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Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources

The European Commission published its Communication of the Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources ("Resource Strategy") on 21 December 2005. The Resource Strategy aims at reducing environmental impacts associated with resource use – called decoupling – in a growing European economy and worldwide. The impacts of unsustainable resource use include e.g. climate change due to fossil fuel use, land use and environmental degradation due to mineral extraction and processing, or overexploitation of soil and fish stocks.

To decouple environmental impacts from economic growth, a life-cycle approach is adopted. The environmental impacts are considered at each stage of the life cycle of a resource, avoiding that negative impacts are shifted to other environmental media, to other stages of the life cycle, or to other countries.

Key to achieving decoupling are three factors:

More value – creating more value while using fewer resources ('resource productivity');

Less impact – reducing overall environmental impact per unit of resources used (through 'cleaner' technologies and consumption patterns);

Better alternatives – substituting currently used resources with better alternatives.

The Commission is now implementing the following actions:

- (a) The Data Centre on natural resources, related to those on products and waste;
- (b) Indicators to measure progress;
- (c) The involvement of economic sectors to take concrete actions;
- (d) EU Member States involvement, focussing on resource uses with the most significant impacts;
- (e) The International Panel on the sustainable use of natural resources, set up together with UNEP.

With its 25 years time horizon and its wide approach the Resource Strategy will have a co-ordinating function to ensure enhanced coherence and efficiency. The challenge will be to integrate this approach into all policies and decision-making.