

## National emission ceilings for air pollutants

Despite improvements in recent decades, air pollution in Europe remains a concern. To address this, in 2013 the European Commission put forward a proposal to update and expand the National Emission Ceilings Directive. A first-reading vote on the report adopted by the ENVI Committee is scheduled for the October III plenary.

### Background

Although air quality has improved considerably in recent decades, the [European Environment Agency](#) indicates that the European Union (EU) is still far from achieving levels that do not result in unacceptable risks to humans and the environment. According to the [European Commission](#), particulate matter (PM) concentrations are responsible for over 400 000 premature deaths annually in the EU, and the total health-related costs of air pollution in the EU are in the range of €330–940 billion per year. Air pollutants are emitted from a variety of sources, including transport, electricity production, industry, heating, households, agriculture and waste. Certain pollutants [combine](#) to create PM and ground-level ozone, which in turn adversely affect human health, the environment and the climate.

EU air quality policy rests on two main legal acts: the 2001 [National Emission Ceilings Directive](#) setting maximum amounts of four pollutants (NO<sub>x</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>, NH<sub>3</sub>, VOCs) that each Member State is entitled to emit per year as of 2010, and the 2008 [Ambient Air Quality Directive](#) setting limit values for the atmospheric concentration of major air pollutants (PM, O<sub>3</sub>, NO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>, CO, benzene and lead) in designated areas. Moreover, a range of acts relate to pollution from transport (e.g. Euro 6 standards for cars) and industry.

### Commission proposal

In December 2013, the Commission presented a [proposal](#) to update the National Emission Ceilings (NEC) Directive. It sets reduction objectives for the amount of pollutants emitted each year: 2020 binding targets transposing the amended [Gothenburg Protocol](#), 2025 indicative targets, and 2030 binding targets aimed at achieving 70% of the 'maximum technically feasible reduction' identified in an [impact assessment](#). The proposal would also add two new pollutants (PM<sub>2.5</sub> and methane) to the scope of the Directive.

According to the Commission, while the benefits (decrease in external costs of air pollution) are expected to reach at least €40 billion per year, meeting the targets would [cost](#) €2.2 billion per year. The Commission estimates that the proposal could create 40 000 new jobs and boost green technology innovation and competitiveness, although it would adversely affect specific sectors (in particular petroleum refining and agriculture, as well as, to a lesser extent, chemicals and iron and steel).

Trade bodies, including [BusinessEurope](#), [Copa-Cogeca](#) (farmers) and [FuelsEurope](#), highlight the need to take technical and economic feasibility into account. Other stakeholders, including [Eurocities](#) and [environmental NGOs](#), call for more ambitious goals.

### Legislative procedure

The [report](#) adopted by the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee in July 2015 introduces a number of changes to the Commission proposal, in particular: setting binding intermediate targets for 2025 and strengthening 2030 reduction targets (except for methane), in line with the most cost-effective option identified by the European Parliament's [complementary impact assessment](#); adding mercury to the scope of the proposal; removing flexibility mechanisms related to the shipping sector; and establishing a system of checks to ensure that cars effectively comply with Euro 6 standards on the road. In their opinion, the [ITRE](#) and [AGRI](#) Committees recommended removing methane from the scope of the proposal. A vote on the report is due to take place in the October III plenary session (rapporteur: Julie Girling, ECR, United Kingdom).