

BRUSSELS, 13 FEBRUARY 2018

To: Health Ministers of the EU-28

Cc: Environment Ministers of the EU-28; Mr. Karmenu Vella, European Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries; Mr. Vytenis Andriukaitis, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety; Mr. Miguel Cañete, European Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy

Open letter

**Call to take up decisive action for clean air in the EU by multiplying health sector engagement**

Dear Minister,

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is a leading European not-for-profit organisation working for better health through a healthy environment. Protecting people's health from air pollution outdoors and indoors, especially those of vulnerable groups such as children or those already suffering from disease, has been a priority of our 75 member organisation's alliance since HEAL's founding fifteen years ago [1].

We would like to express our deep concern that despite legal requirements and political commitments in the EU-28, including legally binding air quality standards, measures to clean up the air at national and local level have been inadequate. In the EU-28, poor air quality leads to nearly 400,000 early deaths per year, which is about 15 times higher than fatalities from road traffic accidents [2]. The health impacts of air pollution are completely unacceptable because they are easily preventable.

HEAL would like to urge you as health minister to give greater priority to preventing disease and ill-health from air pollution in your national efforts, particularly when it comes to keeping the EU's air standards. Currently, 23 out of 28 countries are breaching these standards, which are for some pollutants already less stringent than what the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends, and the EU Commission has started legal proceedings [3] [4].

You could demonstrate your commitment for air quality for example by setting up a high-level inter-ministerial working group that will consider air quality benefits or threats for all relevant laws, strategies and measures or by being involved in your country's activities to tackle climate change with implementing the Paris Agreement, promoting those measures that will bring the greatest benefit to health, air quality and the climate (e.g. in national climate and energy plans).

In recent years, tackling air pollution has received greater attention in the health sector.

In 2015, the World Health Assembly adopted the first ever resolution on this issue, urging member states to redouble their efforts to identify, address, and prevent health effects of air pollution; to enable health systems to take a leading role; to facilitate research and improve databases and surveillance; as well as to develop inter-sectoral collaboration [5]. The recently adopted Ostrava Declaration also includes health ministers' commitment for actions to meet the World Health Organization's air quality guidelines [6]. In addition, a recent Lancet report on pollution and health highlighted the huge health impacts from pollution globally [7], and the role prevention can play.

We invite you to bring this and other evidence on health effects of air pollution into the WHO Action Plans for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), where this global health threat is largely absent at present [8].

HEAL looks forward to working with you to increase public awareness and health engagement in view of the forthcoming WHO First Global Conference on Air Pollution and Health 30 October – 1 November 2018 and the WHO DG report on Health, Environment and Climate Change, endorsed by the February WHO Executive Board [9].

You can find further information on air pollution and health as well as concrete policy recommendations in the attached document outlining HEAL's demands for clean air in the European Region which will be available in additional languages in the coming months.

Yours sincerely,



Genon K. Jensen  
Executive Director  
Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)

[1] HEAL members working for clean air include the European Federation for Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients Associations (EFA), the European Respiratory Society (ERS), the European Lung Foundation (ELF), Association Internationale de la Mutualite (AIM) and Belgian national members, European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), Leefmilieu, Inter-Environnement Wallonie, International Society of Doctors for the environment (ISDE) and ISDE Austria, Sweden and Italy, International Network on Children's Health, Environment and Safety (INCHES), and others. For more information on HEAL's activities see chapter 10.5: The role of civil society and organisations by M. van den Bosch, C. E. Falvo, G. Jensen, J. Karliner, R. Stancliffe in: Oxford Textbook of Nature and Public Health. The role of nature in improving the health of a population, Jan. 2018:

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/oxford-textbook-of-nature-and-public-health-9780198725916?cc=it&lang=en&#>

[2] See speech by EU Commissioner Vella at Paris Clean Air Forum, Nov 2017: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/vella/announcements/clean-air-forum-paris-16th-november-2017\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/vella/announcements/clean-air-forum-paris-16th-november-2017_en)

[3] In January, EU Commissioner Vella convened ministers of 9 EU member states Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom to present solutions for keeping the EU's air quality standards, as a last opportunity before those member states would be referred to the Court of Justice.

The EU Commission has taken legal action against Member States over poor air quality since 2008, focussing initially on particulate matter (PM10), for which the compliance deadline was 2005, and nitrogen dioxide (NO2), for which the compliance deadline was 2010. To date legal action on NO2 involves 13 Member States, with ongoing infringement cases against Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom, and Luxembourg. As regards PM10 particles, there are currently cases against 16 Member States (Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Slovakia, and Slovenia), and two of these cases (against Bulgaria and Poland) have been brought before the Court of Justice of the EU. The European Court of Justice has passed a ruling as regards PM10 ex-ceedances in Bulgaria in April 2017. See: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-18-348\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-348_en.htm)

[4] WHO ambient air quality guidelines: [http://www.who.int/phe/health\\_topics/outdoorair/outdoorair\\_agg/en/](http://www.who.int/phe/health_topics/outdoorair/outdoorair_agg/en/)

Most importantly, the EU's standard of 25 µg/m3 for the annual limit of PM2.5 is less strict than what WHO recommends, which is 10 µg/m3. See: [http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/air\\_health.pdf](http://env-health.org/IMG/pdf/air_health.pdf)

[5] <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/air-quality/news/news/2015/05/air-quality-and-health-resolution-adopted-at-the-sixty-eighth-world-health-assembly>

[6] <http://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/events/events/2017/06/sixth-ministerial-conference-on-environment-and-health/read-more>

[7] <http://gahp.net/>

[http://www.env-health.org/IMG/pdf/18.10.2017\\_-\\_eu\\_backgrounder.pdf](http://www.env-health.org/IMG/pdf/18.10.2017_-_eu_backgrounder.pdf)

[8] [http://www.who.int/nmh/events/ncd\\_action\\_plan/en/](http://www.who.int/nmh/events/ncd_action_plan/en/)

[9] [http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/EB142/B142\\_12-en.pdf](http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB142/B142_12-en.pdf)

*The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is a leading European not-for-profit organization addressing how the environment affects health in the European Union. With the support of its over 70 member organizations, which represent 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.*