

April 2012

Briefing

New EU vehicle noise limits

Context

On 9 December 2011, the Commission published a proposal for a Regulation on the sound levels of motor vehicles. The proposal, if adopted by the Parliament and the Council, will replace the existing Vehicle Noise directive (70/157/EEC). With the adoption of the new law, slightly tighter noise emission limits for cars, vans, lorries and buses will be adopted and the noise testing method will be updated.

The proposal is currently being considered in the European Parliament by the Environment Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) Committee with opinions being provided by the Transport and Tourism (TRAN) and Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) committees. It will also be considered by Ministers under the Competitiveness Council later in 2012.

What's the problem?

Traffic noise is one of the most widespread environmental problems in the European Union. Noise interferes with people's daily activities at school, at work, at home and during leisure time. It causes sleep disturbance, hearing damage, even cardiovascular disease; and hinders performance at work and children's learningⁱ. Studies have revealed that fifty thousand deathsⁱⁱ and approaching a quarter of a million cases of cardiovascular disease every year in Europe are linked to traffic noise. For the first time, noise has also been linked to an increased stroke risk: in Denmark, 5% of all stroke cases are caused by traffic noiseⁱⁱⁱ. In terms of the burden on health, environmental noise is second only to air pollution according to the World Health Organisation.

Noise standards for road vehicles have not been updated for 20 years and had little impact on noise levels adjacent to roads. Improved standards are long overdue but the current proposal fails to adequately deliver the health benefits and cost-savings that are possible by reducing noise from vehicles at the source. Proposed amendments by the motor industry would significantly weaken the inadequate proposals of the Commission. With the 6 EU Environment Action Programme and the EU Environmental Noise Directive^{iv}, the European Parliament and the Member States have agreed to reduce noise. A more effective implementation of the vehicle noise standards would provide a significant opportunity to improve the health and quality of life of EU citizens.

What are the benefits of reducing vehicle noise?

Cutting road noise levels by just 3 decibels is equivalent to halving the level of traffic. This change would deliver a major improvement in the health and quality of life of the vast majority of European citizens who live in towns and cities or near major roads. A 3 decibel reduction is quickly and easily achievable through technologies already readily available to

car and truck manufacturers. Nearly 1 in 4 of the cars and 1 in 3 of the light trucks tested over the past 5 years already meet the strictest standards proposed by the Commission.

Failing to tackle noise from vehicles at source requires national governments, local authorities and homeowners to install noise barriers or sound insulation to homes and public buildings. Quieter vehicles reduce the need for expensive noise abatement and would increase property values, since homes in noisy areas are less attractive to potential buyers.

The benefit of stringent noise limits for vehicles would outweigh the costs by a factor of over thirty to one^v.

What will the new regulation involve?

The Commission's proposal^{vi} would reduce the level for car noise by 4 decibels and lorry noise by 3 decibels in two steps from 2014 and 2017 (if the regulation is adopted in 2012). But overall road noise would not fall by as much and the reduction will be inadequate to protect health.

Initially the new standards only apply to entirely new types of vehicles, so have no effect on current models. The standards would only affect which vehicles can be sold from 2019. The new limits would be 68 decibels for cars, 70 decibels for vans and 78 decibels for lorries. The regulation will also introduce a new noise test method for vehicles.

What should change?

Transport & Environment, the European Environmental Bureau and the Health and Environment Alliance have identified a five step plan to strengthen the Commission's proposal. The proposals are to:

1. Bring forward the benefits of the new law by accelerating the introduction of the revised standards, with Step 1 to be enforced in 2013 and Step 2 in 2015;
2. Set out a pathway for further noise reductions, by introducing Step 3 standards in 2020 which are 2 decibels lower for all vehicle classes (compared to Step 2 limits);
3. Ensure testing is representative of real world noise emissions, such as by adjusting limit values for trucks by -1 decibel to account for ultra-quiet tyres used in the test but never used on the road;
4. Require noise information to be available and clearly displayed at points of sale and in promotional material for vehicles and public access to all test data for full transparency;
5. Introduce stricter limits for highly intrusive peak noise levels at 90 decibels, such as when an engine is revved.

www.transportenvironment.org/what-we-do/vehicle-noise

References

ⁱ WHO press release and report available 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>

ⁱⁱ CE Delft (2007) *Traffic noise reduction in Europe: Health effects, social costs and technical and policy options to reduce road and rail traffic noise*, den Boer, Schrotten, Delft, August 2007. Available from: http://www.transportenvironment.org/Publications/prep_hand_out/lid/495

ⁱⁱⁱ Sørensen, M. et al. (2011) "Road traffic noise and stroke: a prospective cohort study", *European Heart Journal*, doi: 10.1093/eurheartj/ehq466 First published online: January 25, 2011.

^{iv} EU 6th EAP, Decision No 1600/2002/EC and Environmental Noise Directive 2002/49/EC.

^v TNO (2012) Reduction of vehicle noise emission – Technological potential and impacts

^{vi} For further information on the Vehicle Noise Directive see: http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/automotive/environment/noise/index_en.htm