



PRESS RELEASE

NGOs urge Commission to come forward with a second EU Environment and Health Action Plan

1 July 2010 - The European Union's role in protecting health through environmental policy could be enhanced by a visionary second European Union Environment and Health Action Plan, according to Genon Jensen, Executive Director, Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL).

"With growing evidence that many chronic illnesses, such as respiratory disease and cancer, are related to air and chemical pollution, the European Union can continue to deliver real value by tackling the environmental factors that contribute to ill-health and an unhealthy planet," she said. This would require a second European Environment and Health Action Plan (EHAP) as soon as possible.

Ms Jensen's recommendation was made at the "Environment and Health and EU policy" session of the European Commission's Open Health Forum meeting in Brussels. (1) (2) The session was co-organised by HEAL and the European Federation of Allergy and Airway Diseases Patients Association (EFA).

The first Environment and Health Action Plan (EHAP 2004-2010) helped ensure that more targeted research on environmental impacts addressed priority diseases. A second plan would make good use of this research for revising environmental policies.

The EU's sixth research framework programme guided by the first EHAP provided approximately 200 million Euro for environment and health projects (2002-2006). (3) Investment continues in the current seventh programme with important results expected to guide policy change over the next years. For example, the ESCAPE project on air pollution will provide answers in 2012 on how poor air quality affects respiratory disease, heart disease and cancer. (4) The findings could be used to improve air quality controls.

Improvements in air quality are particularly significant in producing benefits for health. According to European Commission estimates, air pollution is responsible for 310,000 premature deaths in Europe each year. "Children with asthma and older people with respiratory problems are more vulnerable to the effects of air pollution," said Ms Susanna Palkonen, European Federation of Allergy and Airway Diseases Patients Associations (EFA). "As a result of climate change, the number of heatwaves, which are associated with peaks in pollution, are expected to rise."

A second EHAP would allow the EU to support Member States to fulfil their commitments in the 2010 World Health Organization (WHO) Parma Declaration which sets deadlines and targets for improving children's environmental health, such as increasing access to safe drinking water, improving air quality, reducing exposure to tobacco smoke and hazardous chemicals, and reducing accidents. (5)

The second EHAP could also capitalise on the European health community's growing interest in EU environmental policy making as part of their wider prevention strategies. For example, the International Association of Health Insurer's Societies (AIM) and its members across Europe have recently pledged to better understand environmental effects and increase participation in evaluating environment and health policies. (6)

The NGO backing for a second EHAP supports the European Commission's assessment in its Progress Report in March 2010 which said that the first EHAP has provided "added value"; a foundation for reducing the environmental burden of disease; and, a means to highlight the positive benefits to health from a more sustainable and cleaner environment. (6)

The NGO position also reflects the concerns of the European public. A recent European public opinion poll shows the extent to which people consider environmental causes are contributing to ill-health. The European Commission's Special Eurobarometer Survey No. 347, which appeared earlier this month, indicates that 65% of respondents consider that chemicals affect their health "to a large extent". (8)

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Notes to journalists

1. EU Open Health Forum, Together for Health - A strategy for the EU 2020, 29-30 June 2010, http://ec.europa.eu/health/interest_groups/eu_health_forum/open_forum/2010/index_en.htm
2. Recommendations are available on the HEAL website www.env-health.org Publications
3. European Commission Research, Environment and Health, http://ec.europa.eu/research/environment/index_en.cfm?pg=health
4. European study of cohorts for air pollution effects (ESCAPE) <http://www.escapeproject.eu/>
5. 2010 World Health Organization (WHO), Parma Declaration on Environment and Health, Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health of the WHO European Region: Parma Declaration on Environment and Health, March 2010: http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/78608/E93618.pdf
6. The Association Internationale de la Mutualité has recently prepared a Declaration on Health and environment: Time to act: http://www.aim-mutual.org/uploads/fmanager/news/2010/aim_pr_declaration_environment_and_health.pdf
7. EU Commission Progress report on the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Environment and Health, March 2010: <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/10/st08/st08201.en10.pdf>
8. The Special Eurobarometer 347 on electromagnetic fields released on 24 June 2010 includes opinions from the question: To what extent do you think each of the following affects your health? http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm Top Five: Chemicals - 65% think it is affecting their health "to a large extent"; Quality of food - 61%; Quality of drinking water - 53%; Quality of outdoor air - 52%; Dumping of waste - 49%.

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) aims to raise awareness of how environmental protection improves health. It achieves this by creating opportunities for better representation of citizens' and health experts' perspectives in the environment and health-related European policy-making. Our membership includes a diverse network of more than 60 citizens', patients', women's, health professionals' and environmental organisations across Europe and has a strong track record in increasing public and expert engagement in both EU debates and the decision-making process.

The European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients Associations (EFA) is a European network of allergy, asthma and COPD patient organizations. EFA was created to combine the forces of national patient associations on asthma and allergy for results at European level and to improve the health and quality of life of people in Europe with those diseases. Serving the interests of allergy and airways patients at the national level is the primary responsibility of individual members and EFA represents member organisations at European level and by facilitates collaboration, sharing of knowledge and experiences.