

Brussels, 11 March 2011

Commission grants UK additional time to comply with EU air quality standards in Greater London

The European Commission today granted the United Kingdom a temporary and conditional exemption in the Greater London Urban Area from the EU's air quality standards for airborne particles known as PM₁₀. Under the 2008 EU Air Quality Directive Member States may, under strict conditions and for specific parts of the country, extend the time for meeting the PM₁₀ standards until 11 June 2011. The Commission decision approves the time extension on the condition that the United Kingdom adapts its air quality plan for this zone. The Commission rejected a second request from the UK for additional time to comply with the legislation in Gibraltar on the grounds that it was no longer necessary, as compliance with the limit values has already been reached.

Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik said: "Air pollution from PM₁₀ has serious impacts on human health. That is why EU legislation sets strict standards. The Commission expects Member States to clearly demonstrate that they are doing their utmost, in the interests of their citizens, to comply with the standards in the shortest possible time."

The Commission's decision

A first exemption request for the Greater London Urban Area air quality zone was rejected in December 2009 because not enough information was available to assess whether the limit values for PM₁₀ could be met by the extended deadline.

The Commission has decided today that a second request for a time extension satisfies the conditions in the Directive. These include demonstrating that steps have been taken to achieve compliance by the 11 June deadline and that an air quality plan is in place setting out the relevant abatement actions.

However, the Commission considers there may still be a risk of the daily limit value being exceeded after the exemption period. The request is therefore granted on the condition that short-term measures are introduced to control, or, where necessary, suspend activities which contribute to the risk of the limit values being exceeded.

It is up to the UK to decide which specific actions to introduce. These could include measures in relation to traffic, construction work, ships at berth and the use of industrial plants or products and domestic heating.

London's air quality plan will need to be revised by 11 June 2011 to include the short-term measures and be submitted to the Commission.

Background: air quality legislation

Directive 2008/50/EC on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe requires Member States to limit the exposure of citizens to the tiny particles known as PM₁₀. The legislation sets limit values which were to be met by 2005, imposing both an annual concentration value (40 µg/m³), and a daily concentration value (50 µg/m³). The daily limit value must not be exceeded more than 35 times in a calendar year.

Member States may apply for exemptions from the PM₁₀ limit values until 11 June 2011, but these are subject to a number of conditions.

Health impacts

Airborne particles (PM₁₀) are mainly present in pollutant emissions from industry, traffic and domestic heating. They can cause asthma, cardiovascular problems, lung cancer and premature death, which is why the Commission has sought to regulate these pollutants under the Directive.

Further information

Air Quality policy:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/quality/index.htm>

Lists of zones in exceedance by Member State:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/quality/legislation/exceedances.htm>

Time extension website:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/quality/legislation/time_extensions.htm