



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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To invest in clean air means to invest in our future

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Launch of EEA's "Air Quality in Europe" – 2012 report
Brussels, 24 September 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here today. First of all, thank you Bas (Eickhout) for hosting this event. And thank you also Jackie (McGlade) for your interesting perspectives. The air quality report of the European Environment Agency provides a useful review of the successes we have achieved with EU air quality legislation, but it is also a powerful reminder of the scale of the outstanding problems and their importance, both for the health of EU citizens, and for nature.

My focus in 2013 will be on revitalising the EU's air quality policy framework to tackle our future challenges. So, the Agency's report is perfectly timed for our Review.

But let me start by putting the theme of today into a wider context – that of **resource efficiency**.

As you are aware, Europe is facing an unprecedented economic crisis, causing instability, unemployment and poverty. But the situation is aggravated even further by a development that seldom reaches the top stories in the news: the continuous depletion of natural resources and the pollution of our environment. This not only threatens our health and ecosystems, and changes our climate; it also undermines our future material wealth, and our future competitiveness.

So, the economic crisis is not only about interest rates, budget austerity and bank bail-outs. It is fundamentally about sustainability. We all know about the unemployment that unsustainable growth fuelled by financial excesses has brought. But we are only now beginning to understand that our infrastructure, financial system, business models and everyday behaviour lock us in to a short-term socio-economic model which relies far too much on running down our stock of natural capital – the water, air and other ecosystems on which we ultimately depend.

Let me be clear: **there will be no growth in the future if it is not green growth**. And the only way to achieve green growth is a concerted shift to **resource efficiency** – to use our natural resources much more efficiently.

The issue of air quality is a good case in point. Thanks to a number of important legislative and other EU initiatives taken in the last few decades, the air we breathe today is generally cleaner than it was 10 or 20 years ago. It is one of the few areas where we have seen **an absolute decoupling between economic growth and emissions**. In some cases, such as sulphur dioxide emissions, significant economic growth has been paired with an 80-90% decrease in the reported emissions in less than two decades.

To me, this is **resource efficiency put into practice**. If we could achieve this kind of decoupling in other areas, we would eventually solve our environmental and health challenges.

Nevertheless, as is made very clear also in the EEA report, we still have problems, and they are not residual. We are still some way from achieving our objective of reaching levels of air quality that do not give rise to significant negative impacts on human health and the environment; and objective set out by the 6th Environment Action Programme.

This is why I have launched a comprehensive review of the EU's air policy. This is why 2013 will become "Year of the Air". We are setting up a broad and inclusive process to analyse progress made, identify key challenges for the future, and ensure that upcoming proposals are cost-effective and based on the latest scientific evidence. In the coming months, we will identify main policy options and conduct a comprehensive impact assessment, to identify the best way forward.

Let me outline **five key areas** to which I will attach specific importance in the review.

First: To protect our health. There is a very large body of evidence on the health significance of air pollution. This is why I will continue to attach the highest priority to this area. We are cooperating closely with the World Health Organisation to review the latest scientific evidence on the health impacts of all pollutants regulated under the EU legislation, along with an evaluation of emerging risks to health from air pollution. This evidence is telling us that 81 % of EU citizens are exposed to levels higher than the limits recommended by the World Health Organisation. The conclusions from this work will guide us in identifying what needs to be done to minimize negative health impacts from air pollution.

Second: To protect our natural capital and promote a more sustainable agriculture. The National Emissions Ceilings Directive, adopted in 2001, provides one of the backbones of EU air legislation by effectively capping emissions of key air pollutants – sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds, and ammonia. While there are also health benefits, the main objective is to protect our nature by abating acidification and eutrophication. Since these also reduce crop yields, this should help in promoting a more sustainable agriculture.

The time is now ripe to **update and strengthen** the provisions of this Directive. In particular, we should integrate the successful revision of the Gothenburg Protocol, agreed in Geneva in May this year, to include more ambitious ceilings for 2020, as well as including Particulate Matter. But we also need to consider how the Directive should evolve in the longer term, up to 2025 or perhaps 2030. It is important to ensure legal certainty and predictability. The NEC revision will be a main feature of the air review next year.

Third: To ensure better implementation. Unfortunately, we are presently facing quite a number of breaches in EU air quality legislation. Some Member States and regions are facing persistent problems in meeting the existing air quality and emission standards. As Jackie (Professor McGlade) just pointed out, a significant proportion of Europe's urban population live in areas where exceedances of EU air quality standards occur.

We are currently taking **infringement action** against a large number of Member States relating to breaches of the limit values for Particulate Matter, Nitrogen Dioxide and other pollutants. But prevention is often the best cure: where possible, we try to help regions and cities when they are developing their air quality plans by spreading good practices.

I recognise that part of the problem lies with the coherence of our policies. For example, the breaches of the NO₂ limit value reflect the fact that the Euro standards for vehicle emissions have not succeeded in bringing down real-world emissions of NO₂ to the levels set out in the legislation. We need to work on changing that situation. But the main issue remains with Member States. They have insisted on flexibility in applying air quality legislation. This has, unfortunately, not led to better implementation. Too often, the response has been too late.

I will work constructively with the Member States to resolve this problem. As said in the Implementation Communication, we need clear commitments from Member States to put measures in place, with benchmarks and timelines, to deliver the required results. These commitments need to be formalised and publicly available, so that stakeholders are confident that their concerns are actually being addressed. **Such "partnership implementation agreements"** could provide a good mechanism for resolving our implementation problems.

I will also explore what kind of support we can provide at EU level to improving implementation. In a new and **promising pilot project with the EEA**, eight cities across Europe get together to learn from each other, and from the Agency experts, how to improve assessment of air quality problems, source attribution, action planning and monitoring of implementation. The first lessons learned and best practice will be forthcoming in the next few months, and will provide a significant contribution towards the Review of Air policy in 2013.

I see this as the seed of a future implementation network across Europe: our new LIFE+ proposal puts forward new ways of making better progress with implementation. These include new "Integrated Projects" bringing together cities and regions to build on the experience of the pilot cities. I welcome the Agency's active co-operation on the initiative to date and look forward to working ever more closely as the initiative develops.

Fourth: To encourage innovation and address emissions at source. Industry, transport, energy production, agriculture and household consumption are important engines of growth and prosperity, but they are also sources of pollution.

For **industry**, we already have a solid legal framework in place – the Industrial Emissions Directive. It includes some of the most important provisions for reducing pollution to air, and covers over 50,000 installations in the EU. It requires industry to apply "**Best Available Techniques**", and is therefore also a key instrument to green our economy and push innovation.

When it comes to **transport**, the industry has innovated to cut emissions from vehicles as a result of the EU-wide provisions called Euro standards, and I am continuing to work closely with Vice-President Tajani to ensure that air quality and transport policies go hand-in-hand. There is an urgent need to address air quality problems linked to the failure of Euro standards to reduce NOx emissions from diesel cars. Another important achievement in this sector is the directive on lower sulphur limits in marine fuel. This was adopted just a few days ago in Parliament, and will significantly cut sulphur emissions from ships both in the short and medium term. A third challenge will be to stimulate innovation through better emission standards for off-road vehicles.

Turning to **agriculture**, there is a large untapped potential for doing more. We need to mainstream existing technology options to abate ammonia, and fully exploit win-win opportunities for farmers. A lot will depend on the fate of the proposed support measures for ammonia abatement programmes in the Commission's proposals for the reformed Common Agricultural Policy and the rural development programmes. I certainly hope that Member States will support these provisions.

Fifth – and this links closely to what I said earlier about the importance of greening our economy – **to promote innovation for sustainable growth.**

Some still argue that in times of severe economic hardship, air pollution measures are too costly. I would argue that air pollution itself imposes much greater costs on the economy. If you consider all costs, including natural capital accounting, clean air is an investment that makes a lot of economic sense. We cannot afford not to act. The 2005 thematic Strategy concluded that there is a loss in statistical life expectancy in the EU of over 8 months due to emission of particles to the air, equivalent to 3.6 million life years lost annually. In monetary terms, it was estimated that associated costs would amount to between €189 - €609 billion per year in 2020. Our current analysis shows that if we do nothing, we will see 200,000 premature deaths in the EU by 2020 due to particle emissions alone - but with concerted action, this number can be pushed down to 130,000. To invest in clean air means to invest in our future.

But those who argue that it would be too costly are on weak ground even from a strict competitiveness perspective. Let us put aside all the health and environmental benefits for a moment –important as they are – and look instead at the economic arguments: Let's take the US and China as examples.

We know that the US air quality legislation is among the most stringent in the world – with California leading the way. We also know that China is now stepping up their air quality monitoring requirements and emission controls significantly. And we know that other emerging economies will follow suit. This will create an enormous demand for products and industrial processes that emit less. So a strengthened air quality regime in the EU will actually benefit European competitiveness by giving us a lead in these growing markets.

Sustaining air quality is therefore not only an environmental objective, but also an economic opportunity. As part of the review, I am considering setting up an **innovation programme specifically targeted on clean air**, to support our industry to invest in clean technologies for clean air. I would like to launch an appeal to you all for your ideas on what the Commission could do to spur innovation and economic opportunities in this area.

Finally, an ambitious EU air quality policy cannot be implemented without a strong knowledge base. We need scientifically sound, up-to-date information, and for this reason, modern monitoring and reporting tools are crucial because they allow us to evaluate policies and take effective decisions. Examples of useful tools developed at EU level include the AirBase and the "Eye on Earth: Air Watch", managed by the EEA, as well as the GMES Atmosphere service.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have achieved a lot in the past years to improve our air quality. But now is the time to move even further. I have outlined some key priorities which will guide our future work in the Commission. By about this time next year, I aim to set out a clear plan for how to ensure that our air can become even cleaner in the coming decades, so that we may live longer, and healthier, as well as protecting our most fragile ecosystems better. I very much welcome your input to this important process, and look forward to your comments and questions.