Ambient air quality: limit values for sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, particulate matter and lead

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The European Commission has presented its review of Council Directive 1999/30/EC relating to limit values for sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and oxides of nitrogen, particulate matter and lead in ambient air, with consideration of Council Directive 96/62/EC on ambient air quality assessment

and management. This review is based on the most recent scientific understanding but focuses on experience to date and suggests planned amendments via Comitology procedure.

The Directive entered into force on 19 July 1999 and had to be transposed into national law within two years. Despite the limited experience with the first daughter Directive, it is already clear that the concept of air quality legislation has been successful in terms of raising public and political awareness of remaining air quality problems and promoting effective action to reduce air pollution throughout the EU. However, only three Member States (UK, Belgium and Sweden) have submitted plans or programmes to improve air quality. In 2004, the Commission started infringement procedures against ten Member States for not submitting plans or programmes on time, or because the plans submitted were incomplete.

According to the report, it is important to set air quality limit values. While tighter air quality limit values are recognised as important and useful further clarification and guidance on the application of limit values will be part of the Thematic Strategy on Air Pollution.

The Commission has launched a contract to gather information on "health relevant ambient air quality measurement". Depending on the results of this contract, the monitoring requirements in the first daughter Directive might be modified.

While continuous action to improve air quality needs to focus on PM10 and NO_2, the Commission is also evaluating the effectiveness of short-term measures. The report states that Member States have reported that they comply well with the limit values for SO_2 and lead in ambient air, with some exceptions. However, the situation is different for PM10 and NO_2 since concentrations of these pollutants at many monitoring stations exceed the limit value plus margin of tolerance.

In addition, all Member States have, to varying degrees, adapted their measurement networks to the requirements of the first daughter Directive. This has helped the harmonisation process. The report does, however, highlight then need for further technical improvements (ensure a sufficient number of rural background stations; ensure a substantial proportion of different station types, such as traffic-related stations and urban background stations; limit the distance from the road where PM10 monitoring is undertaken at traffic related monitoring stations; improve the conditions for applying random sampling; ensure the uniform use of statistical terms (accuracy/uncertainty) and update Annex IX - which describes the reference measurement methods - taking into account the technical development and including the provisions on how to demonstrate equivalence of non-reference methods) which will be adopted by the Commission through Comitology procedure.

While no change in the provisions on air quality modelling is suggested for now, the Commission will follow up this issue.

Lastly, the report states that reporting through electronic means has become more and more but there are considerable delays, and a need for further harmonisation and streamlining.