

Air pollution is like a smog curtain, dividing Europe and widening health inequalities. The burden is heavier in the South-East region of Europe, including Central and Eastern Europe. People are ready and willing to change and challenge this: recent polls show an overwhelming majority of people in Poland and Bulgaria want stricter regulation on air pollution. There is new evidence emerging providing more accurate picture in those countries.

The European environment – State and Outlook 2020 from the European Environment Agency warns that “Europe’s environment is at a tipping point.” The systemic changes in ecological conditions will have far-reaching effects on human health and well-being, including through infectious diseases, respiratory and cardio-vascular diseases, and mental ill-health. Links have already been made between the current pandemic and the ecological breakdown of the planet. Our new study released on October 21st highlighted in monetary terms, the health-related social costs to city dwellers in 432 European cities, through medical treatment, premature death, lost working days and other health costs through transport pollution caused by the three air pollutants, causing the most illness and death: particulate matter (PM), ozone (O₃) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). In the context of the European Green Deal, the European Commission wants to adopt an “EU Action Plan Towards a Zero Pollution Ambition for air, water and soil.” The response to this pollution emergency could also be the greatest opportunity to unleash Europe’s hidden potential to improve population health and wellbeing, while ensuring climate and environmental sustainability at the same time, leaving no one behind.

The opportunities for climate and health of phasing out coal or using the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the new Farm to Fork Strategy to tackle pollution from the agricultural sector, while contributing to a resilient food system able to achieve sustainable food and nutrition security, are immense. Yet, the gap between rhetoric and reality is not being bridged by the European institutions, the latest CAP proposal being an example of this discrepancy.

Coherence is needed with the European Climate Law as well as with Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan, stressing that GHG emitting activities also emit carcinogenic substances. Likewise, mainstreaming zero pollution into cohesion policy will enable countries to contribute to reach the targets of the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Once again, inconsistent messages come from our lawmakers: vote for ambitious targets but not for the tools by which they could be implemented. The European Parliament voted to approve higher targets for the Climate Law, MEPs want to increase 2030 emissions

reduction targets to 60% instead of 55%. Yet, MEPs approved a CAP proposal that will not decrease enough GHG emissions in the agricultural sector.

Ambitious zero-emission targets go hand in hand with lowering health-harmful substances emissions. Air pollution increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, cancers, dementia, and diabetes, it can trigger new asthma cases in children, and it damages nearly every organ in the human body.

In its response to the consultation EPHA calls for the European Commission to:

Take note of the latest scientific evidence on the health damage of pollution, as a basis of any future policy;

-Identify, monitor and tackle every type of pollution;

-Define tangible actions, binding timelines and goals;

-Prioritise prevention and precaution to avoid pollution at source;

-Mainstream the Zero Pollution Ambition into all the EU policies;

-Include a calculation on how much will the initiative contribute to prevent cancer, in relation to the European Beating Cancer Plan;

-Support legal, financial, coordination or promotion tools to develop ambitious policies, such as expand zero-emission vehicles.

As Anne Stauffer, Deputy Director, Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), concluded at the end of the online event launching our new study on the health-related costs of transport pollution, a strong zero pollution plan, with conditionality funds for clean air and measures in favour of climate emergency is needed from the European Commission. It is up to all of us to ensure our politicians take action to improve our health, our environment and our planet.

Source: epha.org