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France's New Government Gives Boost to Environment Policy

Despite giving priority to such pressing matters as record unemployment, the fiscal deficit, and public concerns for security following the bomb attacks in Paris, Premier Jospin has signaled his interest in moving ahead on environmental issues by approving various initiatives of Environment Minister and Green Party member Voynet. Since the June elections, Voynet has taken key domestic actions, including:

- Closing the Super-Phenix fast breeder reactor program after it had been widely criticized for poor management and cost overruns
- Stopping construction of the Rhine-Rhone canal, amid criticism that it would remove whole villages in its path, according to press reports.
- Banning fishing and boating near La Hague nuclear waste reprocessing plant after Greenpeace found radioactive waste in the waters around the facility. The plant is still operational pending government tests. Voynet plans to establish an independent authority for monitoring the operation of all such plants, according to press reports.
- Using the pollution alerts in major French cities this summer to promote an "eco-tax" on private auto emissions with revenues to contribute to expansion of public transport. She considers the private auto a key factor in the smog affecting Paris and proposes that the balance of transport systems should shift toward mass transit, according to press reports. She has asked all urban centers with populations over 100,000 to have in place by December 1998 detailed plans--for which the Environment Ministry will provide guidelines--to transport more people on trains and bicycles.

[Redacted]

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In addition, Voynet has taken some steps in Brussels to indicate that the Jospin Government has decided on a more positive approach to EU environmental actions than its predecessors. She has, for example:

- Endorsed the EU's program for stricter fuel specifications for gasoline and diesel to lower emissions, according to press reports. Legislation is in the final stages in the European Parliament and expected to be ready for implementation by 1 January 1998. The previous French government did not fully support the program.
- Advocated more stringent humane trapping standards for the EU than those to which DG I (External Economic Relations) had agreed with Canada and Russia and, by defeating DG I's proposal, forced the European Commission to start over. [redacted] The previous government was in DG I's camp.

Voynet probably will advocate that France join Austria, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, and the UK in pushing for a 10-percent cut by 2010 in the 1990 level of carbon emissions from the combustion of fossil fuels. The previous French government was reluctant to take that step because the principal sector of the economy in which France would have to find significant emissions reductions is the politically sensitive one of transport. Voynet, however, appears willing to take on private auto transport to reduce emissions. [redacted]

However, formidable political, bureaucratic, and financial obstacles remain for Voynet's policies to make headway. For example:

- French public opinion is not as closely attuned to green issues as is German or Dutch opinion because government programs have to date been conceptually sound but lacking specific targets, standards, and procedural mechanisms that would bring these issues closer to home, [redacted]
- The government's environmental functions are scattered across a number of agencies. Voynet has the environment portfolio, but the Agriculture; Infrastructure, Transport, and Housing; and Justice Ministries also are players. France lacks an interministerial council to coordinate policy, [redacted]



- The Environment Ministry is weak compared to these other ministries. The Infrastructure, Transport, and Housing Ministry, for example, is 20 times the size of the Environment Ministry, according to press reports, and receives a substantially larger amount of government funding.

