



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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A breath of fresh AIR: Regional approach to future Air Quality Policy

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be here today. This is a timely opportunity to share and discuss with you the actions that the European Commission is planning to improve air quality in Europe, and in particular in your Regions.

Allow me to start by thanking the Air Quality Initiative of Regions for organising this event. I warmly welcome your commitment to share best practices, pool research results and possibly take joint action in the future.

"A breath of fresh air". I could not think of a more appropriate title for this conference. This is exactly what we need. A breath of fresh air. A fresh start.

I am just back from Rio, from the United Nations' Conference on Sustainable Development, where world leaders agreed on the need to move towards sustainable development, and recognised the central role of an inclusive green economy to achieve this.

The EU has worked hard to secure a positive outcome and world engagement, in particular in key areas such as water, oceans, land and ecosystems, food and sustainable consumption and production. The Rio+20 Conference did not bring all of the results we were hoping for at global level, but it did set in motion a process that will start a transition towards a green economy. An economy that places social, economic and environmental interests on an equal footing, and that will allow us to live within the limits of our planet. For me air quality is definitely an important part of this transformation. And Europe's regions play a key role.

We have very solid air policy at EU level. Our policy is based on science, evidence and cost-effectiveness. We have mastered the interactions between pollutants and their effects. We have been successful in reducing air pollution over the decades, with about 80 % for sulphur dioxide since 1990... This proves that it is possible to decouple pollution from economic growth. But, air quality remains poor in many of our regions. Also in many of the regions that you represent.

This is particularly worrying because you represent 20% of the European Union's population. This means that over 15 million citizens in your regions are exposed to air pollution concentrations that are above the standards established on the basis of the recommendations of the World Health Organisation. This poses a clear threat to public health, and a threat that we cannot ignore. Evidence brought forward by the World Health Organisation on the clear link between air pollution and negative health effects does not allow us to do so. Recent conclusions on the classification of diesel exhaust emissions as carcinogenic will certainly require further attention.

But ... why is air quality so poor in many European regions?

There are many reasons. Industry, transport, energy production, agriculture and household consumption are important engines of growth and prosperity, but they are also sources of pollution. This is why if we want to see real results we need to act at different levels.

At EU level we need to address transboundary pollution both in the context of the National Emission Ceilings Directive and at source, particularly from transport, where some actions have not delivered the expected results in the past. I am working closely with Vice-President Tajani to ensure that air quality and transport policies go hand in hand. And I refer in particular to the urgency of the air quality problems that stem from the failure of Euro standards to reduce NOx emissions from diesel cars. This urgency needs to be better reflected also by Member States in the coming transport discussions, where the Euro 6 will be addressed.

The Commission will continue to address other sources of emissions. The recent adoption of the directive on lower sulphur limits in marine fuels is an important step, together with the agreement on an updated Gothenburg Protocol on transboundary air pollution, which extends beyond EU borders and will be translated in national and local actions.

We will also continue to work on additional legislation. I will mention one concrete example: in the context of the ongoing air quality review, we have learned that there is a great potential to cut particle emissions from small sources such as coal-fired boilers and wood pellet stoves, which releases about a third of total emissions. The Commission is considering new standards in the Ecodesign directive that could help cut overall particle emissions by 70 % by 2030, thereby cutting overall emissions of primary PM 2,5 by some 15-20%.

But, as you very well know, EU action without action at national and regional level will not be enough. Sustaining air quality should not only be seen as an environmental objective, it should also be seen as an economic opportunity. We have maybe been less successful in EU air policy in stressing the economic opportunities that lie in clean technologies and innovation.

Your Regions represent 22 % of Europe's GDP. Further growth is possible thanks to innovation. And air quality technology offers clear innovation potential. Regions should exploit this potential further. Companies delivering new technological solutions to address air pollution will be the winners of tomorrow's markets. For example, China is now stepping up its air quality legislation and many other countries are following. This creates demand for low emission products, for instance car exports to China in the future!

I acknowledge that air pollution measures do come with a price tag. Actions in isolation might appear costly. But if you consider all costs, including natural capital accounting, it is an investment that makes a lot of economic sense. Costs of inaction would be much higher. Just think of the health-related problems, of the impact on the quality of life, of the implications for governments. And I'm not just thinking of shorter life expectancy but also higher disease rates (such as for example asthma in children)... Investing in clean air, means investing in our future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We appreciate your efforts to improve air quality in your regions and recognise that some regions are facing persistent problems in meeting existing air quality and emission standards. But, I am concerned that some national or local measures are of a limited effectiveness. We look to you to ensure that your air quality priorities at regional level are properly reflected in the national positions taken on these important initiatives.

As you are aware, we are currently reviewing the EU legislative framework for air quality, and we are consulting widely with stakeholders.

The main objectives of the review are:

First: To assess progress towards the goal of the Sixth Environment Action Programme of achieving the levels of air quality that do not give rise to significant negative impacts on and risks to human health and the environment

Second: To ensure that the EU air quality policy is updated in line with the best available knowledge in the field

Third: To identify options, both regulatory and non regulatory that could remedy defective implementation of existing policy. I would like to stress the need to continue with the shift of taxation from labour to pollution.

Fourth: To contribute towards the implementation of the Resource efficiency Roadmap, the greening of the economy, innovation as well as the future Environment Action Programme.

The input of EU regions is very important, given your role in implementation, and I therefore welcome the initiative of the Air Quality Initiative of Regions to produce a position paper to support the review. This will be an important input to our own reflection, as part of a wide range of contributions from different stakeholders.

We have achieved a lot in the past years. I think we can all, at whatever level of governance, be proud of what we have done to improve air quality in the European Union. But, we do need a breath of fresh air, a new insight to go that one step further. Again, your position paper is certainly an important contribution, as is this conference. Thank you for the good work and I hope I can count on a strong partnership with you also in the future. Partnership that people living in your cities and regions, will appreciate most!