

The patchwork of measures to fight air pollution currently in place across European cities is not only inefficient but sometimes counter-productive, said participants at a EURACTIV event on Tuesday (26 June).

The event, organised with the support of ExxonMobil, discussed how city, national and EU policies can make changes to transport that will improve air quality in Europe.

Some 40 million people in the 115 largest cities of the EU are exposed to pollution exceeding World Health Organisation air quality guideline values for at least one pollutant, resulting in approximately 100,000 premature adult deaths each year.

That's ten times more deaths than result from road accidents.

In response, a number of local authorities have decided to take matters into their own hands. Judges in Germany have authorised cities to implement bans on diesel vehicles in city centers, because they cause more air pollution than petrol cars. One of the first cities to initiate this was Hamburg.

Silke Obst, a member of cabinet for European transport commissioner Violeta Bulc, said she has concerns that these bans are being implemented hastily.

"Some of the diesel bans don't make sense," she said, noting that Hamburg ordered diesel cars to only drive on certain roads, causing a marked increase in air pollution and traffic in those areas.

Khurram Gaba, a policy planning executive for fuels and lubes at ExxonMobil, which supported the EURACTIV event, said such bans are not taking into account the specific nature of air pollution.

"Unlike greenhouse gases, where the environmental impact is the same no matter where it takes place, when it comes to pollutants it's very much a local issue," Gaba said. "A diesel ban is a blunt instrument. Targeted measures that get older diesels off the road faster, and well-designed low-emission zones based on emissions performance, not drivetrain, is better."

Conflicting policies in Brussels

Joana Cruz, a policy advisor with the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, warned that cities will have a difficult time implementing their own solutions if they're not supported by their national governments.

She noted, for example, Brussels' efforts to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution by pedestrianising Boulevard Anspach, formerly the main traffic artery through the city centre. A lack of coordination between Brussels' various communes, the Brussels Capital Region and the national Belgian government resulted in chaos in the first months of closing the road to traffic.

The situation was so mismanaged, she said, that a delegation from Oslo recently came to Brussels to look at its pedestrian zone rollout, in order to learn what not to do. Brussels' efforts to reduce traffic in the city have also been directly undermined by national Belgian policy. Brussels has some of the highest air pollution levels from traffic in Europe. Meanwhile, Belgium has the highest income tax rate in the world. Because the country allows companies to pay their employees with tax-free cars rather than taxable income, many people are forced by the national government to take cars they do not want. At the same time, Brussels city government is making it harder for them to drive. Obst agreed that there should be more coordination between different layers of governments, but she said the idea of having an EU-wide directive on public transport or car ownership is not workable. In any event, often cities are the best placed to devise solutions tailored to local circumstances.

"A certain amount of patchwork is not a bad thing," she said. "Cities know best what to do. But probably we should involve the national governments more. If national governments would come to city meetings more, then there would be more communication."

Modern diesel

Gaba argued that the current rush for cities to implement bans on diesel cars is also having a perverse effect because it is ignoring modern diesel cars which are more efficient.

"There are modern technologies that can get diesel to [fuel standard] Euro6," he said. He pointed to a recent study by the consultancy Aeris which compared replacing older diesel vehicles with either battery electric or modern petrol and diesel, and found "the air quality improvements are almost indistinguishable".

However Margherita Tolotto from the environmental NGO the European Environmental Bureau, said even if modern diesel cars are cleaner it is unwise to invest in them now, because it will lock Europe into the technology for a decade or more. Blanket diesel bans are appropriate.

"We think combustion engines are not the future at all," she said. "I'm surprised we are still debating if diesel is clean. Yes, modern diesel is cleaner. But they are not clean. Do we still want diesel cars in the future?" Europe should be moving to electric now, she added.

Appetite for regulation

Of course, any effort by the auto manufacturers or fuel suppliers to solve the air pollution problem themselves is going to be met with scepticism from the public, which is still reeling from the Dieselgate scandal in which automakers were found cheating on air pollution tests. This has increased the appetite for regulation as the answer rather than technology development from private companies.

“Let’s be honest, it’s not a good story,” acknowledged Gaba. “Frankly, people don’t believe what they’re being told anymore.” But he said the Commission’s proposal to change the emissions testing method in 2019 to something “far more robust, which will ensure that consumers are getting what they’re expecting to get”.

“By extension all industry is tainted by the fallout from dieselgate, which is why we’re supportive of the measures the Commission is taking to restore that trust.”

“There is now more appetite for regulators to step in because of Dieselgate” Obst said. “But this is not the main driver of the appetite. It comes from the fact that people can increasingly feel the impact of air pollution on their lives.”

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