

Toxic air kills 400,000 people prematurely across the EU, so that's why environment ministers were summoned to Brussels for what was billed as a make-or-break chance to explain themselves or face legal action. But they seemed to get nothing more than a slap on the wrist.

Nine ministers from member states that have been breaking air quality laws for some time arrived in Brussels this morning for a dressing down from EU environment boss Karmenu Vella.

The meeting had been called at the last minute by the Maltese Commissioner, fed up with long-established rules being broken, in the wake of Poland convincing EU presidency holder Bulgaria to join it in a legal challenge against EU laws intended to safeguard human health. And after Vella confirmed that legal action would be an option if answers weren't forthcoming or good enough, it was fair to expect that one or the other would come out of today's meeting.

But neither did.

Vella admitted that the suggestions put on the table at the meeting "were not substantial enough to change the bigger picture" but would be analysed by his officials over the coming days.

Though Vella warned, again, that the "time for delaying" is well and truly over, no new deadlines or the eagerly-anticipated legal suits were announced. The post-meeting press point seemed more like a pre-summit briefing, leaving most journalists exasperated by the lack of news.

So on the face of things, the meeting achieved nothing more than reminding EU ministers that they are failing miserably in complying with the law (not that they needed to come to Brussels in person to know that, they could easily just read our coverage of it).

Taking the optimistic view, Vella could be playing a shrewd game, as a two-hour-long meeting was unlikely to result in the Commissioner pushing the nuclear button on an infringement procedure.

Ministers had time this morning to justify themselves and suggest solutions. Those ideas will be looked at by DG ENVI and they have until the end of next week to submit more.

Malta's EU man also insisted that calling them to Brussels was not a personal initiative but had the backing of "President Juncker and 500 million Europeans", an indication that perhaps this is being taken as seriously as the Berlaymont claims.

Vella also promised that he will not dilly-dally or take the easy option by just handing the case over to his successor next year (if he does not try to stay on as environment chief).

That may well be the crux: this Commission has been accused of being a lame duck now that

it's entering the home straight of its mandate. But I'd say the situation is quite the contrary. We are firmly in legacy-building mode now. And improving air quality, or at least punishing those who do not do enough in that regard, is one way of doing that.

So don't be surprised if, in the coming weeks, some (or all) of the Naughty Nine find themselves slapped with full-blown legal action by the softly-spoken Malteser.

One final thing: we can all help fight air pollution. Have a read of this petition or, at the very least, drive your car to work less.

The Round-Up

Dieselgate 2? German car makers have been testing the effect of toxic diesel fumes on monkeys and humans, in experiments that caused fresh outrage at the already tainted industry.

Another glyphosate-like controversy... The Commission and member states have extended authorisation for copper sulphate, a controversial pesticide used in organic farming.

A proposal from the Trump administration to build public-funded 5G networks will "end in disaster", the EU's top telecoms regulator has warned. Catherine Stupp has the story.

Bumpy ride after Brexit? Fasten your seatbelts - the UK's aviation sector, the biggest in Europe, is preparing for the worst.

Dude, where's my car? Bulgaria's prosecutor has ordered tax authorities to inspect all Bulgarian citizens who have bought properties and cars worth more than €260,000 in the last two years.

Publishing lists of tax havens is not enough and EU finance ministers must do more on transparency and sanctions to boost their credibility, EU's Economic Affairs Commissioner Pierre Moscovici told EURACTIV's Jorge Valero.

Surprise, surprise. A confidential analysis by the British government on the impact of Brexit suggests all UK industries will be hurt by leaving the European Union.

No fake drugs, please. Twenty-one EU countries have made falsifying medicines a criminal offence, carrying a potential jail sentence of 15 years, according to a new report.

Source: euractiv.com