Environmental protection

SUMMARY

Through its environmental policy, the European Union (EU) has been improving Europeans' well-being since 1972. Today, the aim of EU environmental policy is to ensure that by 2050 we are living well, within the limits of the planet. To reach this goal, the EU is striving to move towards a low-carbon, resource-efficient economy, to safeguard biodiversity and to protect human health through legislation on air quality, chemicals, climate, nature, waste and water.

Although this policy is delivering concrete benefits (such as a wide network of Natura 2000 protected areas, lower greenhouse gas emissions, increased resource recycling, and cleaner air and water), the outlook for the European environment 20 years from now shows a bleaker picture. Yet transitioning to sustainability could deliver a number of benefits beyond environmental protection, from jobs and economic activity to well-being and health.

In a recent poll conducted for the European Parliament, three quarters of EU citizens expressed support for increased EU action on environmental protection.

Since 2014, efforts have been made in a number of areas, including waste management (for example new recycling targets, restrictions on plastic carrier bags, action on plastics, measures to tackle marine litter); climate (for example the 2030 greenhouse gas emission targets, and measures to decarbonise the transport sector); nature (primarily to improve the way EU rules on biodiversity protection are implemented); and air quality (new rules on maximum amounts of five key air pollutants that EU countries can emit into the atmosphere). The European Parliament has advocated ambitious policies in many of these areas.

In the future, EU environment and climate spending is expected to rise. The Commission is proposing to boost the share of EU spending contributing to climate objectives from 20 % to 25 %, while Parliament has called for this share to be set at 30 %. In the coming years, policies are expected to focus on climate action, nature protection, air quality, the circular economy and pesticides.

This is an update of an earlier briefing issued in advance of the 2019 European elections.

In this Briefing

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State of play

Human activities can have adverse impacts on the environment, and subsequently on our well-being. According to the concept of planetary boundaries developed by the Stockholm Resilience Centre, the highest risks include climate change; the discharge of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus) from industrial and agricultural processes; the loss of biodiversity; and land-use change (for example deforestation).[1]

The European Union has been protecting the environment since the early 1970s, under the premise that economic prosperity and environmental protection are interdependent. Successive environment action programmes have set the framework for EU environmental policy. The seventh environment action programme ('Living well, within the limits of our planet') covering the 2014 to 2020 period seeks to realise a 2050 vision for sustainability through action in three areas:

1. protecting, conserving and enhancing **natural capital**;
2. shifting to a **circular** and **low-carbon economy**; and
3. safeguarding people from environmental risks to **health** and **well-being**.

2050 vision for sustainability: living well, within the limits of the planet

'In 2050, we live well, within the planet's ecological limits. Our prosperity and healthy environment stem from an innovative, circular economy where nothing is wasted and where natural resources are managed sustainably, and biodiversity is protected, valued and restored in ways that enhance our society's resilience. Our low-carbon growth has long been decoupled from resource use, setting the pace for a safe and sustainable global society.'

Source: Seventh environment action programme.

The overarching policy framework is complemented by thematic strategies, including the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth; the climate and energy strategy aiming to cut greenhouse gas emissions; and a biodiversity strategy aiming to stop the loss of biodiversity.

The past few decades have seen the establishment of a network of Natura 2000 protected areas covering almost a fifth of EU territory, a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, higher levels of recycling, and Europeans enjoying cleaner air and water. However, although current trends are positive in some areas (such as greenhouse gas emissions, energy consumption or water quality) the outlook 20 years on from now shows a bleaker picture.[2]

The European Environment Agency[3] highlights a number of challenges, including:

- as regards **natural capital**: 60 % of protected species and 77 % of habitats assessed have an unfavourable conservation status. Europe is not on track to meet its 2020 target of halting biodiversity loss. Continued ecosystem degradation threatens Europe's economic output and well-being. Sixty per cent of Europe's freshwater bodies do not meet the 'good ecological status' prescribed in EU legislation. Climate change is expected to intensify pressures and impacts;
- as regards the **circular** and **low-carbon economy**: current policies are not expected to be sufficient for Europe to achieve its long-term environmental goals, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80 % to 95 %;
- as regards **health** and **well-being**: projected improvements in air quality are not expected to be sufficient to prevent continuing harm, while impacts resulting from climate change are expected to worsen. The growing use of chemicals, particularly in consumer products, has been associated with an observed increase of endocrine diseases and disorders in humans.

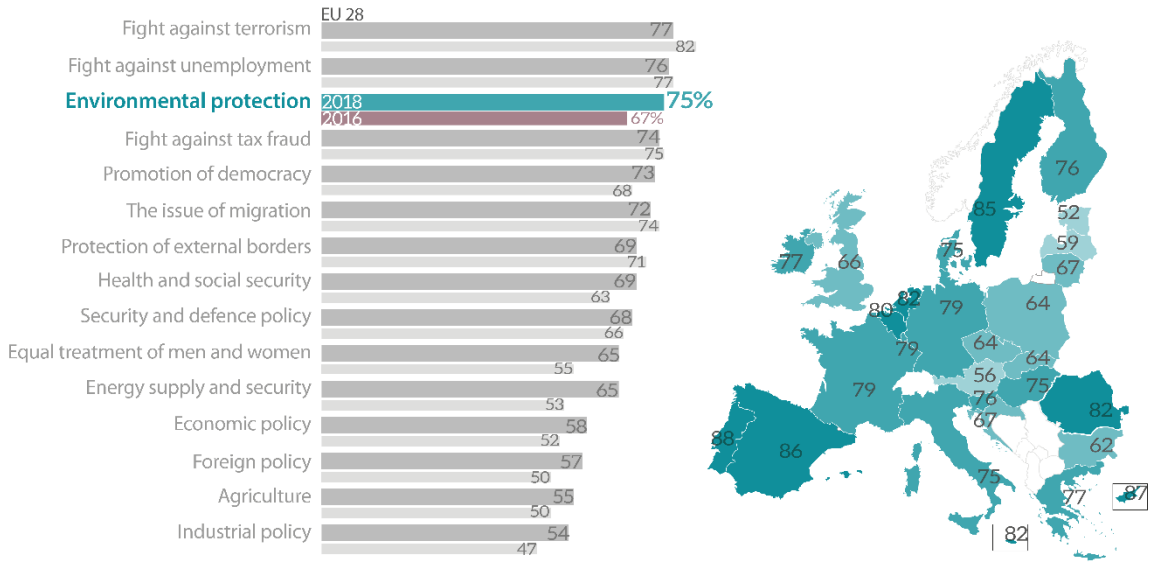
The transition to sustainability[4] could deliver a number of **benefits beyond environmental protection**, including:

- **Jobs and economic activity**: Eurostat data indicates that in the EU-28, 4.2 million people are employed in the environmental goods and services sector (environmental protection activities, and water and energy management), an increase of 49 % since 2000. The output of this sector is estimated at 5.1 % of gross domestic product (GDP), or €710 billion. A 2017 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that ambitious climate change policies can have a positive impact on jobs, provided there is sufficient employment mobility between sectors. It is estimated that the transition to a circular economy could increase GDP by 1 to 7 percentage points by 2030, depending on the pace of technological change taken into account.[5]
- **Well-being and health**: stronger ecosystems, increased air and water quality, and lower quantities of chemicals in consumer products could deliver benefits.

Public expectations for EU involvement[6]

Environmental concerns have been debated intensively at EU level for many years now, covering a wide range of perspectives and areas of impact. As a result, the EU has a broad policy in the area. According to a series of Eurobarometer surveys done for the European Parliament on 'perceptions and expectations', the support of EU citizens for even stronger EU involvement in environmental protection grew from two thirds in 2016 to three quarters in 2018.

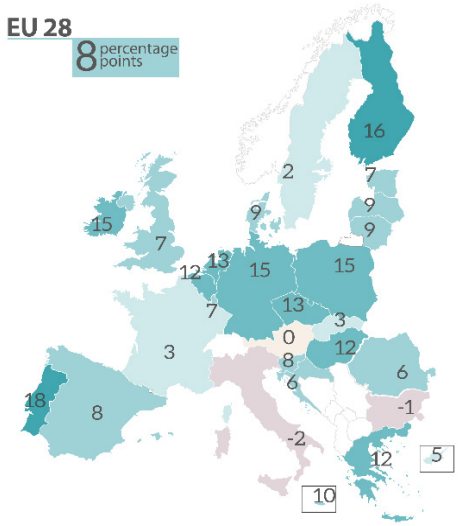
Percentage of respondents who would like the EU to intervene more than at present



Source: Eurobarometer 85.1 - 2016; 89.2 - 2018.

There are significant differences in the way this policy is perceived in different Member States. With few exceptions, there is a trend of central and eastern European countries being less supportive of further intensification of EU involvement in environmental policies than western European countries. The strongest support comes from Cyprus (87 %) and Portugal (88 %). The lowest is registered in Estonia – 52 %, which is still a significant increase from the 45 % registered in 2016. The notable outliers of the east-west division remain Romania and the UK.

Expectations for more EU action than at present: percentage points difference between 2016 and 2018

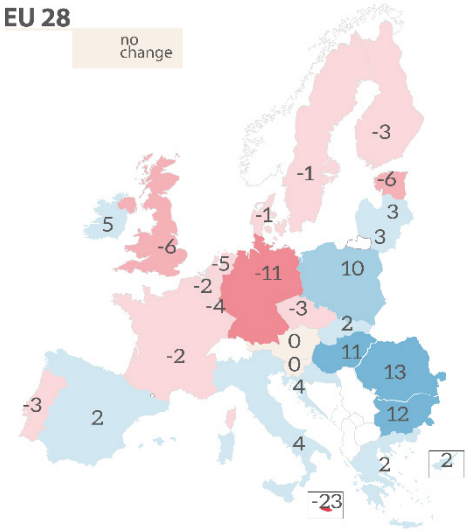


Source: Eurobarometer 85.1 - 2016; 89.2 - 2018.

The overall increase in support for increased EU involvement in environmental protection is 8 percentage points. It is one of the highest amongst all areas researched. This increase is registered in almost all Member States, with the most prominent changes in Portugal (increase of 18 percentage points) and Finland (increase of 16 percentage points). An exception to the general trend is seen only in Italy and Bulgaria, but the decrease in expectations for more EU involvement in environmental protection is insignificant – two percentage points for Italy and one for Bulgaria.

Approximately half of the citizens surveyed consider current EU action on environmental protection to be insufficient (52 % in 2016 and 51 % in 2018), whereas 37 % perceive EU action in the area as adequate. On average at EU level, this perception has not changed during the last few years. However, there are very significant changes in individual Member States. There is a significant decrease in the share of citizens perceiving the EU action as adequate in Malta (a drop of 23 percentage points) and Germany (a drop of 11 percentage points). The most significant increase in the evaluation of EU action as adequate is registered in several central and eastern European countries – Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland (a 13, 12, 11 and 10 percentage point increase respectively).

Perception of EU action as adequate at present: percentage points difference between 2016 and 2018



Source: Eurobarometer 85.1 - 2016; 89.2 - 2018.

Overall at EU level, the gap between citizens' expectations of EU involvement and their evaluation of the current EU action on environmental protection is growing slightly due to the increased pressure of citizens' expectations.

EU framework

Legal framework

European environment policy dates back to 1972. Provisions on environmental protection were introduced with the Single European Act in 1987 and have subsequently expanded. Under Articles 191-193 of the **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union**, EU environmental policy is aimed at providing 'a high level of protection' and is based on four principles (precaution; preventive action; rectification of damages at source, and 'the polluter pays'). The EU is competent to act in most areas of environmental policy, although its action is limited by the principle of subsidiarity and

the requirement for unanimity in Council on certain topics (such as tax, land use and energy mix). Member States may adopt more stringent protective measures if they wish.

EU environmental protection **legislation** relates to a wide variety of topics, which can be grouped into the following broad areas:

- **Air**: EU legislation sets air quality standards, maximum limits for pollutants emitted in Member States and rules on emissions sources, such as vehicle standards.
- **Chemicals**: EU legislation aims to protect human health and the environment and to remove barriers to trade, by regulating chemicals, pesticides and product labelling.
- **Climate**: EU legislation limits greenhouse gas emissions by factories and power plants under the emissions trading system, as well as greenhouse gas emissions from other sectors, for instance agriculture, road transport and buildings. It also promotes renewable energy sources.
- **Nature**: EU legislation seeks to protect nature, biodiversity and ecosystem services through the Natura 2000 network of protected areas, which covers 18 % of the Union's land mass.
- **Waste**: EU legislation seeks to improve waste management and sets requirements for waste streams. A recent focus is to enable transition to a circular economy.
- **Water**: EU legislation aims to protect surface and ground water from pollution, with standards for drinking and bathing water, and requirements for flood management.

The European Union is widely seen internationally as a model as regards environmental policy. The EU is also party to a number of **international agreements**, including:

- on **access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice** in environmental matters, the 1998 Aarhus Convention;
- on **air quality**, the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and its protocols;
- on **climate**, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement;
- on **chemicals**, the Rotterdam Convention on trade in hazardous chemicals, the Stockholm Convention on persistent organic pollutants, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the Minamata Convention on Mercury;
- on **nature**, the Convention on Biological Diversity and its protocols, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and conventions on specific regions;[7]
- on **waste**, the Basel Convention on hazardous waste;
- on **water**, the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) and a number of conventions on regional seas.[8]

Financial framework

According to the agreement on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2014 to 2020, at least 20 % (approximately €180 billion) of the EU budget must be spent on climate action objectives. Climate goals and action have therefore been integrated in all major EU policies and programmes, in particular: cohesion, agriculture, maritime and fisheries, external aid, energy and transport, and research and innovation. As a result, environmental objectives are reflected in all multiannual financial framework headings. Programmes contributing, to a greater or lesser extent, to environmental protection include the European structural and investment funds, the European Fund for Strategic Investments, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the LIFE programme, Horizon 2020, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, as well as numerous EU external action and humanitarian aid initiatives. These funds and programmes are implemented by the Commission independently, together with the Member States, and in cooperation with organisations in third countries.

Since 2014, a special tracking methodology has been used to monitor the dispersed EU budget contribution to two specific goals: climate action and biodiversity protection. The aggregated

figures are presented by the Commission in the annual budgetary procedure. Over the 2014 to 2020 period, the EU budget contribution to climate action and biodiversity protection is expected to reach 19.3 % and 8.0 % of commitment appropriations, respectively.

The only EU programme devoted entirely to environmental objectives is the LIFE programme for the environment and climate action. Between 1992 and 2013 it financed more than 4 170 projects, with a total EU contribution of €3.4 billion. The programme allocation for the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework has increased substantially and is the highest ever for LIFE (€3.4 billion, 0.32 % of the total multiannual financial framework). The programme has two components: environment and climate action. The funding is provided mainly in the form of grants and financial instruments (loans and equity investments). These support public authorities, NGOs and private actors, and small and medium-sized enterprises in particular.

Deliveries of the 2014-2019 parliamentary term

Since mid-2014, a number of results have been achieved, including:

- on **waste management**: Parliament and Council have passed new legislation tightening EU waste rules, in particular introducing new targets for recycling and reducing the use of plastic carrier bags. In 2015, the European Commission published a broad action plan aiming to initiate transition to a circular economy, and in early 2018 a more specific strategy on plastics aiming not least to make all plastics recyclable by 2030. In addition, Parliament and Council have agreed on new rules to reduce marine litter by addressing single-use plastic items and collection of ship waste in ports. The European Parliament has all the while been advocating ambitious waste management and circular economy policies;
- on **climate action**: Parliament and Council have adopted new rules and 2030 emission targets for the energy and industry sectors (through the EU emissions trading system), for transport, buildings and agriculture, and also for land use and forestry. The Council and the Parliament have set a new renewable energy target of 32 % for 2030. To decarbonise the transport sector, the Commission presented a European strategy for low emission mobility in 2016, together with a number of legislative proposals. Parliament and Council have passed legislation setting new CO_2 emission standards for new cars and vans for the period after 2020, and agreed on the first-ever CO_2 emission standards for new trucks. The European Parliament has been pushing for ambitious climate policies on these various files;
- on **nature**: following a review of EU rules on nature protection (known as the Nature Directives), in 2017 the European Commission published an action plan aiming to improve their implementation and to contribute to biodiversity protection. The European Parliament has been very supportive of the Nature Directives and has urged the Commission and Member States to give higher priority to achieving the objective of halting biodiversity loss by 2020;
- on **air quality**: in 2016, Parliament and Council adopted new rules on maximum amounts of five key air pollutants that can be emitted. These updated rules aim to halve the number of premature deaths from air pollution by 2030.

Potential for the future

In its resolution of March 2018 on guidelines for the 2019 budget, the European Parliament stressed that the share of EU spending contributing to climate objectives for 2019 must significantly exceed the overall 20 % target in order to offset the lower allocations made during the initial years of the multiannual financial framework, and that the climate change mainstreaming mechanism should be fully optimised.

Looking at the longer term, EU environment and climate spending is expected to increase in the future. In its May 2018 communication on the 2021 to 2027 multiannual financial framework, the **Commission** proposed to increase the share of EU spending contributing to climate objectives from

20 % to 25 %. In its June 2018 legislative proposal on the LIFE programme for 2021-2027, the Commission proposed to increase the funds allocated to this programme by 50 % to €4.8 billion, from €3.2 billion under the 2014 to 2020 period.[9] The revenue side of the EU budget could also contribute to EU policy objectives. In its May 2018 proposal on the system of own resources for the EU budget, the Commission proposed to set new own resources linked to climate and environment objectives: a share of the revenues generated by the EU emissions trading system, and a national contribution based on the quantity of non-recycled plastic packaging waste generated in each Member State.

The **European Parliament**, in its resolution of 30 May 2018 on the multiannual financial framework and own resources, and in its resolution of 14 November 2018, further detailing its position, called for climate-related spending to reach 30 % of EU spending as soon as possible and at the latest by 2027, and for the funds allocated to the LIFE programme to be doubled. In its resolution of 13 September 2018 on the plastics strategy, Parliament stressed that the effects of a budget contribution based on non-recycled plastic packaging waste must be coherent with the waste hierarchy, and underlined that priority should be given to the prevention of waste generation.

As far as the policy outlook is concerned, under the Treaties, the EU has powers to address the challenges highlighted above. However, these powers are limited by the fact that responsibility for financing and implementing environmental protection measures adopted at EU level lies with the Member States, and in some cases with regional and local authorities.

EU laws on environmental protection are generally adopted under the 'ordinary legislative procedure', whereby the Commission puts forward a proposal that is subsequently amended and adopted by the European Parliament and the Council. New or updated **legislation** could be passed in the following areas:

- On resource-efficiency and the **circular economy**, the European Parliament has called on the Commission to propose new rules to make sure that products last longer, are easily repairable and are recyclable, as well as new public procurement procedures to encourage circular products and business models.
- On **chemicals**, in the context of the debate about the authorisation of plant protection products illustrated by the case of glyphosate, the European Parliament urged the Commission to propose updated legislation to increase transparency in authorisation procedures and promote low-risk pesticides.
- On **air quality**, following the upcoming publication of updated air quality guidelines by the World Health Organization and a review of legislation on outdoor air quality, legislation on air quality standards might be updated.

In addition, **initiatives** could be expected in the following areas:

- On **climate action**, the focus is expected to be on implementing the recently adopted legislation for the 2020 to 2030 period, and on working towards a climate-neutral economy, based on the strategy presented by the Commission in November 2018.
- On **nature protection**, the Commission might put forward a biodiversity strategy, following up on the current one, which ends in 2020; a new strategy could also reflect developments at global level under the Convention on Biological Diversity.
- More generally, the Commission might put forward a proposal for a new **environment action programme** which, once adopted by Parliament and Council, would set the overall goals for future EU environmental policy.

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Visit the European Parliament homepages on the circular economy, plastic waste and climate change.

ENDNOTES

1 The 'planetary boundaries' concept includes nine dimensions: climate change; biodiversity loss; stratospheric ozone depletion; chemical pollution; ocean acidification; freshwater consumption; land-use change; biogeochemical flows (altered nitrogen and phosphorus cycles); and atmospheric aerosol loading. For more detail on the general concept, see The nine planetary boundaries, Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2015; and on the concept in the EU context, see H. Hoff et al., Bringing EU policy into line with the Planetary Boundaries, Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2017.

2 For more details, see the indicative summary of environmental trends by the European Environment Agency.

3 The main source is the 2015 State and outlook of the European environment report (SOER). Updated data from European waters – assessment of status and pressures 2018.

4 On this topic, see also the recent paper by the European Political Strategy Centre on Europe's Sustainability Puzzle. Broadening the Debate.

5 The European Commission estimated in 2014 that a shift to a circular economy would deliver a 0.8% increase in GDP by 2030, while the Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimated in 2015 that a transition could bring a 7% increase in GDP by 2030, based on a higher pace of technological change in the major product and resource sectors.

6 This section has been drafted by Alina Dobreva, with graphics by Nadejda Kresnichka-Nikolchova.

7 The Alpine Convention (Salzburg Convention) and the Carpathian Convention.

8 Convention for the protection of the Mediterranean sea against pollution (Barcelona convention), Convention on the protection of the Black Sea against pollution (Bucharest convention), Convention on the protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea area (Helsinki convention), Convention for the protection of the marine environment of the north-east Atlantic (OSPAR convention).

9 This would increase the share of the LIFE programme in the total multiannual financial framework from 0.32 % to 0.4 %.

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