads of state broadly agree to the Commission's energy package, presented in January. The agreement includes an overall binding commitment to reduce, by 2020, greenhouse gas emissions by 20% compared with 1990. Subject to similar commitments by the other major economies, including the US, India and China, the EU will raise this commitment to a reduction of 30%.

Central to this aim is an agreement to set binding targets of a 20% share of overall energy production from renewables by 2020. This had proven a contentious issue during the period preceding the summit. In addition, EU leaders committed to a 10% share of energy provision for biofuels. On energy efficiency, the Council set out a non-binding objective of reducing consumption of energy by 20%, when compared with consumption levels projected for 2020. With regards to nuclear energy, the Council recognised the role of nuclear energy in reducing carbon emissions, while emphasising that safety and security should remain of central importance.

ESBA endorses the emphasis placed on increased energy efficiency by the Energy Council. In addition, the binding commitment to biofuels is a step in the right direction. Moreover, ESBA fully supports the decision to introduce a binding target for renewable energy sources. Apart from being fundamental in the fight against climate change, biofuels and renewables offer a wealth of opportunities for SMEs to engage in research and development and become involved in energy supply.

For the Commission's climate and energy package, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/energy/energy_policy/index_en.htm

For the Commission's action plan for energy efficiency, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/energy/action_plan_energy_efficiency/index_en.htm

To see the Presidency conclusions, please go to:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?id=432&lang=en&mode=g

EU / Employment: Commission adopts health and safety at work Communication

On 21 February 2007, the Commission adopted its new strategy for health and safety at work 2007-2012. The strategy sets out the aim of reducing the rate of accidents at work by 25% by 2012. SMEs are identified as being particularly important to the strategy, as they account for 82% of accidents in the workplace, but often lack the resources to implement complex systems of worker protection. To achieve these aims, the Communication propose instruments including: the proper implementation of EU legislation; support for SMEs in the implementation of current legislation; and adapting and simplifying relevant legislation.

ESBA recognises the importance of a strategy for health and safety in the work place to reduce accidents, improve worker motivation and alleviating the financial burden public and private protection systems. Moreover, we welcome the fact that the Communication recognises the

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particular difficulties faced by SMEs when trying to implement complex systems of worker protection.

To this end, ESBA would like to emphasise the importance of the Commission's commitment to develop simple tools to develop risk assessment; the distribution of clear guidelines; and economic incentives for micro-enterprises and SMEs. Currently, these support structures have not been outlined in any sufficient detail, and ESBA would hope to see more specific information over the coming months.

In addition, with regards to coercive measures, ESBA stresses that these should only be employed with the utmost restraint. SMEs must be given every opportunity and assistance to comply with health and safety regulations, as lack of compliance will usually be the result of a lack of a clear understanding of requirements. In addition, ESBA will hold the Commission to its promise of incorporating the principles of 'Better Regulation' and ensuring that legislation is implemented appropriately in all Member States.

To access the Communication, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2007/feb/commstrat_en.pdf

For the Commission's website on health and safety at work, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/health_safety/index_en.htm

IN BRIEF

EU / Procurement : EC Workshop on facilitating SMEs access to Public Contracts takes place

On 22/02/2006, representatives of business organisations, including ESBA, met European Commission officials to discuss SMEs' access to public procurement. The Workshop focused on implementation of the European public procurement Directives, the exchange of best practice and stimulating innovation through procurement. Whilst barriers such as the size of contracts, a lack of time and information, and high qualification, financial and technical criteria were identified, it was widely agreed that broad cultural change is fundamental amongst stakeholders in order to facilitate better access for SMEs. To this end, the Commission is now establishing a compendium of Best Practice.

To view more information about the EU's Public Procurement Policy, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/publicprocurement/index_en.htm

EU / Corporate Social Responsibility: SMEs concerned about 'Howitt Report' prior to Strasbourg vote

A report on CSR by Richard Howitt MEP (PES, UK), the European Parliament's Rapporteur, received criticism this week from representatives of SMEs. At an SME Union breakfast meeting in the Parliament, attended by ESBA, participants expressed concerns that stricter reporting obligations, amongst other measures called for in the report, undermined the voluntary basis on which CSR is founded. Whilst informal socially responsible practices are currently well observed by small businesses, the proposals threaten to increase red tape and act as a disincentive to new CSR activities in EU SMEs. The report faces opposition from Conservative MEPs when it is voted on in Strasbourg next week.

To view a copy of the 'Howitt Report' on CSR, please go to:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A6-2006-0471+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

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EU / Better Regulation: Commission tables set of pure reduction proposals

On 8 March 2007, the Commission tabled three 'pure reduction proposals', aimed solely at reducing unnecessary administrative burdens for companies, especially SMEs. The proposals, which relate to small bakers, butchers and grocery shops, the merger or division of enterprises, and transport companies, will now be submitted to the legislators for approval. If approved, they will be adopted by the Commission. This follows the endorsement of a fast track action on energy crops by the responsible committee last week. The coming weeks will see three further proposals undergo similar procedures. These will relate to exports of agricultural produce, statistical surveys on information society, and requirements for small fishing vessels. In addition, two proposals, one on agricultural statistics and another regarding data exchange for road haulage, will be passed to the legislator in the next month. Moreover, a proposal to update procedures for maritime transport is currently being analysed by the Council Working Party.

To see the Commission's website for Better Regulation, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/regulation/better_regulation/index_en.htm

To see the press release regarding the reduction proposals, please go to:

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/07/294&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

EU / Society: Tripartite Social Summit emphasises flexicurity

On 8 March 2007, the Tripartite Social Summit was held in Brussels. These summits meet at least once per year, directly ahead of the Spring Council. The summit consisted of Commission President Barroso; the current President of the European Council, German Chancellor Merkel; the two future Presidents of the Council – the Portuguese and Slovenian Prime Ministers; Vladimir Špidla, Commission for Employment, Social affairs and Equal Opportunities; and the social partners, consisting of employers' and workers' representatives. Mr. Barroso asserted that improvements in growth and employment levels were partly the result of Lisbon reforms, but that efforts needed to continue. The central themes were the promotion of knowledge and innovation and making labour markets more flexible whilst still ensuring employment security through the principle of flexicurity.

For more information on the social dialogue, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_dialogue/index_en.htm

To see the Commission press release, please go to:

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/07/308&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

EU / Multilingualism: Study determines importance of languages for business

On 23 February, the UK National Centre for Languages, CILT, published a study conducted for the Commission, titled 'Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise'. The study represents the first attempt to determine the cost to businesses which lack language skills. It argues that, by failing to invest in languages, companies are missing out on valuable export opportunities.

To see the full report, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/key/studies_en.html

EU / Economy: Despite positive economic data public confidence lags

Economic growth for the EU from 2007 to 2008 is estimated at 2.5%, with employment growing at 1.2-1.3% per annum. However, a study by Eurobarometer into 'European social reality' has found that just 41% of the EU's citizens believe that they will experience an improvement in their situation over the coming five years. The situation is particularly apparent for those who are over 55, and

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those who left school before the age of 15, with just 16% and 24% respectively being positive about their future prospects.

For more information about the EU's economy, please go to:

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=0,1136173,0_45570698&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

To see the Eurobarometer study, please go to:

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_273_en.pdf

PUBLICATIONS

OECD Tax Policy Studies

The list of titles that have been published in the series of Tax Policy Studies. This series aims to disseminate to a wider audience work undertaken by the OECD Secretariat in the areas of tax policy ...

To access these publications, please go to:

http://www.oecd.org/document/26/0,2340,en_2649_201185_37815834_1_1_1_1,00.html

Energy Policies of IEA Countries - United Kingdom

The UK is facing a critical moment in its energy policy: North Sea oil and gas production is declining, dependence on imported energy is increasing, while rising energy prices and climate change considerations pose further challenges.

To purchase this publication, please go to:

<http://www.iea.org/w/bookshop/add.aspx?id=299>

Global Issues for Global Citizens: An Introduction to Key Development Challenges

This comprehensive volume provides an introduction to today's most pressing global issues -- from poverty, conflict, and migration to climate change, international trade, education, health, and corruption.

To purchase this document, please go to:

http://publications.worldbank.org/ecommerce/catalog/product?item_id=5825019

CONSULTATIONS

VAT - Possible introduction of a mechanism for eliminating double taxation in individual cases

Closes 31 May 2007

The European Commission has launched an online consultation to ascertain the views of the public and businesses on the possible introduction of a mechanism for eliminating double taxation in individual cases.

You will find more information at the following link:

http://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/common/consultations/tax/article_3316_en.htm

The Green Paper on Urban Transport

Closes 30 April 2007

The Green Paper on Urban Transport will be published in the second half of 2007. This internet consultation will support the preparation of the Green Paper, and is intended to collect views from interested parties on how best the EU may contribute to improving transport and mobility in urban areas.

You will find more information at the following link:

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http://ec.europa.eu/transport/clean/green_paper_urban_transport/public_consultation_en.htm

Capturing and storing CO2 underground – should we be concerned?

Closes 16 April 2007

We wish to consult European citizens and other stakeholders on benefits and challenges of CCS, and how the technology relates to other energy and greenhouse gas mitigation options. Your views will help us to identify which issues to consider when preparing legislative proposals to regulate CCS for the end of 2007.

You will find more information and the questionnaire at the following link:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/climat/ccs/consult_en.htm

Green Paper: "Modernising labour law to meet the challenges of the 21st century"

Closes 31 March 2007

As part of the Commission's drive to modernise Labour Law, both companies and workers are invited to participate in the debate and to put forward their views. See the ESBA Opinion above.

You will find information and the questionnaire at the following link:

<http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/ipm/forms/dispatch?form=labourlaw&lang=en>

COMING UP

EU Institutions: Important Dates

12-16 March 2007 Plenary session (Strasbourg)

19-23 March 2007 Committees

26-29 March 2007 Committees, groups and mini plenary

2-6 April 2007 Yellow week (no activities)

10-12 April 2007 Committees

SME related Events

5 March 2007 'Conference on the Challenges and Opportunities in a Digitalised World', organised by the German Presidency, taking place in Berlin. For more information: <http://www.konsumentdigital.de/>

9-30 March 2007 'Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in the Internal Market'; organised by the Academy of European Law; taking place in Brussels; for more information and the register, please go to:

http://www.era.int/web/en/html/nodes_main/4_2127_474/conferences_0000_Date/5_1796_3168.htm

14 March 2007 Information day on research and SMEs under FP7; organised by the Commission; taking place in Brussels; for more information: http://cordis.europa.eu/fetch?caller=EN_NEWS&action=D&session=&rcn=27175

15 March 2007 5th European Business Summit; organised by the European Business Forum; taking place in Brussels; for more info, email: info@ebsummit.org

15 March 2007 Safer, healthier, more confident citizens – why would Business Care?; organised by the British Chamber of Commerce; Brussels; more information and to register: <http://www.britcham.be/>

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15-16 March 2007 European Business Summit; organised by Cefic; taking place in Brussels; more information: <http://www.ebsummit.org/index.html?page=0>

20 March 2007 “Flexicurity: myth or reality? – How to move to a more adaptive labour market”; organized by EuroFound; taking place in Brussels; for more information and to register: sja@eurofound.europa.eu

27-28 April 2007 Business Start-up Overseas Exhibition; organised by ‘Business Startup’; taking place in London; for more information, please Email helmi.soosaar@britcham.be