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Commission's analysis of the Y2K problem

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The report, prepared by Berlioz and Co, claims the European consumer may have to deal with substantial problems. 'Since the consumer is the end-user of products and services, he is not content with noting the adaptation by enterprises of their computer and electronic systems. The enterprises' difficulties will reverberate on their consumers, they will manifestly be the victims of difficulties in transition to the year 2000.'

An in-depth analysis of the potential consequences consumers might face is included in the report, which provides advice on what precautions can be taken and what remedies are available.

It claims that the extent of the bug is so huge that correction can only be partial - bugs will continue to nestle in hardware, programmes and micro processors, the effects of which will be difficult to predict. Consumers will be directly vulnerable from these potential errors, and should therefore take precautions to minimise the damage. Consumers should be aware of the legal protections that exist, including commercial guarantee, certificates and labels.

The legal weapons provided by consumer law, law of sale, and ordinary laws of availability vary significantly between the different Member States, although European directives have attempted to achieve a degree of harmonisation.

The risks are highest in the food and medical sectors, according to the report, where

the consequences could be fatal. Where the risks are so high, consumers may wish to take their own precautions, and the report provides advice accompanied by an analysis of the legal remedies.

Vulnerability will be particularly high on critical dates, of which there are many, and may lead to a domino effect. Although legal protection exists, the amount of legal actions in such a situation could topple the enterprises involved. The report outlines the need for Member States to sensitise consumers who 'without giving in to a wave of panic, have to prepare, be vigilant and try to avoid the damage rather than have to obtain an indemnification.'

The potentially disastrous millennium bug refers to the possibility of mass computer failure, arising because most timing devices only acknowledge the last two digits of the year and may therefore interpret the century change incorrectly.

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