

# A Prescription for a Healthy Planet

Speaker notes - Androulla Vassiliou, EU Health Commissioner

*European launch on 6 October 2009. 12.00- 14.00. Boulevard Charlemagne, 28, Brussels*

I would like to welcome you here today – and to thank the Health Environmental Alliance (HEAL) and Health Care without Harm (HCWH) for taking this important and excellent initiative of launching a "prescription for a healthy planet".

Environmental determinants are major contributing factors to disease. They also impose significant burdens on health budgets.

Climate change is a major issue for all EU policy areas, and it is clear that its impact on human, animal and plant health will be of massive importance to citizens in years to come.

In recent years we have witnessed an upsurge of extreme weather events such as floods, windstorms and heat waves.

And we have seen changes in the extent and manner of transmission of certain infectious human and animal diseases.

Stronger effects of Ultra Violet radiation; increased exposure to air pollution and air allergens; heat and cold-related deaths – these and other phenomena have been recognised as climate change-related.

In order to respond effectively to such disruptive threats, the European Commission, in addition to the ambitious mitigation policy we have in place, has developed a White Paper on adaptation.

This includes important policy elements relating to human, animal and plant health, which have been developed in much greater detail in a separate Commission Staff Working Document.

I think it is important to spell out what mechanisms we have in place, and identify those areas that we still need to develop, under the existing legal frameworks and with the support of our current financial mechanisms.

Where possible, we seek to create added-value at EU level, to support, for example, reinforced surveillance of human and animal diseases, and to propose greater support through the EU health programme, for climate change and health work.

Diseases affecting humans, animals and plants could progress in a negative way as a result of climate change.

We need to think about how to bolster our surveillance of communicable diseases in particular, together with the Member State authorities and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. This will have to be matched by support for implementation and capacity development towards the control of communicable diseases and the effects of extreme events.

We are already working with Member State authorities on the preparedness plans for major health events and generic issues.

Extreme weather health action plans will need to be integrated into the preparedness planning of health authorities in order to help Member States assess their own health-related vulnerabilities to climate change and to develop health-related adaptation strategies.

We saw a practical example of this in relation to the heat wave in France in the summer of 2003, where health systems were severely stressed from dealing with such a major climatic event. This experience has now been integrated into France's planning for such events, and can serve as a good example for others to follow.

Our Health Security Committee has now established a section dealing with generic preparedness planning. Later this year it will adopt guidelines to assist Member States in developing their national preparation. In addition, this Committee follows modelling projects carried out by the Joint Research Centre to estimate evolution of health threats, including those caused by climate change.

It is also important to recognise that we will need to devote particular attention to vulnerable social groups. Further efforts towards identifying efficient health measures and public health responses, including strengthening emergency medical services, early warning, education and outreach to vulnerable population groups are amongst the next key steps to be taken at European level. This aspect will also be included in our work on Health Inequalities.

Several services in the health sector need to work together. Human, animal and plant health surveillance bodies will need to look at sharing knowledge and intelligence bases, such as epidemiological, meteorological and entomological data, or integrating water and air quality records and many other information sources across Europe.

We saw the importance of this recently with the arrival of Chikungunya in Italy and Spain, following the spread of the carrier mosquito in continental Europe for the first time. I could also mention the attack of pinewoods in Portugal by the so-called pinewood nematode, the introduction into Europe of the red palm weevil, and the spreading of the bluetongue disease in animals to most parts of Europe.

I would also mention that the Commission is working with WHO Euro – currently delivering a significant effort on the European strategy on climate change and health.

The Commission has also developed further recommendations to step up animal disease surveillance and control, already envisaged by the Community Animal Health Strategy, and the control of plant disease, in relation to the climate induced changes.

Through the Community policies I have mentioned, and by making best use of our financing mechanisms, we can assist Member States in responding to climate change challenges in the public health field.

In particular, the financial possibilities offered through Community programmes such as the Health Programme should be fully exploited to develop knowledge and the sharing of best practice.

I would encourage the exploration of links between extreme climate events and chronic disease, such as respiratory, allergic and cardiovascular disease, for instance – an area where our knowledge base could be improved.

I should also mention the substantial resources available under the EU Research Programme. I will ensure that health topics continue to receive good coverage in the work programmes for future research.

Ladies and gentlemen, **now** is the time to act.

We need to work together and ensure that we have in Europe the best mitigation and adaptation policies in place. In this respect, I have great hopes and expectations for the forthcoming Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen.

But, without needing to wait for international agreements, we must not forget that each organisation and every citizen can also contribute by substantially reducing their own environmental and climate footprint.

The "Prescription for a healthy planet" will make a substantial contribution to this end in mobilising and raising awareness of environmental and health issues at a critical time for the future of not only humans but of all life on our planet.

Thank you.

**End**