

# The 7<sup>th</sup> EU Environment Action Programme: Preventing disease, increasing wellbeing and quality of life through environmental measures



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The proposal on the General Union Environment Action Programme (EAP) to 2020 “Living well, within the limits of our planet”<sup>1</sup> is currently being discussed in the European Parliament and among EU Member States.

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), a leading European not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects health in the EU, welcomes the priority that is given to protecting citizens’ health and improving wellbeing in the Commission proposal of the 7<sup>th</sup> EAP, but urges Members of the European Parliament and environment ministers to strengthen goals and measures in key health-related areas.

## THE SCIENCE ON HEALTH EFFECTS

The environment is a major determinant of health. According to the World Health Organisation, environmental pollution is responsible for up to 20% of the burden of disease in the European region.<sup>2</sup> The science on how environmental factors are implicated in cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, and diabetes - the main chronic diseases and leading causes of death and ill-health in the EU - has grown tremendously since the 6<sup>th</sup> EAP started in 2002. In addition, the list of known or suspected health effects has broadened to include neuro-developmental effects, reproductive disorders, cognitive function impacts etc.

As the evidence on how air, water, soil and noise pollution, harmful chemical exposure, climate change and ecosystem degradation affect our health increases, two dire warnings emerge:

1. Health effects can occur at much lower exposure levels than previously thought;<sup>3</sup>
2. The timing of exposure is critical: pre-natal or early life exposure can significantly alter or severely hamper the biological development process with consequences for our health manifesting only later in life.<sup>4</sup>

From a public health perspective, environmental pollution takes a significant toll on individual’s and community health. It also has major social and

economic costs, such as increased medication use, hospital admissions and productivity loss.<sup>5</sup> The good news is that measures for environmental protection and for moving to a sustainable, low-carbon economy bring large benefits to people’s health. These are generally underestimated.<sup>6</sup>

## STEP UP ACTION FOR THE BENEFIT OF CITIZENS

The Commission’s proposal for the 7<sup>th</sup> EAP needs to be strengthened to spell out more clearly the goals, timelines and activities of the EU’s overall strategy for environmental health action to improve public health and prevent disease in the next years. This is also in the interest of citizens, who are concerned and supportive of greater EU and the member states action to protect health. Environmental action is an area where the EU brings added value for improving citizens’ health and increasing their quality of life.

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), bringing together over 65 member organisations, representing health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, patients, citizens, women, youth and environmental experts from the international to the local level, urges members of the European Parliament and ministers to consider the recommendations below.

## HEAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 7<sup>TH</sup> EAP:

- ✓ ***Protect the health of those most vulnerable such as children, those already ill, and the elderly***

Certain population groups are more sensitive to environmental pollution than others: pre-natal exposure to hazardous chemicals can increase the risk of developing cancer or other health conditions later in life; air pollution can increase the frequency of asthma attacks. The measures detailed in priority objective 3 should meet the needs of vulnerable groups, which may mean e.g. setting stricter standards or prioritizing the phase out of certain substances which are particularly harmful to vulnerable groups. For emerging technologies such as nanotechnology or electromagnetic fields the precautionary principle should be applied to protect sensitive groups.
- ✓ ***Ensure that outdoor air quality improves to WHO recommended levels***

Outdoor air pollution is still a major public health and environmental problem in Europe, and is responsible for half a million premature deaths each year. Current outdoor EU air quality standards are less strict than the limits recommended by the World Health Organisation. As a way forward, the 7<sup>th</sup> EAP should state that air quality has to improve to levels that are in line with WHO recommendations.
- ✓ ***Include a strategy on indoor air quality***

Europeans spend the majority of their time indoors, where air pollution can be worse than outside. Indoor air pollution is responsible for 2 million healthy life years lost every year in the EU. Many EU policies influence the quality of the indoor air, but there is no coherent EU approach yet for clean indoor air. As the 7<sup>th</sup> EAP aims to improve air quality, a specific strategy on indoor air is needed to spell out measures so that citizens breathe clean air, whether we're outside or inside. The WHO guidelines and recommendations should be taken as the reference.
- ✓ ***Provide the way forward for phase-out and restrictions of hazardous chemicals***

Harmful chemicals are the top environmental health worry of Europeans. The European Parliament and the EU Member states have committed to protecting people's health from hazardous chemicals in chemicals laws such as REACH, the pesticides and biocides legislation. Instead of focusing primarily on improving the knowledge base, the goal of the programme should be to support immediate action to phase-out and restrict for example endocrine disruptors (e.g. timelines for reviewing authorized substances, revision of EU laws to properly address EDCs). The 7<sup>th</sup> EAP should also speed up action to effectively address chemicals mixtures, and the application of REACH.
- ✓ ***Support human bio-monitoring to assess exposure to harmful pollutants***

Human bio-monitoring – the measuring of contaminants in our bodies, through hair, urine and blood sampling – is an indispensable way to assess exposure of the population and especially of vulnerable groups, inform risk assessment, guide policy decisions and monitor effectiveness of regulatory actions. The EU funded COPHES/DEMOCOPHES project has laid the basis for EU-wide HBM activities and enabled economic assessments, e.g. on mercury exposure. Greater financial support and commitment to an EU level human bio-monitoring is necessary.
- ✓ ***Promote measures to reduce noise exposure***

Environmental noise is the second biggest threat to health after air pollution. While progress has been made in the EU to assess the extent of exposure to harmful noise levels, action on reducing noise is (too) slow. Including target and limit values in the programme will help drive improvements to people's health.
- ✓ ***Step up climate mitigation action to protect health***

Climate change already has an effect on people's health in Europe. In order to prevent serious health impacts in the future, the EU not only needs to strengthen preparedness (adaptation), but also increase its mitigation commitment in order to stay on track for the substantial long-term reductions required to limit global temperature rise to 2 degrees. Reductions of CO<sub>2</sub> and short-lived climate forcers such as methane

and black carbon can bring important public health benefits, while watching out for potential trade-offs. A move away from coal – the most emission intensive energy source - will make a significant contribution to mitigating climate change and preventing chronic disease. Measures for de-carbonisation should also include promoting climate-friendly, healthy buildings, as a way to address inadequate housing, fuel and energy poverty and more sustainable agricultural practices and consumption patterns, as a way to reducing climate pollutants and addressing chronic diet-related disease.

✓ **Promote sustainable public transport and active transportation**

Incentives should be put in place to make public transport affordable and accessible to all, and to promote walking and cycling, especially in urban areas. This will help to improve air quality in cities, reduce noise pollution and contribute to a healthier population.

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**References:**

<sup>1</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/newprg/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> WHO: the European Health report 2012: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/data-and-evidence/european-health-report-2012>

<sup>3</sup> WHO Review of evidence on health aspects of air pollution REVIHAAP: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/environment-and-health/air-quality/publications/2013/review-of-evidence-on-health-aspects-of-air-pollution-revihaap>

<sup>4</sup> Developmental origins of non-communicable disease: Implications for research and public health: <http://www.ehjournal.net/content/11/1/42/abstract>

<sup>5</sup> The health cost from air pollution for the year 2000 alone is estimated at between 277 – 790 billion EUR: CAFE CBA Baseline Analysis 2000-2020." (2005). Report to the European Commission by AEA Technology UK.

<sup>6</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> EAP can contribute to improving the knowledge base by improving data collection and support the development of indicators that go beyond GDP

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**The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)** is a leading European not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects health in the European Union (EU). With the support of more than 65 member organisations, representing health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, patients, citizens, women, youth, and environmental experts, HEAL brings independent expertise and evidence from the health community to different decision-making processes. Members include international and Europe-wide organisations as well as national and local groups.

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