

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 proposed to update and expand the National Emission Ceilings Directive. First-reading negotiations with the Council of the European Union delivered a compromise, which now awaits a vote in the European Parliament's first November plenary.

Background

Although air quality has improved considerably in recent decades, the [European Environment Agency](#) indicates that pollution levels in the EU continue to present considerable 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 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. First, the 2001 [National Emission Ceilings Directive](#) sets maximum amounts of four pollutants (NO_x, SO₂, NH₃, VOCs) that each Member State may emit per year as of 2010. Secondly, the 2008 [Ambient Air Quality Directive](#) sets limit values for the atmospheric concentration of major air pollutants (PM, O₃, NO₂, SO₂, CO, benzene and lead) in designated areas. Moreover, a range of acts relate to pollution from transport (for example Euro 6 standards for cars) and industry.

Commission proposal

In December 2013, the Commission presented a [proposal](#) to update the National Emission Ceilings Directive. The proposal 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 reducing the number of premature deaths by 52 % by 2030 compared to 2005 levels. The Commission also proposed to add two new pollutants (PM_{2.5} 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 a year, meeting the targets would [cost](#) €2.2 billion a year. The Commission estimates that the proposal could create 40 000 new jobs and boost green technology innovation and competitiveness, but would adversely affect specific sectors (in particular, petroleum refining and agriculture, and, to a lesser extent, chemicals, iron and steel).

Trilogue agreement

The first-reading [compromise](#) reached with the Council during interinstitutional negotiations and endorsed by Parliament's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) Committee on 12 July 2016, introduces a number of changes to the proposal. These include: setting targets aimed at reducing premature deaths from air pollution by half by 2030 compared to 2005 levels; excluding methane from the scope of the proposal; enabling flexibilities in certain cases, such as problematic enforcement of source-based legislation, unforeseen events in energy supply and production systems, and particularly cold winters or dry summers; facilitating financial support from EU funds to meet the proposal's objectives; and requiring that the Commission publish detailed implementation reports every four years and put forward a review by 2025, with specific focus on ammonia and mercury emissions.

The [report](#) at first reading is due to be discussed in Parliament's first November plenary session following the negotiated compromise (rapporteur: Julie Girling, ECR, United Kingdom).

