Mid-term review of the European environment and health action plan 2004 - 2010

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The Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety adopted the own-initiative report by Frédérique **RIES** (EPP-ED, BE) on the mid-term review of the European Environment and Health Action Plan 2004-2010. The committee acknowledges the efforts made by the Commission since the action plan was launched in 2004. It considers, however, that such an action plan is bound to fail at least in part, since it is designed solely to accompany existing Community policies, it is not based upon a preventive policy intended to reduce illnesses linked to environmental factors, and it pursues no clear, quantified objective.

MEPs regret the fact that the Commission has not provided sufficient funding for human biological monitoring in 2008 to enable it (as it had promised Parliament and the Member States) to introduce a consistent approach to biological monitoring within the EU. They call on the Commission to respond by 2010 to two essential objectives:

1. make members of the general public aware of environmental pollution and the impact thereof on their health;
2. 2. adapt European risk-reduction policy.

MEPs recommend that the Member States meet their obligations as regards implementation of Community legislation and that the Commission does not weaken those laws under pressure from lobbies or regional or international organisations.

Vulnerable groups: MEPs stress that, when it comes to assessing the impact of environmental factors on health, consideration should be given first and foremost to vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, newborn babies, children and the elderly. Those who are the most susceptible to pollutants should be protected by specific measures to reduce exposure to indoor environmental contaminants in healthcare facilities and schools.

A new dynamic approach to protection based on the precautionary principle: MEPs claim that the EU needs to apply a continuous dynamic and flexible approach to the Action Plan and that it should acquire specific expertise on the subject of environmental health, to be based on transparency and on a multidisciplinary and adversarial approach which would thus enable the general public's distrust of official agencies and committees of experts to be countered. Although there have been genuine advances in environmental policy in recent years, MEPs state that EU policy still lacks a comprehensive preventive strategy and fails to apply the precautionary principle. The Commission should revise the criteria as regards recourse to the precautionary principle pursuant to European Court of Justice case-law, in order to ensure that an action and security principle based on the adoption of provisional and proportionate measures lies at the heart of Community health and environment policies.

Air quality: MEPs call once again upon the Commission to come forward as soon as possible with concrete measures on indoor air quality. The Commission is called upon to draft appropriate minimum requirements to guarantee the quality of indoor air in buildings to be newly built. MEPs recommend that, in awarding individual European Union support, the Commission bear in mind its impact on the quality of indoor air, exposure to electromagnetic radiation and the health of particularly vulnerable sections of the population. They also call for environmental quality standards for priority substances in water to be laid down. MEPs point out that certain Member States have successfully introduced mobile analysis laboratories (or ‘green ambulances’) to enable habitat pollution in public and private places to be

diagnosed swiftly and reliably. They consider that the Commission could promote such a practice within the Member States which have not yet acquired such a means of direct intervention at a polluted site.

Dangers of new technologies: MEPs are concerned about the lack of specific legal provisions to ensure the safety of consumer products containing nanoparticles being put on the market. They are greatly concerned at the Bio-Initiative international report on electromagnetic fields, which highlights the health risks posed by emissions from mobile-telephony devices such as mobile telephones, UMTS, Wifi, Wimax and Bluetooth, and also DECT landline telephones. It notes that the limits on exposure to electromagnetic fields which have been set for the general public are obsolete. They do not take account of developments in information and communication technologies or vulnerable groups, such as pregnant women, newborn babies and children.

Global warming: worried about the multiple health risks created by global warming on EU territory, MEPs call for enhanced cooperation between the WHO, the Member States' monitoring authorities, the Commission and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in order to bolster the early-warning system and thus to curb the harmful effects which climate change has on health. MEPs highlight that this Action Plan would benefit from being extended to cover negative impacts of climate change on human health. They regret in particular that the current cost benefit impact assessment of the '20 20 by 2020 Europe's Climate Change Opportunity' (COM(2008)0030) only considers the health benefits of reduced air pollution at a 20% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2020. They call on the Commission to ensure that the (ancillary) co-benefits to health of various levels of ambition, in line with the International Panel on Climate Change recommendations of domestic 25% to 40% as well as possibly 50% or more of greenhouse gas emission reduction by 2020, are urgently investigated and modelled into an impact assessment.

Mental health: MEPs call on the Commission to pay attention to the serious problem of mental health, considering the number of suicides in the EU, and to devote more resources to the development of adequate prevention strategies and therapies.

To conclude, MEPs urge the Commission and Member States to acknowledge the advantages of the prevention and precautionary principles and to develop and implement tools enabling potential environmental and health threats to be anticipated and countered. They recommend that the Commission cost the 'second cycle' of this action plan and make provision for appropriate funding covering a larger number of practical measures to reduce environmental impact on health and to implement prevention and precautionary measures. Lastly, they urge the Council to take a decision without delay on the proposal for a regulation establishing the Union Solidarity Fund.