

Industrial pollution: reduction of emissions of volatile organic compounds (VOC)

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A Commission proposal for a directive setting emission limits for industrial solvents was approved with amendments by the Committee. Such solvents contribute to the formation of ozone at ground level, leading to an increase in asthma, headaches, eye problems and heart disease. As a result, the Commission has put forward a directive to reduce solvent emissions from certain craft and industrial activities by nearly 70% (compared with 1990 levels). The committee adopted, with amendments, a draft report (cooperation, first reading) by Mr Christian CABROL (UFE, F) on the Commission proposal for a Council directive on the limitation of emissions of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) due to the use of organic solvents in certain industrial activities. The industries involved include over 400 000 firms, many of them SMEs, accounting for nearly 10 million jobs in some 20 economic sectors. The estimated cost of implementing the directive varies from around ECU 4 billion (according to the Commission) to ECU 80 billion (according to a German academic study). Solvents are used in a wide range of industries, (eg. dry cleaning, pharmaceutical manufacture, the painting of road and rail vehicles). In amending the proposal, the committee threw out a Commission proposal to exempt from the need to implement emission limits those Member States which had drawn up national plans for reducing VOC emissions. Such plans, according to the Commission, were a new tool that was being used for the first time in this area to promote subsidiarity. The committee, however, opted for harmonized provisions which would provide a Community-wide level playing field and prevent unfair competition. The committee also rejected a provision in the Commission proposal which would have enabled many small and medium-sized installations to benefit from "somewhat less stringent" requirements as regards emission limits. However, limits may be exceeded where a firm using the best available technology can demonstrate that it is technically and financially impossible to stay within them. The committee also called for preventive measures to protect the health of workers using solvents. Once the directive is adopted, Member States will have two years in which to transpose it into national law. Existing installations will have until October 2007 to comply with the directive's requirements. Member States which have already adopted VOC-reducing measures but ones which are incompatible with the directive will have until 2010 to fall into line. However, the committee introduced a new provision permitting Member States to impose more stringent restrictions.