Implementation of the Ambient Air Quality Directives: Directive 2004/107/EC and Directive 2008/50/EC

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The European Parliament adopted by 425 votes to 109, with 153 abstentions, a resolution on the implementation of the Ambient Air Quality Directives: Directive 2004/107/EC and Directive 2008/50/EC.

Air pollution is the biggest environmental health risk in Europe, causing, according to the most recent EEA estimates, almost 400 000 premature deaths per year. In 2018, estimates of the health impact of long-term exposure to air pollution in the EU-28, indicated that PM2.5 was responsible for approximately 379 000 premature deaths, NO caused around 54 000 deaths and O3 accounted for 19 400 premature deaths.

A partially effective tool that needs to be improved

Parliament pointed out that while the ambient air quality directives have been successful in establishing common European air quality standards and facilitating the exchange of information, they have been only partially successful in effectively reducing air pollution and limiting its adverse effects on health, quality of life and the environment.

The ambient air quality Directives are based on air quality standards that are now 15 to 20 years old. Some of them are much weaker than current WHO guidelines and estimated reference levels based on excess lifetime cancer risk, and the levels suggested by the latest scientific evidence on human health and environment impacts. In this regard, Members welcomed the European Green Deal's commitment to revise air quality standards and called on the Commission to align PM10, PM2.5, SO2 and O3 values with WHO guidelines, and benzene (C6H6) and benzo(a)pyrene (BaP) values with WHO reference levels, through legislative changes to the ambient air quality directives. In particular, the Commission should propose to replace the current target values (O3, As, Cd, Ni and BaP) with limit values.

In order for the EU to become a global leader in this field, it should adopt and enforce ambitious quality standards for all air pollutants. The revised standards should also cover other unregulated pollutants with demonstrated negative impacts on health and the environment in the EU, such as ultrafine particles, black carbon, mercury and ammonia. The Commission is invited to draw up a watch list covering substances that are a matter of health concern to citizens or the scientific community, such as microplastics.

Measuring air pollution

Members noted that Member States have set up an air quality monitoring network based on common criteria defined by the ambient air quality directives, comprising more than 4000 monitoring stations and 16 000 sampling points.

The Commission is urged to strengthen the obligations under the directive to ensure that Member States carry out air quality measurements at appropriate locations and close to emission sources, and that the data collected provide information on where the highest concentrations of air pollutants occur.

The resolution also called on the Commission to:

- review and establish new mandatory rules for locating monitoring stations and sampling points;

- define new indicators in air quality indices that better reflects the human exposure to air pollution, such as population density around monitoring stations and sampling points.

COVID-19 and air pollution

The resolution highlighted that there is evidence that exposure to air pollution could affect the health outcomes of people who catch COVID-19, principally due to damage to the respiratory and immune systems.

Parliament noted that confinement measures to control the spread of the pandemic led to a drastic temporary reduction in traffic and industrial activity and consequently resulted in an unprecedented decrease in emissions and air pollution on a continental scale, which clearly shows the impact of human activities on the environment.

Members suggested that all measures should be analysed to understand their impact and stressed the need to take into account the lessons learned from the COVID-19 air pollution pandemic when developing new measures.

Stringent policies for main pollution sources

Members warned that any new measures will be worthless if air quality is not properly prioritised and mainstreamed in all EU legislation, including EU emission source legislation, such as climate, energy, transport, industry, agriculture and waste, while ensuring synergies between all policy areas.

The resolution called on the Commission and Member States to assess the effectiveness of all emissions legislation and to strengthen it while ensuring compliance.

Improving air quality plans and enforcement of the Ambient Air Quality Directives

Air quality plans, which are a key requirement of the Ambient Air Quality Directives in cases where Member States do not comply with air quality standards, are often ineffective in terms of delivering their expected results.

Members called on the Commission to establish as soon as possible a set of minimum requirements and best practices for both the preparation and implementation of air quality plans, to ensure that these plans set out time-bound measures that are commensurate with the pollution problem they are intended to address.

As of February 2021, 31 infringement proceedings against 20 Member States were still ongoing concerning the implementation of the ambient air quality directives. The Commission is required to take legal action as soon as it becomes aware that EU air quality laws are not being implemented, and to swiftly follow up with court referrals and sanctions when violations are established.

Promoting public awareness and action

The resolution called on the Commission, Member States and relevant regional and local authorities to launch updated public information and awareness campaigns on topics such as the different types of air pollutants and their impact on human health, or the existing levels of air pollution in the territory, including information for vulnerable groups, and to publish rankings of the best and worst progress made by air quality zones.

A standardised air quality classification system should be established which would be applicable across the EU.