

Patients and doctors urge to put EU air quality policy back on the agenda

Brussels, 17th December 2014 – The European Commission presented yesterday at the European Parliament plenary in Strasbourg, its 2015 working plan. The new plan withdraws the proposal for the revision of the National Emission Ceilings Directive, a key EU legislative file aimed at regulating air quality by setting maximum emission levels for six main pollutants - PM, SO₂, NO_x, VOCs, ammonia and methane- that directly affect our health and the environment we live in. (1)

European Commission Vice-President Mr. Frans Timmermans announced that the Commission “will bring forward a modified proposal”, but he did not specify its exact timing.

Timmermans announcement has dismayed and confused institutions and civil society representatives. Member of the European Parliament Sirpa Pietikäinen (Finland, EPP) reacted: “EU is lagging badly behind from the World Health Organisation recommendations (2) for good air quality. Hundreds of thousands of premature deaths still occur in Europe due to fine particles in the air. It is by no means smart regulation to delay new legislation to improve air quality.”

EFA President Breda Flood declared:

“We are shocked at the death sentence imposed by the Commission on EU air quality policies. Air pollution has no boundaries and needs to be regulated at EU level. At this very moment, 9 out of 10 Europeans living in cities are breathing air that is harmful to their health. The majority of EU citizens consider air quality a major concern and expect political action to improve the air we breathe. (3) (4) The Clean Air Package is a paramount piece of legislation to improve this reality, a political tool that could save thousands of lives and protect people living with allergy, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). In November, we urged to keep this legislation on the table (4) as we consider that improving current clean air policy now is imperative to ensure that our health will not be compromised in the future. Sustainable economic growth should protect people’s health. Therefore, we encourage the Members of the European Parliament to use their influence to put back on the political agenda air quality legislation for the next year”.

EAACI President Nikos Papadopoulos declared:

“The decision of the Commission to drop the revision of the National Emission Ceilings Directive is of profound concern, certainly to the medical community, but also to all Europeans. Almost 150 million EU citizens suffer from chronic allergic diseases, of which 70 million of asthma. The Commission move to stop further discussions on this key legislative proposal, equals denying the many allergy and asthma sufferers the perspective of an improved health future.

This approach disregards the huge societal benefits that sound environmental and public health policies are able to deliver to the European citizens. Health is a wealth, and the Commission cannot put short-term economic growth at the expense of people’s health. Only sustainable politics that take health, the major human need, into account, can guarantee a sustainable Europe”.

Notes to editors:

- 1) The proposal for the revised National Emissions Ceilings Directive (NEC) was part of the Clean Air Policy Package, which was presented by 2009-2014 Commissioners for Environment, Janez Potocnik, and Health, Tonio Borg, on 18th December 2013, aiming to improve air quality in Europe. The Package is based on a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis and impact assessment of the Commission services that showed that in 2010 alone, air pollution caused 400,000 premature deaths in the EU-28, with associated health costs of up to €940 billion (or 9% of the EU's GDP). In addition, there is a large body of evidence on the health effects of air pollution, which requires action at EU level: a recent review by the World Health Organisation highlighted that health impacts occur at lower concentration levels and that the range of effects is broader than previously thought, now including not only lung and heart health, but also impacts on children's development. It is now also associated with higher rates diabetes.
- 2) World Health Organisation (WHO) Air quality guidelines (2005) recommend countries to adopt lower maximum levels of pollutant exposure:
http://www.who.int/phe/health_topics/outdoorair/outdoorair_aqg/en/
- 3) A recent Eurobarometer showed that air quality is a major concern for European citizens, 79% of EU citizens are concerned by air quality and think the EU should do more to improve the air people breathe: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_360_en.pdf (page 86)
- 4) In a letter from 1st December 2014, 11 Member States -Belgium, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden- invited the European Commission to "keep viewing the Circular economy and the Clean Air Policy as high priorities for the coming years".
- 5) EFA, ERS and HEAL letter to Mr. Claude Juncker, 18 November 2014: http://www.efanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/HEAL-EFA-ERS-Letter-to-Juncker-on-air-quality-and-health_Nov-2014.pdf

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The European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA) is a non-profit network of allergy, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD) patients organisations, representing 35 national associations in 22 countries and over 400,000 patients. EFA is dedicated to making Europe a place where people with allergies, asthma and COPD have the right to best quality of care and safe environment, live uncompromised lives and are actively involved in all decisions influencing their health. Visit www.efanet.org for more information. Follow us on @EFA_patients and <https://www.facebook.com/pages/EFA/>

The European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) is a non-profit organisation active in the field of allergic and immunologic diseases such as asthma, rhinitis, eczema, occupational allergy, food and drug allergy and anaphylaxis. EAACI was founded in 1956 in Florence and has become the largest medical association in Europe in the field of allergy and clinical immunology. It includes over 8,000 members from 121 countries, as well as 49 National Allergy Societies. Visit www.eaaci.org for more information.