

Air pollution : national emission ceilings for pollutant gas (SO₂, NO_x, NH₃, VOCs)

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The Council held a further policy debate on two proposals for Directives, one on national emission ceilings for certain atmospheric pollutants (sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxides, volatile organic compounds and ammonia) and the other on ozone in ambient air. During the debate, Ministers replied to three questions asked by the Presidency: - whether Member States were willing to go further than the reductions in emissions accepted in the framework of the Gothenburg Protocol; - whether the possible willingness of countries applying for memberships of the EU go beyond the reductions set in the Protocol should be taken into account when calculating emission ceilings; - whether Member States were committed to the interim targets for ozone reduction. In their contributions, a large majority of delegations supported the Presidency in its intention to push work forward in this area, particularly on emission ceilings, and to reach political agreement at the Council meeting in June. Several Ministers observed that the ceilings set by the Gothenburg Protocol seemed to be insufficient and said that they would be prepared to go further. Other stressed that the need to keep ceilings agreed in the Protocol for the time being, and then to adopt more ambitious ceilings when it was revised in 2004. In this context they commented on the considerable effort, particularly in financial terms, which was already necessary to achieve the ceilings set by the Gothenburg Protocol, and also on the need for a balance between environmental benefits and the financial costs entailed by the measures to be adopted. However, some Ministers said that they were prepared to accept more ambitious ceilings, while pointing out the need for progress in discussions on the Directive on large combustion plants and the need to develop Community legislation in certain areas which might affect the emission levels of pollutants covered by the proposal. Several delegations believe that additional effort would be needed from the countries applying for membership, over and above what they had accepted in the Gothenburg Protocol, while recognising the difficulties which they might have in this respect. Some Member States suggested that this question should be handled when the Directive was reviewed in 2004.