

EUROVIGNETTE REVISIONS 'DISAPPOINTING'

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A revision to the European Commission's Eurovignette Directive, which allows European Union states to impose charges on trucks to offset pollution costs, has been given final approval to apply a new toll-based pricing system aimed at recovering previously prohibited "external costs". Last week's vote on the revision marks the end of a three-year debate and will allow member states to charge all vehicles above 3.5 tonnes not only for infrastructure costs but also for noise, pollution and congestion.

However, a compromise on what was originally a mandatory allocation of revenue derived from the increased levies for reinvestment in transport infrastructure, means EU member states get the final say on how they will spend the extra funds; a source of frustration for many, including The Association of European Vehicle Logistics (ECG).

"The most disappointing aspect of the latest changes involves the earmarking of funds for transport infrastructure, with the text watered down significantly to get it through its second reading," said a spokesman for the ECG. "Where it did say '15% shall be allocated', it now declares that 15% 'should' be allocated', which binds the member states into very little of anything."

The Commission's original proposal was to earmark the revenue generated by the new tolls "for measures aimed at facilitating efficient pricing, reducing road transport pollution at source, mitigating its effects, improving the CO2 and energy performance of vehicles, and developing alternative infrastructure for transport users."

The resistance of member states to this mandatory aspect of the revision now means they are merely encouraged to set aside 15% of the new charging revenues for investment in sustainable transport infrastructure (TEN-T) projects.

The International Road Transport Union said that the final outcome *de facto* failed to 'green' road transport by not making mandatory the earmarking of Eurovignette revenues. It is now urging governments to earmark such revenues at a national level to effectively meet the objectives of the EU Transport Policy White Paper.

Road congestion, meanwhile, is now incorporated into existing infrastructure costs. According to the revised directive, countries will have the right to vary toll tariff during peak and off-peak hours "to ease congestion". In congested areas higher tariffs of up to 175% above the average will be allowed. Top tariffs will be collected during a maximum of five peak hours per day, with lower tariffs applying for the rest of the time on the same section of road.

Applying higher tolls has "the clear aim of discouraging or getting heavy lorries off the road, [such as] the ring road around Brussels at peak times, allowing traffic to flow," said Helen Kearns, spokeswoman for EU Transport Commissioner Siim Kallas.

According to the ECG, while it is still too early to predict the impact of the changes, not least since implementation will be a question for member states, the tariff increase to 175% of the basic rate at times of high congestion looks set to change patterns of road transport, with journeys scheduled to avoid those peak periods.

The charges will be collected by electronic systems that are expected to be fully interoperable at EU level by 2012. A receipt clearly stating the amount of the external cost charge will be given to hauliers so that they can pass on the cost to their clients.

The revised directive extends the chance to toll trucks on all motorways in Europe and not just the 15,000km of tolled roads on the TEN-T network currently covered by the existing law.