

Ambient air quality: common strategy for assessment and management

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The committee adopted a draft recommendation for a second reading by Mr Mihail PAPAYANNAKIS (GUE/NGL, Gr) on the common position established by the Council with a view to the adoption of a Council Directive on ambient air quality assessment and management. Parliament adopted 37 amendments at the first reading on 16 June 1995. Fourteen of these were incorporated, wholly or in part, into the common position established by the Council on 30 November 1995. In particular, the Council took account of Parliament's position on: - the right of the Commission to revise limit values and early warning thresholds in the light of the latest scientific data; - the need for research into the combined effects of different pollutants and climate; - the role of the European Environment Agency in implementing the directive; - coordination of measures adopted by Member States under this directive and those implemented in connection with the directive on integrated pollution control and prevention (see the BOWE recommendation above); - the right to introduce short-term measures, including the suspension of industrial activities and the imposition of a ban on motor traffic, when there is a risk that limit values will be exceeded or early warning thresholds crossed; - the inclusion of particulate matter of less than 10 micrometres in Annex I. On 7 May 1996, in its recommendation for second reading, the committee adopted 26 amendments to the common position. Inter alia, these provided: - that ambient air quality should be assessed and managed in agglomerations with populations of 100 000 upwards (instead of the 250 000 threshold proposed in the common position); the Commission representative opposed the lowering of the threshold on the grounds that this would impose expensive monitoring costs on smaller towns, but the rapporteur, Mr PAPAYANNAKIS, persuaded the committee that "smog is not a monopoly of very big towns"; - that, in addition to the setting of practicable restrictions on the emission of pollutants (limit values) in the near term, higher targets should also be set as long-term goals; in so deciding, the committee rejected the Commission's view that the setting of long-term targets might take the emphasis off and undermine more immediately operational limit values; - that limit values be set with reference to the "critical load concept", which the committee defined as "either the highest load that will not cause chemical changes leading to long-term harmful effects on the most sensitive ecological systems for acid deposition or, for gaseous pollutants, the concentration of pollutants in the atmosphere above which direct adverse effects on receptors, such as plants, ecosystems or materials, may occur, according to present scientific knowledge"; this was also against the wishes of the Commission, which had wanted the "critical load concept" to be dealt with through other legislation; The committee also decided that margins of tolerance permitting limit values to be exceeded temporarily should not last more than five years (instead of being open-ended, as the Council wanted). It stipulated that plans for improving air quality should be submitted to the Commission by Member States a year earlier than was proposed in the common position. Proposals for dealing with benzene and carbon monoxide should be submitted earlier than the Council had proposed. Moreover, additional pollutants for which limit values would be considered at a later stage (dioxins, volatile organic compounds, methane, ammoniac and nitric acid) should be introduced into Annex I. The committee also opted for the establishment of an advisory rather than a regulatory committee