



Press release

Traffic noise health impacts second only to air pollution, new WHO report says

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Brussels – In the EU and Norway, traffic noise is the second biggest environmental problem affecting health after air pollution, says a report published today by the World Health Organization (WHO) (1). This new health evidence highlights the urgency of adopting more stringent EU vehicle noise standards, according to health, environment and sustainable transport campaigners. The European Commission is expected to release a proposal to update the Vehicle Noise Directive 70/157/EEC in June. (2)

“The Commission has an opportunity in the coming weeks to cut road traffic noise by half, and protect millions of Europeans from this health risk”, says Nina Renshaw, Deputy Director at Transport & Environment (T&E), a Brussels-based sustainable transport campaign group. “The proposal for an update of the Vehicle Noise directive should set strict new noise standards for cars, vans, lorries and buses. Policy-makers must act on this WHO report and cut road noise to benefit us all by protecting health, improving quality of life, and easing the strain on government healthcare budgets”.

The WHO report says that each year Europeans lose at least one million healthy life-years due to disability or disease caused by traffic noise. And that estimate is said to be conservative. The new calculation includes data that measure exposure to traffic noise and its impact on health related to cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment in children, sleep disturbance, tinnitus, and annoyance.

According to the study, 1.8% of heart attacks in high income European countries are attributed to traffic noise levels higher than 60dB. Cardiovascular disease is the largest cause of death in the EU, accounting for 40% of deaths and approximately 10% of healthcare budgets (3). A 2008 report by consultants CE for T&E (4) found that noise from rail and road transport is linked to 50,000 fatal heart attacks every year in Europe and 200,000 cases of cardio-vascular disease.

“The new figures are worrying but the true impact of noise pollution on health is likely to be much higher”, says Anne Stauffer, Deputy Director at Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL). “Noise pollution is a critical public health problem. We hope that now the EU has the evidence, policy makers will make changes in transport and other legislation that will better protect citizens' health.” Ms. Stauffer added.

HEAL is particularly concerned about the effect of traffic noise on children's learning abilities. In a recent children's health summit in Parma, Italy, environment and health ministers committed to reducing the exposure of children to noise (5).

The European Environmental Bureau hopes the WHO study will also help strengthen the existing EU directive on environmental noise, which includes noise mapping. This legislation is currently under review by the European Commission. “The review is long overdue”, says Louise Duprez, Policy Officer at EEB, “and with this report reinforcing already-known health implications of noise there is no excuse not to come up with a more ambitious Environmental Noise Directive.” (6)

European citizens are well aware of the health impacts of traffic noise. According to a recent Eurobarometer (7), almost half of all Europeans believe that noise affects their health "to a large extent" and another one-third said that it affected their health "to some extent".

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Notes to editors:

1. World Health Organization press release is available at <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-publish/information-for-the-media/sections/latest-press-releases/new-evidence-from-who-on-health-effects-of-traffic-related-noise-in-europe> and the report at <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-publish/abstracts/burden-of-disease-from-environmental-noise.-quantification-of-healthy-life-years-lost-in-europe>

2. For further information on the Vehicle Noise Directive see:

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/automotive/documents/directives/directive-70-157-eec_en.htm. For further

For further information on the EU vehicle noise policy see:

<http://www.transportenvironment.org/Pages/transport-noise/>

3. http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_problems/cardiovascular_diseases/index_en.htm

4. <http://www.transportenvironment.org/News/2008/2/50000-heart-deaths-a-year-caused-by-traffic-noise/>

5. Parma Declaration, March 2010,

http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/78608/E93618.pdf

6. Environmental Noise Directive, <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/noise/directive.htm>

7. Special Eurobarometer on Electromagnetic Fields,

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_347_en.pdf

Transport and Environment (T&E) is the principal environmental organisation campaigning on sustainable transport at the EU level in Brussels. Established in 1990, our primary focus is on European transport and environmental policy but our work in Brussels is supported by 50 member organisations working across the EU to promote an environmentally sound approach to transport. Website: www.transportenvironment.org

Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) aims to raise awareness of how environmental protection and sustainability improves health and to empower the health community to contribute their expertise to policy making. Since its inception, HEAL's membership has grown to include a diverse network of more than 67 citizens', patients', women's, health professionals' and environmental organizations across Europe which together have a strong track record in increasing public and expert engagement in both EU debates and the decision-making process. Website: www.env-health.org

The European Environmental Bureau (EEB) is Europe's largest federation of environmental citizens' organisations. We stand for environmental justice, sustainable development and participatory democracy. Our aim is to ensure the EU secures a healthy environment and rich biodiversity for all. Website: www.eeb.org