

“A Big Day for the Alpine Convention”

by Wolfgang E. Burhenne*

This was the headline of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* after the conclusion of the sixth Alpine Conference of the Ministers of the eight Contracting Parties held at Lucerne, Switzerland, on 30-31 October 2000. While all eight of the contracting State Parties were present, which are (in alphabetical order) Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia, Switzerland, and the European Commission, the latter was criticised for not having sent a delegate.

The stumbling block for a long time has been a lack of consensus regarding establishing a legally binding Protocol for managing traffic in the alpine region.¹ After a total of six years of negotiations, a compromise was finally reached as to where all Parties agreed, for example, to refrain from building new Trans-alpine motorways, and to devise concepts that rely more heavily on railroad traffic.

This breakthrough in negotiations enabled the signing of the other Protocols which had been negotiated earlier, but have not been signed by most contracting States. Moritz Leuenberger, the Swiss Minister for Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications noted that this was a joyous occasion for the Host Country. The Ministers of all Member States present expressed their commitment toward ensuring speedy implementation of the Protocols.

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¹ See also EPL 27/5 (1997), p. 407-408.

An agreement was also reached on the new protocol regarding procedures for dispute settlement. Another major step toward the implementation of the Convention and its Protocols was the acceptance of the proposal to establish a permanent Secretariat after its necessity had been questioned for so long. Now preparations are underway to devise an organisational structure and determine the size and location of the Secretariat.

Among other matters considered, the Conference approved a report on mountain-specific environmental quality goals for the alpine region. The Permanent Committee of High-Level Officials for the Alpine Convention had already agreed in their last meeting to set up a working group which is to draft a new Protocol on Populations and Culture.

In gearing up for the International Year of the Mountains in 2002, a special report on the Alpine Convention is to be prepared and to be presented to the United Nations Secretary General, in the hope that it will be used as a model for other States who share cross-boundary mountain systems. Italy made a bid to chair the next two-year term and was confirmed by unanimous vote.

In closing, the delegates of the member States and the observers of the accredited non-governmental organisations (NGOs) thanked the host country and outgoing chair of the Alpine Convention. They all agreed that this Conference could not have come to a successful conclusion without Switzerland's tireless efforts to keep the negotiations alive and to seek new avenues for compromise.

