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Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques
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COUNCIL

Council

RECOMMENDATION OF THE COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

(adopted by the Council at its 922nd Session on 3 April 1998 [C/M(97)8/PROV])

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THE COUNCIL,

Having regard to Article 5 b) of the Convention on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of 14th December 1960;

Having regard to the Recommendation of the Council of 8th May 1979 on Reporting on the State of the Environment [C(79)114];

Having regard to the Decision-Recommendation of the Council of 8th July 1988 Concerning Provision of Information to the Public and Public Participation in Decision-Making Processes Related to the Prevention of, and Response to, Accidents Involving Hazardous Substances" [C(88)85(Final)];

Having regard to the Recommendation of the Council of 31st January 1991 on Environmental Indicators and Information [C(90)165/FINAL];

Having regard to the Recommendation of the Council of 20th February 1996 on Implementing Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers [C(96)41/FINAL];

Having regard to the OECD Environment Ministerial Communiqué of 20 February 1996 which urged the OECD to "further develop its work on environmental indicators, in particular in the context of environmental performance reviews, in order to allow effective international comparison by policy-makers";

Having regard to Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development according to which "each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities" and that "States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available" and to Chapter 40 of Agenda 21 "Information for decision-making";

Having regard to the Guidelines on Access to Environmental Information and Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making endorsed by the Third Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" held in Sofia in October 1995;

Having regard to the preparatory work for a proposed UN/ECE Convention on Access to Environmental Information and Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making;

Having taken note that the first cycle of OECD reviews of environmental performance has revealed the need to make progress on the development and use of environmental data, environmental indicators and environmental reporting;

Considering that openness in information and wide availability of public information on environmental issues is conducive to i) more cost-effective policies, ii) greater accountability to all stakeholders concerned and iii) increased public awareness and participation;

Considering that public awareness of environmental conditions and risks is essential to protection of human health and the environment;

Convinced of the need for intensified efforts by OECD Member countries to upgrade the extent and quality of environmental data, indicators and information dissemination systems to support the preparation and the implementation of result-oriented strategies and effective policies concerning the environment and sustainable development, and to facilitate public participation in the decision-making process:

Taking into account the close co-operation on environmental matters between OECD and other international organisations;

I. Recommends that:

1. Member countries take all necessary actions within the framework of their national laws to increase the availability to the public of environmental information held by public authorities; in doing so, each Member country may determine which information needs to be widely distributed and under which form it will be disseminated;
2. all relevant environmental information should be provided to any natural or legal person, in response to any reasonable request, without that person having to prove an interest, without unreasonable charges and as soon as possible, taking into account protection of privacy, industrial and commercial confidentiality, national security or other legitimate causes as provided under national law;
3. Member countries promote adequate dissemination of environmental information (e.g. periodic reports on the state of the environment and its changes over time, environmental indicators publication);

II. Recommends to this effect that Member countries:

1. intensify efforts to improve as far as necessary the quality and relevance for environmental policy of data and information systems on the environment and related economic variables, and in particular:
 - improve monitoring and data collection concerning environmental pressures, conditions and responses, including explanatory information about current environmental changes;
 - encourage all appropriate levels of government to collect environmental data in order to enable them to monitor progress in environmental policies which they implement;
 - promote co-operation on environmental data among different administrations and government levels;
 - develop co-operation in sharing methodologies and improving data comparability and collection systems, drawing on work done in various Member countries and in the framework of international organisations;
 - promote periodic assessment by regional or local authorities of environmental situations in their jurisdiction;
2. further develop and use indicators to measure environmental performance, and in particular:
 - establish indicators of progress concerning implementation of national and subnational policies on the environment, eco-efficiency and sustainable development;

- systematically compare achieved results with relevant objectives of environmental policies and, where appropriate, related international commitments;
 - pay particular attention to the availability, reliability and international comparability of indicators concerning international environmental issues;
3. establish effective mechanisms to better inform the public, decision-makers and the authorities on environmental and sustainable development conditions and issues, and in particular:
 - encourage appropriate levels of government to make publicly available reports on the results of public policies and related actions;
 - use modern effective information communication methods to enable timely, easy and inexpensive access to large volumes of information;
 - promote co-operation on dissemination of environmental information among different administrations and government levels as well as non-governmental organisations concerned;
 4. provide public access on request to non-confidential information on non-compliance as well as on sanctions levied for violation of environmental laws;
 5. support educational efforts towards enabling the public to make use of available environmental information;

III. Recommends that Member Countries:

1. promote effective and periodic reporting by enterprises of appropriate and timely information on environmental implications of their activities, for example, on pollution emission levels, on use of natural resources, and on potential risks from hazardous activities and products, as well as information on environmental progress and achievements by enterprises;
2. promote the dissemination of relevant information to enable the public to assess the environmental consequences of activities of enterprises and individuals to take effective preventive measures, e.g. in case of emergency;

IV. Instructs the Environmental Policy Committee:

1. to continue and strengthen its work on data, indicators and information relating to the environment and to sustainable development, and in particular:
 - contribute to further improve the quality and comparability of environmental data and indicators at international level;

- develop accounting systems and new indicators to enable better assessment of progress towards sustainable development;
 - make relevant work on environmental indicators publicly available through appropriate modern communication methods (e.g. the World Wide Web).
2. to make full use of these indicators in the reviews of environmental performance and other reports;
 3. to use the OECD reviews of environmental performance to monitor progress as regards access to information and, in particular, the implementation of this Recommendation;
 4. to report to the Council on the measures taken pursuant to this Recommendation by Member countries within three years following the adoption of this Recommendation, with a view to providing OECD inputs to the discussion on environmental information to be held under the auspices of the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development in 2001.