

fyi (08/06/2006) Europe Information Service (EIS). Environment

Commissioners clash over soil protection strategy The sixth and penultimate thematic strategy under the Sixth Action Programme on the Environment, that governing soil protection, has gone to earth again. Scheduled for approval by the European Commission at its weekly meeting on 7 June, the strategy has once again been put off until a later date. At issue is the provision on compiling an EU register of polluted sites requiring rehabilitation measures. This register would be directly accessible to the general public, for example via the Internet.

Four Commissioners are at odds on the issue, the revolt being led by Günter Verheugen (Industry), supported by Commission President José Manuel Barroso and Charlie McCreevy (Internal Market and Services) and Viviane Reding (Information Society and Media). Mr Verheugen's department is keen to restrict mandatory registration to sites with a cross-border impact, saying there should be no question of national registration of polluted sites. It also says they should only take account of sites where large plants and possibly highly-polluting small enterprises (paints and varnishes for example) have been located and the register should be kept confidential. Furthermore, only local authorities would be informed in the event of a pollution problem and no rehabilitation measures would be compulsory.

Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas has dismissed these modifications as «totally unacceptable» as they would strip the soil strategy of much of its substance. He plans to defend his project to the death, pointing out that such registers already exist in several member states, notably Germany. The deadlock appears unbreakable for the present. Mr Dimas has made quite clear that he will not budge an inch, this issue being one of the key elements of his proposal.

By Anne Eckstein