

# LETTERS

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## Looser purse-strings, looser standards?

Alarming evidence already exists that projects supported by EU regional funds are having economically and environmentally dubious effects.

Alarm bells should be ringing even louder if, in an effort to offset the economic crisis, the European Commission is about to propose suspending requirements that member states must co-finance projects (see 'Regional funding rules "should" be eased', *EuropeanVoice.com*, 4 June and 'Commission in bid to ease regional aid rules', 28 May-3 June).

Just over a month ago, Bankwatch and Friends of the Earth Europe produced a map of 55 projects in central and eastern Europe for which EU funds are being sought. All the projects are more environmentally damaging than their alternatives, and will cause significant harm to the natural and human environment. Many also breach national or EU legislation on, for example, environmental impact assessment or Natura 2000 sites. Often, these projects are also economically dubious: their costs are higher



**WHAT A WASTE** Environmental groups are concerned that many proposed projects to deal with waste will do more harm than good and should not receive Commission funding. REUTERS

than their benefits, or they crowd out more cost-effective alternatives. The majority – predominantly road and waste incinerator investments – have yet to receive any EU funding.

There is a significant risk that, if the Commission's proposals are adopted, billions could be squandered in central and eastern Europe on these or similarly sub-standard projects. There are, after all, good reasons why most of these projects have been lingering on planners' tables for two years or more.

It is understandable that

the EU feels that it is an imperative to ensure that funds are disbursed rapidly during a period of acute economic difficulty. But the acceleration of payments – and potentially even the eased access to funds – makes it all the more important that the process is subject to proper scrutiny and is properly transparent.

That means – as EU legislation demands – the authorities must make a cost-benefit analysis and environmental impact assessment of every major project, including consider-

ation of alternatives and a public consultation.

These are standards that the Commission needs to apply rigorously, even if it waives some financial strictures. In the present circumstances, giving member states – especially the EU's new members – a little bit of extra rope may be justified, but that must not result in a noose being hurriedly knotted around the environment.

**Keti Medarova-Bergstrom**  
Friends of the Earth Europe/CEE  
Bankwatch Network  
Brussels

## Nanotechnology must be a priority for MEPs

In the supplement on the next European Parliament's agenda (4-10 June), *European Voice* could have mentioned one issue left on the table by the old Parliament – the regulation of nanotechnology, a science focused on the engineering of systems at molecular level.

This issue was not left on the table for lack of interest: the last Parliament was awash with proposals to introduce heightened scrutiny of nanotechnology through sector-specific legislation.

Instead, it remained on the table because of a stark difference of opinion between the European Commission and the Parliament about how, or how not to, regulate nanotechnology.

The Parliament's proposals were a far cry from the recommendations that were issued by the Commission last year, which, after a thorough review of EU legislation, concluded that the potential risks are, in principle, adequately covered by the current regulatory framework.

These differences need to be resolved. Both sides agree about the benefits of nanotechnology's applications, most notably for consumer health and the environment. Both recognise that nanotechnology could make an important contribution to European innovation and competitiveness, and that Europe has the opportunity to be among the world leaders in this exciting new field of science. Where they diverge is in how to regulate nanotechnology's development and deployment.

Last week, the Dutch parliament held a debate on the subject in which the expert consensus favoured a pragmatic, flexible approach to regulation. National legislation should be postponed,

they concurred, and any potential health and safety concerns addressed via temporary, case-by-case measures. In the meantime, the Commission and national authorities should work together to define risk-analysis mechanisms.

As one of Europe's leaders in nanotechnology research, the Dutch have a wealth of experience to draw upon. Hopefully, their discussions will help guide the EU institutions. What they must do is endorse a balanced and sensible regulatory regime. Nanotechnology innovators and proponents must sit down with the Parliament, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders to avoid hasty, uninformed decision-making. And the Commission should consider driving the debate more proactively, in part through studies that enable a better understanding of the scientific landscape. At present, there is a shortage of evidence-based impact analyses – a shortage that leads to the real risk that misunderstandings about the technology and its applications will result in a moratorium on nanotechnology products altogether.

The initial months of this new Parliamentary term will be crucial in defining the shape of the debate. Nanotechnology is moving quickly from theory into practice. Its impact, some suggest, may ultimately be as great as that of the computer revolution – and that analogy demonstrates why Europe needs a balanced regulatory regime that promotes innovation and advances consumers' interests.

**Wim van Velzen**  
Senior European policy adviser  
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Brussels

## Committee at the heart of regional development

I read with interest the *European Voice* special report on regional policy (28 May – 3 June). I was, however, disappointed that it made no reference to the European Parliament's committee on regional development.

Created at the start of the 2004-09 legislature, this

committee has been very active within its remit, which includes passing legislation in the area of cohesion policy and overseeing the work of the European Commission and EU member states.

For example, its ideas helped shape recent reforms to deliver EU funding faster and more flexibly to region-

al policy projects, and also make it available for energy-efficiency improvements to housing throughout the EU.

The committee on regional development will also help shape the future of the cohesion policy, even before the Commission puts forward its ideas on the future programming period. Its members in-

clude some of the most influential experts in this area, whose views could usefully have been included in your special report, as they have been in the past.

**Miguel Tell Cremades**  
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Printed by: Het Volk Printing, Keerstraat 10,  
B-9420 Erpe-Mere, at the coldset printing department of VUM – Groot-Bijgaarden, Brussels.  
European Voice is printed on recycled paper.

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