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**Accompanying document to the
COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE
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Towards a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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Towards a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

This Impact Assessment has been prepared by the Commission services to support the Communication "towards a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS)".

The general background to the Communication concerns the need for a high quality of information to support the preparation and implementation of environmental policy, in line with the principle of better regulation. This need exists against a background of rapidly evolving information and communication technology, which presents considerable scope for streamlining reporting systems and making more effective use of available data.

Specific problems include the need to further simplify reporting and monitoring obligations and reduce the administrative burden associated with them, shortcomings in relation to the timeliness, availability, reliability and relevance of information, missed opportunities in relation to modernisation of the public sector and provision of e-Government services in the field of environment, and shortcomings in the capacity to quickly turn data to policy relevant information and implement integrated approaches to environmental policy efficiently.

Several initiatives are underway at European and national level that will go some way in addressing the above problems. However, despite these initiatives a major challenge in Europe and globally remains to organise the vast array of already collected environmental data and information, to integrate these, where desirable, with existing data and information from the social and economic realms, to make them available together with tools that allow experts to do their own analyses, and to communicate them in ways which the public policy makers and the public can readily understand and use as a basis for their own actions. At the same time, MSs and EU institutions need an efficient and modern 'reporting system' to fulfil their legal obligations related to Community and international environmental policies and legislation, avoiding duplication of efforts, overlapping and redundancies.

The general objectives for SEIS are to improve the availability and quality of information needed to design and implement Community environment policy, to reduce administrative burden on Member States and EU institutions and modernise reporting, and to foster the development of information services and applications that all stakeholders can use and profit from.

The specific objectives are:

- (1) to secure a clear political agreement around a set of principles on which the Shared Environmental Information System is to be based;

- (2) to continue rationalising the 'knowledge base' through the assessment and streamlining of existing reporting requirements within environmental legislation while implementing information and communication technology solutions for electronic reporting;
- (3) to establish and implement data and information sharing agreements in addition to an efficient information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure to facilitate the discovery, assessment, access and sharing of environment-related data and information;
- (4) to reinforce and, where necessary, establish monitoring infrastructures and surveys for the collection and archiving of 'fit-for-purpose' environment-related data that are cost-effective and flexible but can be sustained over the long term.

In addition to the "zero option" (business as usual), four options have been identified as follows:

- option 1: the current Communication itself, which corresponds to specific objective 1. The primary aim of the Communication is to provide the political and conceptual framework that is needed to guide existing processes in a common direction and foster new initiatives sharing the same goal. The Communication also lists the principles on which SEIS will be based;
- option 2: updating the Standardised Reporting Directive, which corresponds to specific objective 2 but could also serve, at least indirectly, specific objective 3. The aim will be to critically overhaul the directive in the light of its shortcomings and the on-going evolutions in the directives under its scope. Such an update will allow new trends in environmental policy making to be reflected while ensuring a more coherent and aligned framework for reporting;
- option 3: expanding and/or harmonising the mandatory data collection and archiving under Community regulatory frameworks. This option corresponds to specific objective 4, and will involve assessing current approaches against this specific objective and the overall aims of SEIS. Amendments to existing legislation will be proposed where appropriate and new regulatory proposals formulated to fill gaps identified in data or observational infrastructures;
- option 4: a new regulatory framework for SEIS covering compliance and former statutory reporting, which would lead to the full achievement of specific objectives 2 and 3. It would include provisions aiming to increase the quality and availability of the data required to develop and assess environmental policies within a logically coherent framework, and to fully streamline the various current approaches to data collection, monitoring and reporting in the environmental *acquis*.

The cost and benefits of implementing SEIS will depend on the timescale over which it happens, and the precise measures that are taken to achieve it. However, the potential benefits of such a system can nevertheless be expected to be considerable. Improving the mechanisms for collecting, exchanging and using the data can be expected to significantly increase the use that is made of such data, together with a significant reduction in cost for the users. Improvements in the access and interoperability of data systems will also reduce the need for reporting requirements, leading to a streamlining of data requirements and data flows, including the phasing out or repeal of outdated or redundant reporting requirements. Other benefits include better legislation, more efficient EU-level analyses, efficiency gains in relation to the achievement of international policy commitments and evaluation obligations, empowerment of citizens through the widespread availability of information, increased availability of data for use by researchers, and better profile for the EU in various global fora.

On the cost side, it is expected that even relatively modest initial investments towards implementing the SEIS vision will, if designed properly, lead to economic, social and environmental benefits that can in turn be reinvested into further development of the system. The types of investments that will be necessary include reinforced efforts to successfully implement the INSPIRE directive; possible change in organisational and business models of institutions involved in the collection and processing of environmentally-relevant data; continued or reinforced efforts by EU institutions and bodies to update and streamline

legislative requirements and centralised reporting systems; further analysis to clarify real data and information requirements and to develop the required legal and/or financial instruments; and further investments to create new data that is not currently collected but is found to be essential to support policy, or to harmonise monitoring and data systems.

Updating the standardised reporting directive will bring about immediate simplification benefits, will in addition help to trigger further streamlining within Member States and compliance with the SEIS principles. Citizens in particular stand to benefit from the increased transparency and availability of information that makes full use of the rapidly evolving information and communication technologies.

There also appears to be significant scope for improving the cost-effectiveness of national monitoring efforts through further harmonisation. More generally the cost-benefit ratio of environmental monitoring is estimated to be highly favourable, so further harmonisation and even expansion of current monitoring obligations should not be ruled out at this stage. However, more detailed analysis is necessary including possible pilot schemes involving Member States before specific legislative proposals can be considered.

Based on the above analysis, options 1 to 3 are considered to be justified. The fourth option of defining a new regulatory framework including detailed obligations would go furthest in ensuring that the SEIS objectives are met, but could be seen as over-prescriptive, could also lack the flexibility to allow more spontaneous adaptation to evolving political priorities and technological possibilities, and could be seen as conflicting with the principle of subsidiarity. Nevertheless, in view of its potential effectiveness such an instrument deserves further consideration during the coming years.