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Latvia joins E-rail Agreement

On 18 May Latvia acceded to the European Agreement on Main International Railway Lines (AGC), bringing to 26 the number of the UNECE Member States Contracting Parties to this Agreement.

The AGC was drawn up under the auspices of the UNECE Inland Transport Committee in 1985 and became effective in 1989. It provides the legal framework for the construction and development of a coherent international rail network, the E-rail network. The Agreement identifies the E-railway lines, or arteries that channel major international rail traffic flows throughout the UNECE region and



establishes the minimum uniform technical standards those railway lines must respect as well as a distinguishing number for each E-rail line.

In addition to the major railway traffic lines in Western, Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the AGC now includes main international roads in the Caucasus and Central Asia. ✳

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Single window standards

Continuing its work on promoting the efficient exchange of information between trade and government, the UNECE through its Centre for Trade Facilitation and International Business (UN/CEFACT) organized on 3-5 May a Symposium on Single Window Standards and Interoperability. Single Windows play an important role in simplifying and rationalizing national import and export procedures.

International standards for data harmonization were presented, designed to help establish an efficient and secure exchange of trade – an essential component of Single Window operations.

Representatives of the trade community presented their expectations from countries in terms of facilitating electronic business and e-freight operations. They expressed strong interest and support for the Single Window initiatives and encouraged countries to establish legal conditions that enable electronic trade operations in order to attract the interest of the business community. Legal issues are often a challenge during the implementation process. Introducing a Single Window usually requires significant changes to the existing legislation.

Governmental representatives presented their experience in organizing a cross border exchange of trade data, describing several projects on data exchange between different countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. Speakers noted the great challenges of dealing with different languages, data requirements, definitions, data element definitions and regulations. ✳

All presentations are available at: http://www.unece.org/trade/workshop/sw_2006/presentations.htm.

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Wood: an alternative to oil and gas?

by Douglas Clark, UNECE Timber Section

I have been struck by the fact that oil and gas have featured heavily in recent issues - a reflection of the importance of energy, the effects of sharp rises in energy prices and concerns about the security of energy supplies.

In all of this there has hardly been a mention of the potential of wood as an energy source. Yet countries like Austria realized as long back as the first oil 'crisis' in the 1970s that wood represents an important indigenous energy source that, if properly developed and managed sustainably, could make an important contribution to meeting Austria's energy needs and make it less reliant on imported



energy (oil and gas). Austria also invested heavily in research to improve the efficiency of wood burning boilers to the extent that the newest generation of household boilers can recover 93% of the energy content of the wood.

This approach is now being adopted by the EU and there is a new emphasis on wood as a serious energy source and an alternative to gas and oil. It can never meet all energy needs - we are far too greedy in our use of energy - but with energy saving measures and simply being wiser in the way that we use energy it can make a significant contribution to meeting future energy needs. It already is in some countries, notably Finland, Austria and Sweden.

In the EU as a whole, only about 62% of the increase in volume that occurs through growth is harvested annually. Right away this shows that





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there is potential for wood to increase its share of energy production, even allowing for the fact that 10% of forests are protected and may not be available for wood production. Wood is of course viewed as a carbon neutral fuel – because the CO2 released when it is converted to energy is re-absorbed by growing trees. Thus, it is a source of truly 'green' energy: it does not increase the atmospheric load of CO2. This cannot be said for oil or gas.

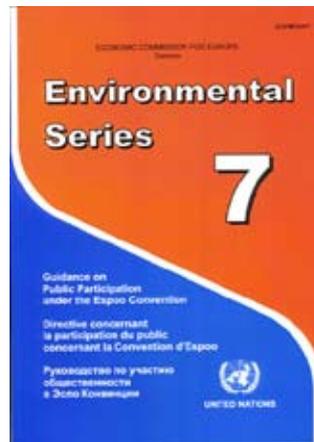
Wood energy was a special topic at the recent Joint UNECE/FAO Working Party on Forest Economics and Statistics (2-4 May 2006) though the concern there was about finding ways of improving the quality of the information about wood and its role as a source of energy to help policy makers make informed choices.

From a purely personal viewpoint, I see wood as being a means potentially of empowering local communities. If governments can find a way of encouraging local communities to utilize wood from their own forests to generate the heat and energy that they consume, it raises awareness of just how much energy they use; it generates local employment. If those communities are also 'shareholders' in the means of energy production then they share in the 'profits' and can use these to reinvest in community infrastructure for the benefit of the community. *

Off the press

Guidance on public participation

When governments enable the public to participate in decision-making, they help meet society's goal of sustainable and environmentally sound development. Public participation in environmental decision-making and, in particular, in EIA, may lead to some benefits in these processes. As



a result of public participation, the process of decision-making, up to and including the final decision, becomes more transparent and legitimate. Public debate on proposed activities among all interested groups at an early stage of decision-making may prevent or mitigate conflicts and adverse environmental consequences of the decisions with transboundary impacts.

The Parties to the Espoo Convention* recognized the need for guidance to assist competent authorities and the public in organizing effective public participation in environmental impact assessment in a transboundary context and have prepared guidelines to this effect.

For more information contact eia.conv@unece.org.

*The Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context was adopted in Espoo (Finland) in 1991 and entered into force in 1997.

Facts and figures

Consistent macroeconomic policies result in a significant decrease in inflation rates

Coming up ...

6-8 June

Working Party on the Standardization of Technical and Safety Requirements in Inland Navigation

6-9 June

Working Party on Pollution and Energy

7-9 June

Working Party on Transport Statistics

9 June

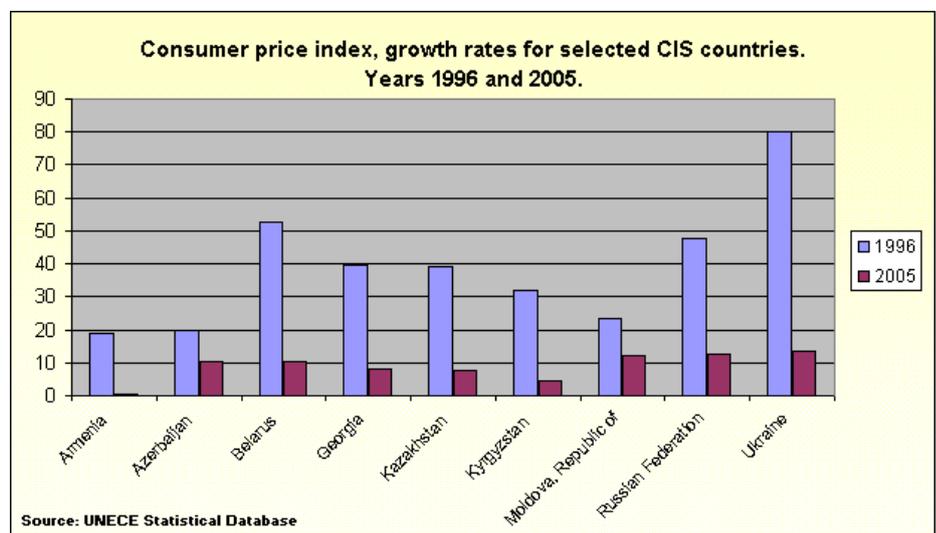
Ad Hoc Meeting on the European Agreement on Main International Traffic Arteries (AGR)

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CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States): Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan

In the selected CIS countries, inflation was significantly higher in 1996 than in 2005. During the early to mid 1990s most of the CIS countries experienced extremely high levels of inflation. In 1996, Ukraine and Belarus had the highest rates of inflation out of the selected countries, with prices increasing by 80% and 53% respectively. However, the relatively consistent macroeconomic policies in the CIS countries in recent years have contributed to the strengthening of economic growth and macroeconomic stabilization, which is reflected inter alia in falling inflation rates. In 2005 all of the selected CIS countries recorded much lower rates of inflation, with prices in Ukraine and Belarus increasing by 14% and 10% respectively.