

Brussels, 18 January 2011

Statement by Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik following today's debate in College on air quality

Today the Commission had a debate on how best to deal with the issue of air quality in the short and long term. Measures addressing air pollution extend beyond environmental policies. Actions taken in many other policy areas, such as transport, energy, or agriculture, are crucial to their effectiveness.

Air quality is an important public health and environmental issue. Air pollution continues to cause damage to people and environment: premature deaths, shorter life expectancy, as well as substantial damage to ecosystems, crops and buildings. These are real losses for our economy, productivity of our workforce and our nature.

Our policy has been successful in bringing down air pollution over the decades. It is a mature policy based on science, evidence and cost-effectiveness. Considerable emission reductions have been achieved over the past twenty years, though improvements seem to have slowed down in recent years.

As the recently adopted State of Environment Report from the European Environment Agency acknowledges, areas where we are not on track include pressures on ecosystems from air pollution e.g. eutrophication, biodiversity loss, waste generation and air quality in urban areas.

In today's debate, the Commission recognised that improving air quality is a pressing need and a shared responsibility requiring our joint efforts and that we should immediately focus on improving air quality. The need for a renewed and comprehensive air quality policy was accepted and also that such a wider review should also include a revision of the National Emission Ceilings Directive (NEC Directive).

The Commission will without further delay take measures which will help Member States comply with established EU air quality standards. These include, for example, measures on the sulphur content of bunker fuels and on reducing emissions from vehicles and machinery. Additionally the implementation of measures in the climate and energy package, the new CAP, the use of Cohesion Funds and support for research will further help dealing with air quality

The Commission will also actively participate in the negotiations for international conventions on air quality, in particular in the framework of the UNECE Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and the ongoing revision of the Gothenburg Protocol.

The main instruments of EU policy include Air Quality legislation setting Limit Values, source oriented legislation (such as on industry and energy production) and legislation on mobile sources such as cars and trucks through Euro standards and the National Emissions Ceilings directive.

The NEC Directive sets cost-effective national ceilings for 2010 for pollutants that travel long-distance.

It caps the pollutant levels that Member states can export to other Member States therefore limiting the pollution neighbouring Member States import. It enables all Member States to meet EU environment and health standards cost-effectively.

In spite of the general success of our policies, some Member States are set to overshoot the ceilings concerning nitrogen oxide while others are also facing infringement procedures for failing to meet Particle Matter limit values

The NEC directive has been due for revision for some time but in the College's opinion a 'stand alone' revision would not fully benefit from synergies with other policy measures in the pipeline and/or envisaged. One could expect such synergies to come out, for example, from the ongoing evaluation of the 6th Environmental Action Programme, our climate change policy and a range of industrial and technological policies.