Policies in the dock (Athens News, May 20, 2005)

The European Union and WWF both went over Greece's environmental policy record last week and found it wanting

MARIA KAGKELIDOU
A delegation of the European Commission's legal experts was in Greece last week to discuss the country's abysmal environmental record. Commission sources say that during discussions with environment ministry officials they were pleasantly surprised.

However, European officials point out that words have to turn into actions or further court cases and fines will follow. Despite ministry assurances, they remain particularly concerned by developments at the Zakynthos National Park, where the endangered loggerhead species Caretta caretta is facing extinction.

Just a few days after the commission's visit, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) published its own report on Greece's environmental legislation entitled "Commitments without Implementation". According to WWF, Greece's environmental laws are unclear, complex and not properly enforced. The country's administration does not comply with court decisions, takes too long to check environmental law breaches and is not applying European environmental laws properly.

WWF experts go on to say that Greece lacks the necessary infrastructure that would help it design and enforce environmental legislation. For example, there are hardly any environmental data. "Environmental issues depend on legal enforcement. The country's environmental legislation is not effectively enforced, " said Demetres Karavellas, WWF Greece managing director.

Even though the report is the first comprehensive effort to survey Greece's environmental policy and legislation, WWF says it received no help from the authorities, with the exception of the environment inspection service.
European environmental laws. Ten cases are pending and 60 more are currently under consideration by the European Commission. Legal procedures have been initiated on 44 of them.

**Thriasio**  a case in point

Greece’s environmental and legislative woes are reflected in the industrial areas of Elefsina and Aspropirgos in eastern Attica, where the majority of Greece’s heavy industry is concentrated. Just last month the European Court found Greece guilty of not properly implementing European laws regarding toxic and hazardous waste in the local Thriasio plain, an area spanning the two municipalities.

Hazardous waste is mainly produced by metalworks, oil refineries and chemical industries. Elefsina has more than one of each. In April, the court found that Greece allowed three local tanneries, a steelworks plant and two petroleum-related businesses in Thriasio to dump dangerous waste into the sea and local streams. It also failed to draw up a plan of action to deal with hazardous waste and to recognise the pollution problem.

Since then the tanneries have been shut down and the other companies have invested large sums of money to create safe storage facilities for their hazardous waste. However, the EU is again considering taking Greece to court for not taking action to deal with hazardous and toxic waste, not just in Elefsina but throughout the country.

The steelworks named in the Thriasio case, Halyvourgiki, has spent in excess of 40 million euros on environmentally-friendly waste-processing facilities in the last three years. "We created three processing units and a storage unit using the best available technologies. We have got the relevant permits from the ministry. For the storage facilities these permits are renewed every six months," says Halyvourgiki plant director Thanasis Lappas.
At the moment, the only legal way for industry to deal with hazardous waste is to export it. According to WWF's report, the exact quantities of toxic and dangerous waste produced in Greece are unknown. Environment ministry data record 391,539 tonnes of toxic and hazardous waste in Greece in 2000. Of these around 40 percent were recycled and the rest stored. Lacking the required infrastructure to process waste, Greek companies should be exporting their waste. However, a recent Technical Chamber report on hazardous waste points out that in at least one industrial zone only 1 percent of hazardous waste is actually exported.

The mayor of Aspropyrgos believes that hazardous waste is still being dumped unchecked in western Attica, despite the latest conviction and the measures the companies named in the Thriasio case have taken. "If there are no legal grounds to permanently dispose of it, it must go somewhere, probably to the nearby landfill in Ano Liosia, and illegal landfills all around," he says.

Apart from hazardous industrial waste, western Attica also has numerous businesses that collect abandoned cars and take them apart to turn them into scrap metal. This type of uncertified recycling also produces hazardous materials. Even though the legal framework for car recycling was completed last year, no company has yet been licensed by the environment ministry to recycle cars in the Attica region where over a third of Greeks live. "Remains from these compressed cars are scattered around and the sea has been further polluted in Elefsina. High levels of heavy metals have been detected recently," says Chrysogelos.

Environment ministry officials say that they are currently preparing new legislation on hazardous waste that would put the onus on industry to process it. "The ministry is trying to solve this problem. It doesn't just concern us in Elefsina, but Greek industry as a whole. It's a political decision as local communities do not want landfills and other such sites in their vicinity," says Halivourgiki's Thanasis Lappas.