



PRESS RELEASE

EU member states fail Europeans health in air quality agreement, says HEAL

Brussels, 01 July 2016 – The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) has expressed disappointment on the missed opportunity to significantly improve people’s lives in an area that really counts, that is their health, with the agreement reached on the EU National Emissions Ceilings Directive (NEC) on air quality (1).

In October 2015, the European Parliament vote had stood up to strong lobbying to protect people’s health by improving the draft EU Commission proposal. However, the final NEC now agreed includes new flexibilities and a weaker overall ambition on cutting emissions, as a result of the EU member states refusal to increase commitment for cleaner air.

“The new agreement on reducing harmful air emissions under the NEC will leave Europe with an unnecessary health burden for millions living in polluted areas, as well as a high health bill, which could have been avoided,” says Anne Stauffer, HEAL Deputy Director.

“The EU member states are entirely to blame. Instead of putting the health of their citizens first, EU member states have successfully pushed through a short-sighted agenda focusing on as much flexibility for continuing to pollute our air. They have decreased the overall ambition level, which is an indication that they simply do not take air pollution seriously enough. With this approach, they ignored the warning from the World Health Organization that air pollution is now the top environmental health threat facing Europe.”

She says that member states seem to have brushed aside the large evidence base on the harm to health from air pollution as well as the desire of the majority of Europe’s citizens for cleaner air.

“Tackling air pollution is a policy area with clear EU added value. At a time of crisis and soul searching for EU policy-makers, a more ambitious outcome would have been a much needed sign to citizens of the benefits of the European Union.”

The World Health Organization defines air pollution as one of the main avoidable causes of disease and death globally (2). In the EU, it is responsible for reducing life expectancy by an average of almost nine months. (3) Health costs from air pollution in the EU are estimated at 330 – 940 billion EUR a year. (4)

Experts say that air quality in much of Europe is “poor” (5) contributing significantly to asthma, COPD, heart disease, lung and other cancers, and brain damage in children.

In the latest EU opinion survey, Europeans say they want cleaner air and believe that it is the EU that should take action. Over half of all Europeans (56%) said they thought air quality has deteriorated over the past 10 years and more than half (51%) thought EU air quality standards should be strengthened. (6)

The new NEC is the most important piece of legislation for cutting air pollution emissions at the source. It sets limits for emissions of major air pollutants, including particulate matter, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds, and ammonia. Emission caps for methane were left out at the insistence of EU member states.

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Notes to journalists

1. [Ec.europa.eu/environment/air/pollutants/ceilings.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/pollutants/ceilings.htm)

The NEC is the only legislative instrument tackling cross-border air pollution in the European Union. It defines the implementation of the EU's international commitments under the UN Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution.

2. World Health Assembly resolution on the health impact of air pollution, 2015, apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA68/A68_75-en.pdf

3. Statement of ISEE and ISEE Europe Chapter http://www.isee-europe.com/uploads/4/7/0/6/47066395/necd_statement_isee_final.pdf

4. Open Letter from HEAL and others to MEPs, 23 October 2015, <http://www.env-health.org/resources/letters/article/open-letter-to-meps-call-for-clean>

5. Bert Brunekreef, who has lead major EU research projects on air quality and is chairman of the European Respiratory Society, says that air quality is "poor" in much of Europe and that the Air Quality Guidelines set by the World Health Organisation are exceeded almost everywhere in Europe. See Air Quality at a Crossroads, <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/climate-environment/air-quality-crossroads-318195>

6. Flash Eurobarometer 360, 2013, Attitudes of Europeans towards air quality http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_360_en.pdf