Thematic strategy on air pollution

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PURPOSE : to propose a thematic strategy on air pollution.

CONTENT : given the trans-boundary nature of air pollution there has been a long held recognition in the EU to regulate and contain the spread of this problem. To date, EU action has focused on establishing minimum quality standards for ambient air, tackling the problems of acid rain as well as seeking to reduce ground level ozone. As a result polluting emissions from large combustion plants and mobile sources have been reduced, fuel quality has improved and environmental protection requirements integrated into the transport and energy sectors. However, and in spite of significant improvements, serious air pollution persists. The 6th Environmental Action Plan has therefore set an ambitious target under the thematic strategy on air pollution whereby the EU is to attain levels of air quality that do not give rise to negative impacts or risk human health and the environment. In response to this objective the Commission opened a consultation exercise, entitled CAFE, in which it examined whether current legislation is sufficient to achieve the set objectives by 2020. Of the 11 578 responses received over 10 000 were from private individuals – a sign of how seriously many EU citizens consider the problem of air pollution to be. The results of the consultation exercise showed that significant negative impacts will persist even with the effective implementation of current legislation. In response to this concern the Commission has prepared this “Thematic Strategy on air pollution”.

Findings from the impact assessment indicate that it is impossible to apply all of the technical measures. For example, even if all technical measures were to be applied irrespective of cost, it would still not be possible to meet the ambitious 6th EAP objectives. The Commission has been forced to make a policy choice on the level of health and environmental protection. The strategy chosen sets health and environmental objectives and emission reduction targets for the main pollutants. These objectives are to be delivered in stages. By setting objectives to be attained by 2020, EU citizens will be protected from exposure to particulate matter and ozone in air and European ecosystems will be better protected from acid rain, excess nutrient nitrogen and ozone. This implies that the concentration of PM25 would be reduced by 75% and ground level ozone by 60% from what is technically feasible by 2020. In addition the threat to the natural environment from both acidification and eutrophication will be reduced by 55% from what is technically possible.

Part of the strategy will be implemented through a revision of the current ambient air quality legislation comprising two main elements. The first, a streamlining of existing provisions and the merging of five legal instruments into a single directive. The second, the introduction of new air quality standards for fine particulate matter (PM25) in the air. In addition, the national emission ceilings Directive will be revised to ensure reduced emissions of nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, volatile organic compounds, ammonia and primary particulate matter.

The Commission pledges that its next steps will be to review the strategy in 2010, which in turn will feed into the final evaluation of the 6th EAP. In its conclusions to the Strategy, the Commission notes that air pollution continues to diminish the health, quality and life of EU citizens as well as the EU’s environment. The magnitude of these effects it too large to ignore and doing nothing more beyond implementing existing legislation is not a sensible option. The proposed Strategy, on the other hand, sets out a long term perspective for cleaner air in Europe.