Air pollution: strategy for reducing methane emissions

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OBJECTIVE: following a request from the Environment Council in December 1994 the purpose of the Commission communication is to examine the problems relating to atmospheric methane emissions, identify the main emissions sources and sinks, introduce some cost-effective means to reduce these emissions and propose a set of potential measures for incorporating into a Community emissions mitigation strategy. SUBSTANCE: at both the Community and international level it has been recognised that a methane (greenhouse gas second to carbon dioxide) reduction policy could be an important element of an overall climate change strategy. The Commission therefore proposes a series of options to reduce methane emissions which are derived almost entirely from agriculture (45%), waste (32%) and energy (23%). - In the agriculture sector the Commission suggests developing equipment for the conversion of animal manure into energy (anaerobic digesters or simple covered lagoons). Initially these technologies would be tested through demonstration programmes and feasibility studies implemented at EU, national, regional and local level; at a later stage there would be a legal obligation to install recovery systems for large holdings; - In the municipal waste sector the Commission proposes: a) the promotion of general measures to reduce the quantity of organic material in waste as a whole and minimizing its production, separate collection, development of recycled products, composting; b) adoption of Community legislation requiring, in the absence of other options, that the new landfills are equipped with a methane recovery and use system; c) the adoption of Community legislation requiring the retrofitting of existing landfills with systems for the collection and use of methane wherever possible; - In the energy sector a Community recommendation should encourage Member States to generate programmes promoting the application of the best available technologies for those coal mines that will still be in operation beyond a certain time frame (10 years for instance). For natural gas the Commission proposes the drawing up of an EU minimum leakages standard and increased control frequency of pipelines at national level. These options will be discussed with all the interested parties so that practical measures can be adopted as quickly as possible.