

Verheugen: car emission rules could be more specific

The inquiry committee on Emission Measurements in the Automotive Sector (EMIS) heard Günter Verheugen, Commissioner for enterprise and industry 2004-2010, on how the current legislation on car emissions was drafted during his tenure. MEPs also heard Peter Lakin, vice president of Faurecia, on emission control technologies.

Former Commissioner Verheugen argued that as Commissioner for industry his main responsibility was to keep the EU car industry globally leading and competitive, with rules best suited for technological development, including pollutants' limits. He relied on experts for the drafting of the directives on Euro 5 (on particles) and Euro 6 (NOx). It was clear that type approval tests didn't represent real driving conditions and therefore a new test started to be developed in 2007 but no one suspected that manufacturers would cheat using so-called defeat devices.

MEPs pressed Mr Verheugen on the question if the rules are so vague that they allow for mis-interpretation. Verheugen insisted that defeat devices had already been banned at an earlier stage and that those provisions were copied into ensuing rules, but MEPs stressed that this was the case for lorries only. They also deplored the lack of a definition of what constitutes a defeat device.

Mr Verheugen conceded that at the time nobody considered the possibility of sophisticated cheating at emissions tests and that in hindsight the rules might be perceived as lacking clarity. He also set out that until the end of his mandate in late 2009, no procedures against any member states for not applying the rules were started, while imposing sanctions against manufacturers was only possible if national authorities reported on irregularities - which didn't happen either.

MEPs also quizzed the former commissioner on the lengthy procedure for developing new tests and on the Commission decision to focus mainly on the reduction of CO2 emissions, neglecting the harmful NOx. Mr Verheugen insisted that changes to the so-called type approval was on the right track at the time but he declined to speculate on why it took so long to complete. The Commission focused on CO2-reduction as that was part of the EU global commitment in the fight against climate change. Mr Verheugen concluded that together with his team he took decisions which were right at the time.

Faurecia: diesel can be clean with present technologies

Questions to Peter Lakin, vice president of Faurecia, manufacturer of emission control technologies and other car components, related mostly to ways to produce cleaner diesel engines. He explained there is a trade-off between CO₂ and NO_x emissions: efficient diesel engines consume less fuel and emit less CO₂ than comparable petrol engines, but they produce more NO_x, which must then be reduced with a range of different technologies.

Next steps

The committee will meet again on Monday 5 September, when Janez Potočnik, Commissioner for the environment from 2010 to 2014, and Antonio Tajani, Commissioner for Industry and Entrepreneurship from 2010 to 2014, will answer to questions from MEPs.

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Contacts

Janez VOUK

Press Officer

☎ (+32) 2 28 31053 (BXL)

☎ (+33) 3 881 74466 (STR)

☎ (+32) 475 78 48 56

🐦 [@EP_Emissions](#)

✉ emis-press@europarl.europa.eu



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