

# An all-consuming responsibility

Andrew Farmer, Director of Research at the Institute for European Environment Policy, discusses the urgent need for a policy framework on resource use...

**E**uropeans are consuming ever larger quantities of natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable. This can lead to damaging pollution, waste management problems, impacts on biodiversity and scarcity of valuable resources, as well as broader social and environmental impacts on third countries (many of which are developing countries) where many of our resources come from. The EU is developing a more strategic policy framework for addressing our use of natural resources, but this is technically difficult to define and politically difficult to deliver.

In 2007, with a population of 6.6 billion people, the global use of resources exceeded the biocapacity of the planet by 50%. In 2050 the global population is expected to reach nine billion. Furthermore, the per capita rate of use of resources in many countries (especially China and India) is rising dramatically. The world, therefore, faces the potential for serious increasing constraints for a greater number of resources. Marginal changes to social and economic systems are insufficient. As the World Economic Forum stated in 2010: 'The global consumption trajectory remains largely unchanged...incremental improvements in sustainability are not enough. A more fundamental, transformational shift in the way the world produces, consumes and manages value chains is needed.'

The EU will, later in 2011, launch a resource efficiency roadmap. This will sit alongside other strategies, such as that for climate change to 2050, and within broader strategies, for example the 'Europe 2020' economic strategy, which is responding to the economic crisis. It will also not be the first strategic policy in this area. A 2008 Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan stressed the need for better information, benchmarking, etc. yet contained no clear political targets. It stated that these should be developed, but no substantial further work took place. A 2005 Natural Resources Thematic Strategy identified the problems we face, but focused action on improving understanding rather than containing any concrete targets or actions on resource use or even putting forward a process for their development. The EU's 2008 Raw Materials Initiative, updated in 2011, highlighted the need for greater recycling and efficient use

of certain scarce resources. However, it did not address the fundamental issue of our unsustainable consumption.

In affecting consumption patterns, the EU is limited in its ability to direct consumer behaviour (although it can facilitate such activity at national level). Indeed, attempts made by the EU to directly tell citizens how to live their lives would be likely to have a significant political backlash, further undermining support for EU-level governance. In contrast, the EU can regulate in order to reduce pollution, manage waste, set recycling targets, create product standards, etc. As a result, an EU approach to natural resource efficiency has to take the form of a suite of policies of different types and at different scales. However, even with these policies in place, it is likely that much policy development will still be needed at member state level to address specific economic and social consumption issues.

The forthcoming resource efficiency roadmap, therefore, needs to include a suite of policy initiatives at different scales to provide a coherent and consistent approach. This must include targets for specific resources as well as for the overall efficiency of resource use by different economic sectors. Without such targets, the policy will have little influence on future core economic policies.

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The roadmap must state clearly not only the objective of absolutely decoupling economic growth from resource use, but what level resource use should be reduced to and how this is to be achieved. This objective of principle must also be combined with an overall objective for a level of resource use for 2050 with intermediate targets. Given the wide range of renewable and non-renewable resources, specific targets for individual resources should also be included. Such targets need to accommodate the goals we

already have in the EU for achieving sustainable levels of use of renewable resources such as water and biodiversity. They also need to address the principle of equitable use on a global scale with non-European communities and, alongside this, recognise the political realities of increasing competition and resource security concerns from other industrialised and emerging economies.

The roadmap should also cover the need for policies that focus on specific sectors and issues. In particular, there is a need to improve the resource efficiency of the housing, transport, and food and drink sectors. These areas are already affected by a range of EU level policies; however, they address specific issues, such as energy-efficiency or emissions, rather than forming a coherent policy framework for overall resource use. Indeed, the dominant influence of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy and Regional Policy (Structural Funds) on these sectors emphasises the need for an EU-level resource efficiency policy.

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Alongside action for individual sectors, there is also a need for policies regarding specific materials, such as major fuels, metals, construction materials, timber, fish, etc. This would allow for a cradle to grave lifecycle approach to improving extraction, reducing consumption and promoting re-use and recycling. For example, such policies should not only set objectives for recycling (as is already the case for some materials), but create markets and demand for recycled materials (a gap in the current EU approach).

There is a major role for further micro-level policies as well. The EU already has a suite of product related legislation, including directives on the eco-design of products and buildings, as well as ensuring the recyclability of products such as vehicles and packaging. These need to be extended, so as to include water use efficiency, to act as incremental steps in selecting less environmentally damaging materials and thus reducing initial consumption, and to promote recycling materials that are consumed.

The forthcoming resource efficiency roadmap presents a major opportunity for Europe to develop a new paradigm for the foundation of our economic and social systems, which is needed to address the major challenges the world faces in the next few decades. The problems are known and solutions are available. Europe – at EU, member state and citizen levels – now has to be seen to be taking concrete actions to make these solutions a reality.

## European Commissioner for the Environment Janez Potocnik: Stepping up the effort

Biodiversity and the protection of the environment is an area that has been recently highlighted in a strategy by European Commissioner for the Environment Janez Potocnik. According to figures, 25% of animal species across Europe are at risk of extinction and 88% of fish stocks are over-exploited. To combat this growing problem, the Commissioner has put into place the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

The strategy suggests that by 2020 there should be a considerable halt in the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU.<sup>1</sup> The new strategy will replace the previous Biodiversity Action Plan and will need to be undertaken by all member states if it is to have any chance of diverting environmental catastrophe in the future.

Speaking about the strategy, Potocnik said: “We are part of biodiversity, but we also depend on it for our food, for fresh water and clean air, and for a stable climate. It’s our natural capital that we are spending too fast – and we all know what happens when we borrow beyond our means. We should all be aware of the severity of this situation and our past failures to address the problem. The time has come to step up our efforts enormously. I am confident this new multi-sectoral approach will put us on track to halt biodiversity loss by 2020.”<sup>2</sup>

Potocnik has also been promoting the idea of the sustainable city. Speaking in Hamburg, the winner of European Green Capital of 2011 in April, the Commissioner argued that technology and the environment can exist side by side, as Hamburg has proven.

“If you bear in mind that Hamburg is the third largest port in Europe – and the eighth largest port in the World – this City has proved that economic growth and environmental protection can live together in one city. And we need this kind of inspiration when many of the world’s greatest cities are cracking under the strain of persistent environmental problems,” said Potocnik.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/11/268&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

<sup>2</sup> <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/11/526&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

<sup>3</sup> <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/11/273&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>



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