

BRUSSELS, 17 April 2018

To: Chancellor Sebastian Kurz

CC: Donald Tusk, President of the European Council
Elisabeth Köstinger, Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism
Beate Hartinger-Klein, Federal Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection
Miguel Arias Cañete, European Commissioner for Climate Action & Energy
Karmenu Vella, European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

RE : Open letter on environmental health priorities for Austria's upcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union

Dear Chancellor Sebastian Kurz,

In a few months Austria will be taking over the presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU). As Chancellor, your role will be crucial in driving the EU's work in a variety of fields that affect over 500 million people across the EU, ensuring cooperation among member states and preparing the future of Europe.

There has been a long consensus on the clear added value of the European Union action for the protection of the environment and its related public health benefits, and Austria has a long record of positive and ambitious contributions in this respect.

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is a leading European not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects human health in the European Union (EU) and beyond. Our alliance brings together over 75 member organisations working on preventing environmental and climate threats to health, with a focus on clean air, hazardous chemicals, climate mitigation and clean energy.

During the Austrian presidency of the EU, HEAL encourages you to show leadership to advance on a safe environment that benefits people's health and an adequate allocation of resources to climate and environment measures. In order to do so, we believe that your focus on security should include targeting health, environment and climate aspects.

1/ Security: a European Union that protects health and the environment

- **From climate threats**

The UNFCCC negotiations (COP24) in Katowice, Poland, will fall under your Presidency, and are a unique opportunity to make decisive progress on the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

From the health perspective, 15 years after the European heat wave with a death toll of 70,000 people, ambitious national measures to bring down CO₂ emissions and achieve a swift decarbonisation are

urgently needed. The Austrian Presidency should therefore rally and encourage EU member states to put forward ambitious and health enhancing national climate and energy plans, which will promote a coal phase outⁱ in favour of renewable energy forms, higher energy efficiency rates, renovation of the EU's building stock as well as address energy poverty and sustainable and healthy transport.

In addition, we urge you to demonstrate this climate leadership in your planned exchanges with Western Balkans policy-makers.

- **From hazardous substances**

Currently only a fraction of the over 100,000 chemicals sold on the European market are thoroughly evaluated for health and environmental impacts, and even fewer regulated. Various individual and groups of chemicals – such as endocrine disrupting chemicalsⁱⁱ or flame retardants – are currently overlooked by the European regulatory frameworks. None of the existing regulations addresses the real-life effects of the cocktail of chemicals that daily life offersⁱⁱⁱ.

However, the timing of your presidency carries significant opportunities to improve European regulations on hazardous substances. The end of 2018 will coincide with the deadline for delivering on an EU strategy for a non-toxic environment according to the 7th Environment Action Program (7 EAP). The European Parliament and citizens expect ambitious commitments that will bring major public health wins, which will also boost industrial innovation through safer substitution. The recent REACH review exercise and the ongoing fitness check of the non-REACH chemicals regulations provide important building blocks towards the phasing out toxic substances from our environment and economy.

We count on your government to play a steering role for action from the European Commission and member states as to deliver the promised strategy with an adequate level of ambition in time. The October 2017 declaration from France, Italy and Luxemburg on “A more transparent, more effective and safer assessment of chemicals substances” could form the basis of such discussion and be followed-up on at the Council, for example under the form of Council Conclusions on chemicals.

- **From air pollution**

During your presidency, work will advance on the fitness check of the EU's ambient air quality directive (DR 2008/50). At the same time, the WHO is organising its first global conference on air pollution and health, on 30th October - 1st November.

Air pollution comes from multiple and combined sources and is the number one environmental threat to our health in Europe and globally, leading to 400.000 early deaths in the EU-28. Meanwhile, 23 out of 28 member states do not comply with EU air quality standards.

We count on your presidency to fully support efforts towards an increase in political commitment for clean indoor and outdoor air on the side of EU member states, which is currently undoubtedly lacking. We offer our expertise^{iv} and wide membership and partnership base and health led advocacy campaigns, such as Unmask My City^v, to contribute to your efforts.

2/ Budget: a European Union that invests in environmental health

- **Aligning budgetary priorities with objectives set in the 7th Environment Action Program**

For now, emissions from coal power plants in Europe contribute significantly to the burden of disease from environmental pollution. Recent figures show that European Union-wide impacts amount to more than 18,200 premature deaths, about 8,500 new cases of chronic bronchitis, and over 4 million lost working days each year. The economic costs of the health impacts from coal combustion in Europe are estimated at up to €42.8 billion per year.

Besides, human exposure to preventable environmental chemicals is currently resulting in health costs of 10% of global GDP.

It is of utmost importance to make efficient use of the European taxpayers' money, to boost health, environmental and climate protection. The EU budget should therefore be a representation of the EU's priorities and its values. As an obvious prerequisite for policy coherence, those priorities should be in line with the objectives set in the 7th Environment Action Program.

Such a strategy would decrease the strain on healthcare budgets and economic productivity from our current unhealthy ways of life.

- **Allocating and relocating adequate resources to climate and environment measures**

When negotiating the future of the EU budget as well as upcoming environmental, energy, farming, research, trade, transport and investment EU political priorities, we ask you to consider the following three environmental health concerns.

Prior to any EU public investment, environmental and health impact assessments should be conducted and the results used in setting up the investment priorities.

Equally, phasing out subsidies for fossil fuels as they result in health costs up to 8 times their amount in the EU alone, and ending financial support of chemicals in goods and foods that are directly or indirectly toxic to current and future generations is urgently needed in order for Europe to transition to a post-toxic near future with a sustainable economic model.

Finally, prior environmental health impact assessment and divestment from harmful subsidies cannot fully reach the target of a non-toxic future without significant tools and funding to remedy pollution that has already accumulated in the ecosystems over the years and decades.

- **Acknowledging the value for money of the LIFE program through increasing its budget**

As a result, HEAL considers it key that the next EU funding cycle acknowledges the value for money of the LIFE program, the high return rates and potential for job creation from green investments.

This can only be reflected through a significant increase in the LIFE budget to at least 1% of the total EU

budget in order to enable the investments required to ultimately achieve EU's environment and climate change objectives.

Finally, in many countries NGOs and public bodies as main applicants of projects may face severe difficulties to mobilise domestic funding, which constitutes a risk for the uptake of LIFE. This can be solved with an increase in co-financing rates to 75% especially, in Member States with lower GDP.

We look forward to an ambitious Austrian presidency for health and the environment. We are available and looking forward to answering any question you or your team may have and working closely together on health and environment during the second semester of 2018.

With kind regards,



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

Contact: Sophie Perroud, Policy Coordinator at HEAL – sophie@env-health.org

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is a leading European not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects health in the European Union (EU). With the support of more than 70 member organisations, HEAL brings independent expertise and evidence from the health community to different decision-making processes. Our broad alliance represents health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, doctors, nurses, cancer and asthma groups, citizens, women's groups, youth groups, environmental NGOs, scientists and public health research institutes.

ⁱ HEAL's reports: [Unpaid Health Bill](#) (also in [DE](#)), [Europe's Dark Cloud](#) (also summary in [DE](#)). See also HEAL's recommendations for [five EU actions to take Europe beyond coal](#)

ⁱⁱ HEAL acts as the secretariat of the [EDC-Free Europe campaign](#), does advocacy work and regularly publishes reports: [Health costs in the European union, how much is related to EDCs?](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ A recent HEAL briefing illustrates this flaws in the carpet sector. See [Detoxing Carpet - Pathways Towards Safe And Recyclable Carpet In A Truly Circular Economy](#) (also in [DE](#))

Another example is this [Study for the strategy for a non-toxic environment of the 7th Environment Action Programme commissioned by the European Commission](#)

^{iv} [HEAL's demands for clean air in the European Region](#)

^v HEAL's involvement in the [Unmask my city campaign](#)