



To:  
EU Ministers of Environment, Health, Competitiveness

Utrecht, 16 Feb. 2006

Re: Contribution to the Spring European Council: Environmental Health in the Lisbon Strategy

Dear Minister of Environment,

We are writing you in advance of the Environmental Council meeting concerning the review of the re-launched Lisbon Strategy. We would like to draw your attention to the environmental burden of disease (EBD) in the European Union in the context of the Lisbon Agenda. The following letter will be sent to all Heads of State in advance of the Spring Summit.

There is a growing wave of scientific, social, and political concern regarding the increasing effects of the environmental burden of disease (EBD) in Europe. A wealth of research demonstrates that the size and strength of the environment-health link has been underestimated. Increases over the last few years in asthma and allergies, cancers, neuro-developmental disorders, and even cardiovascular disease and obesity, amongst others, have been linked to exposure to environmental pollutants.

- Asthma and allergies drastically increased over the past 15-20 years; 1 child in 7 suffers from it.<sup>1</sup>
- Cancer incidence in children is increasing at 1% yearly; it is a second cause of mortality.<sup>2</sup>
- Breast cancer incidence is increasing at 1-2% yearly with growing evidence that some of this is caused by exposure to environmental pollutants.<sup>3</sup>
- Every citizen has man-made chemicals in his/her body.<sup>4</sup>
- Womb and breast milk are chemically contaminated; pollutants pass through the placental barrier.<sup>5</sup>
- Male fertility has sharply declined in Western countries over the past 50 years; 1 in every 6 boys born in Europe today will have a low sperm count and research suggest links with prenatal exposure to endocrine disrupting substances.<sup>6</sup>

Children are the most vulnerable to environmental pollutants and increases in asthma (the number one reason for missing school), cancers (increasing 1% yearly), and neuro-developmental disorders (one in six children affected by e.g. learning disabilities, ad(h)d and autism) is alarming. These trends fly in the face of a "knowledge-based economy," one that undoubtedly builds upon children developing healthy and smart in a competitive global society.

<sup>1</sup> EEA/WHO Regional Off. for Europe. Tamburlini, G. et al. (2002). "Children's health and environment: a review of evidence." pp :44-47

<sup>2</sup> International Association for Cancer Research (IARC) - Steliarova-Foucher, et al (2004), *The Lancet* 364

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament report (2002) (2002/2279 (INI))

<sup>4</sup> EEA/JRC Report (2005), "Environment and health" no. 10/2005.

<sup>5</sup> Noreen, K., Mieronyte, D. (1998) "Contaminants in Swedish human milk, organohalogen compounds", see also WWF (1999), "Chemical trespass: a toxic legacy."

<sup>6</sup> Carlsen E., et al (1992), *British Medical Journal* 305. See also van Waeleghem, K., et al (1996), *Human Reproduction* 112.

Economically speaking, this means high societal costs and the loss of tens of thousands of healthy life years, aspects that undermine EU aims to become the most progressive, competitive economy in the world. Meanwhile DG SANCO and the WHO confirm that public health is a key determinant of economic development.<sup>7</sup> “If Europe is to compete in the global knowledge society, it must also invest more in its most precious asset—its people.”<sup>8</sup>

To reverse these trends, policies geared at protecting human health, particularly that of future generations must be based on the precautionary principle. Even if the science is still in development, the evidence thus far clearly falls in the scope of the Commission communication on the application of the precautionary principle.<sup>9</sup> The previous EU Presidency of Finland focused on the concept of “Health in All Policies”. We believe, every Member State should follow this initiative. EU policies to reduce the EBD must be synergistic and multi-sectoral, and implemented and monitored coherently and consistently. In addition, also policy measures that stimulate eco-innovation (taking health aspects into consideration), reduce environmental health impacts while simultaneously boosting competitiveness. Such a combined approach must occur if Lisbon is to deliver what it promises.

WECF believes a healthy environment is a prerequisite for the healthy development of every human being, and that only a healthy society is a productive one. As such, diminishing the EBD has the opportunity to present a win-win-win situation, benefiting the environment, society, and the economy.

As a Minister of the European Council, we call on you to give priority to environmental health in the review of the Lisbon Agenda.

The attached position paper gives further information on these issues, and should be considered in the Spring Summit and when reviewing the Member State National Reform Programmes. Our general recommendations include:

- Base policies targeted at environmental health protection on the precautionary principle
- Shift the conventional risk assessment paradigm to one that accounts for the multi-causality and complexity of exposure and long term effects of (low dose) exposure particularly during prenatal development.
- Children, the basis of a future Europe, are most vulnerable to effects of pollutants and need to be especially protected.
- Integrate health into all policies at Community and National level.
- Enact effective regulation and eco-innovation to boost health protection and competitiveness
- Recognize that citizens prioritize environment and health protection and that they expect you to ensure that you put citizens at the heart of Lisbon.

We trust you will take these recommendations into your deliberations on the Lisbon Agenda, and we, along with the active citizens we represent, look forward to your reaction.



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Women in Europe for a Common Future

<sup>7</sup> Commission on Macroeconomics and Health (2001), “Macroeconomics and health: Investing in health for economic development.” See also, European Commission DG Health and Consumer Protection (2005). “The contribution of health to the economy in the European Union,” pg. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Report from the High Level Group chaired by Wim Kok (2004), “Facing the challenge: The Lisbon strategy for growth and employment.”

<sup>9</sup> EU Commission (2000) “Communication on the Precautionary Principle” [Com (2000)1].

WECF Women in Europe for a Common Future

is a Network of 80 organisations in more than 30 Western and Eastern European countries, the Caucasus and Central Asia