



Info

Air quality: MEPs set maximum concentration of microparticles

The European Parliament adopted a second-reading legislative report which provides for maximum concentration levels for the atmospheric microparticles or dust most hazardous to human health, the PM2.5, which were not regulated until now. The report is the basis of an agreement with the Council on the directive on air quality.

Under the second-reading deal reached in late November with the Portuguese presidency, the amount of PM2.5 and other gases in ambient air which are the suspected cause of the growth in respiratory illnesses such as asthma, bronchitis and emphysema, would be reduced.

The aim of the directive is to reduce this pollution in order to minimise its harmful effects on human health. According to the agreed text, "emissions of harmful air pollutants should be avoided, prevented or reduced and appropriate objectives set for ambient air quality". Special efforts will be made for the most sensitive population groups, particularly children.

Member States will have two years after entry into force of the directive to transpose it into national law.

Particles - Fine particles (PM2.5)

For particles with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometres (PM2.5), which do the most damage to lungs, MEPs and the Council agreed on an initial target value of 25µg/m³ from 2010. From 2015, this figure would become a binding limit.

MEPs successfully pushed for a second limit value - an indicative one - of 20µg/m³ to be achieved by 1 January 2020, five years after the first limit. The European Commission must review this indicative figure in 2013 to confirm the value laid down (20µg/m³) or to propose that it be altered.

Parliament also managed to introduce the notion of an "exposure concentration obligation", meaning "a level fixed on the basis of the average exposure indicator with the aim of reducing harmful effects on human health, to be attained over a given period". When the Commission carries out its 2013 review of PM2.5, this exposure concentration obligation must also be reviewed.

Larger particles (PM10)

MEPs accepted the Council's common position regarding maximum concentrations of the largest microparticles (PM10). These are to be reduced to 40µg/m³ on average per year, although no precise date is set by which this level should be reached. This represents no change compared with the current directive governing PM10 (Directive

1999/30/EC), which lays down limit values for sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and oxides of nitrogen, particulate matter and lead in ambient air, and has been in force since 1 January 2005).

MEPs also agreed to the Council's position on daily limits of these same particles: a maximum of 50µg/m³ which must not be exceeded more than 35 times per year.

Derogation

The agreement allows a three-year exemption to the PM₁₀ limit values for areas or cities which cannot meet the targets "because of site-specific dispersion characteristics, adverse climatic conditions or trans-boundary contributions". This exemption would be granted only if Member States submit a plan showing why the maximum figures cannot be met despite measures taken at national and local level.

Sampling points

Under the directive, Member States must set up "sampling points" in urban areas and cities (of more than 250,000 inhabitants) and also in rural areas, where a measuring station must be set up for every 100,000 km².

In addition to particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}), these sampling points will measure sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and oxides of nitrogen, lead, benzene and carbon monoxide.

The criteria used in the Member States for selecting sampling points will be monitored by the Commission to ensure harmonised EU-wide application of the criteria.

Binding measures for certain sources of pollution

Regarding the emissions which are the source of certain pollutants, MEPs secured the addition of a new recital stating that "The necessary Community measures to reduce emissions at source, in particular measures to improve the effectiveness of Community legislation on industrial emissions, to limit the exhaust emissions of engines installed in heavy duty vehicles, to further reduce the Member States' permitted national emissions of key pollutants and the emissions associated with refuelling of petrol cars at service stations, and to address the sulphur content of fuels including marine fuels should be duly examined as a priority to by all institutions involved".

In addition to this recital, the Commission has agreed to accompany the directive with a declaration in which it undertakes to put forward new legislative measures in 2008 to:

- limit the exhaust emissions of engines installed in heavy duty vehicles;
- further reduce the Member States' permitted national emissions of key pollutants and the emissions associated with refuelling of petrol cars at service stations;
- address the sulphur content of fuels including marine fuels.

This declaration is a response to a request by MEPs, who asked that the Commission should submit, within two years of the directive's entry into force, binding measures to cut air pollution from motor vehicles, including boats and aircraft, as well as the application of Euro VI norms for heavy goods vehicles, new standards for domestic heating equipment and lower emissions for the latter as well as for emissions from farming. It will be published in the EU Official Journal on the same day as the directive. The Commission refused to have the list included in the text of the directive on the ground that this would impinge on its right of initiative.

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