

Political priorities of President Ursula von der Leyen and  
mission letter for Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice-President-designate  
for the European Green Deal

**HEAL questions for European Parliament hearings**

Legislature 2019-2024

Your [mission letter](#) mentions:

- Cross-cutting priorities
  - Be ready to take swift action if EU law is breached
  - Make Europe world's first climate-neutral continent
  - A just transition for the most affected
  
- Lead on
  - Presenting within the first 100 days of the Von der Leyen Commission the European Green Deal
  - Proposing within the first 100 days of the Von der Leyen Commission the first European Climate law
  - Instilling a new climate culture in Europe through a European Climate Pact involving civil society, schools and other stakeholders in behaviour change across society
  
- Coordinate
  - The Von der Leyen Commission's work on the new Just Transition Fund
  - The Von der Leyen Commission's work on the zero-pollution ambition, requiring a wide-ranging approach looking at air, transport, food and hazardous chemicals among other key areas
  - The Von der Leyen Commission's work on reducing the carbon footprint of Europe's transport sector
  - The Von der Leyen Commission's work on the circular economy and farm to fork strategy for sustainable food, making real step change in food production, food safety and packaging policy

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## QUESTIONS

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### In order to deliver on the European Green Deal:

#### A healthy planet for healthy people

Harmful chemicals are now ubiquitous in the environment but preventing environmental pollution can save lives and reduce the toll of diseases. European governments have committed to an 8th Environment Action Programme (EAP). One of the priority objectives of the current 7th EAP expiring in 2020 is to safeguard the Union's citizens from environment-related pressures and risks to health and well-being.

**Question 1** - The EU's Environmental Action Programmes have been essential to define and guide the environmental strategies and measures. In the 8th EAP, what will be your main policy proposals to ensure that a zero-pollution strategy really reduces the toll of diseases?

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### In order to deliver on the zero-pollution ambition:

#### Zero pollution, zero victim from pollution

President-elect von der Leyen committed to a cross-cutting zero-pollution strategy that will: "protect citizens' health from environmental degradation and pollution, address air and water quality, hazardous chemicals, industrial emissions, pesticides and endocrine disruptors". Health groups think that the primary focus of the zero-pollution strategy should be on pollution prevention and the emphasis of the precautionary and polluter-pays principles.

**Question 1** - How will you contribute to the development and implementation of this strategy, and what kind of actions will you include to protect especially those most vulnerable to the impact of pollution, such as pregnant women, children, those already sick, or the poor? How will you address the delay between exposure to pollution and the onset of disease and ill-health, which can happen decades after the exposure? What do you propose to address the problem of accumulation of pollution and persistency of substances?

**Question 2** - What do you propose for ending environmentally harmful subsidies and ensuring compensations for patients that are victims of exposure to hazardous substances, either in the zero-pollution strategy or in other policy-measures?

More resources: HEAL briefing on a non-toxic strategy ([EN](#), [FR](#), [NL](#)); HEAL Fossil Fuel Subsidies & Health report ([EN](#), [DE](#), [PL](#))

## Clean up the air we breathe

Air pollution is the number one environmental threat to health in Europe, leading to 400,000 early deaths each year. It exacerbates chronic illnesses and causes huge health, environmental and economic costs. In a resolution in spring 2019, the European Parliament [called for action for clean air](#) in Europe.

**Question 1** - In order to clean up the air we breathe outside, what immediate actions - including in the European Green Deal - do you foresee to cut emissions at source and ensure that existing EU air quality standards are respected in all Member States?

**Question 2** - The World Health Organization has set the gold standard for air quality, based on a thorough review of the evidence by hundreds of experts. For key air pollutants, the EU's standards are less strict than what is needed to protect health. Do you commit to working to align EU legislation with the latest World Health Organisation guidelines, expected in 2020/2021?

**Question 3** - Indoor air quality and indoor environments have received far less political attention than outdoor air, even though people spend the majority of their time indoors. Which measures will you propose to clean up indoor air? How will you tackle the worrying fact that pollution from outside travels inside into schools and other buildings where vulnerable groups of the population spend their time?

**Question 4** - What will you do to tackle air pollution in EU neighbouring states, especially the Western Balkans, which travels to Europe and harms people's health?

More resources: HEAL infographic on clean air for health (available in [EN](#), [DE](#)); HEAL [briefing on healthy buildings](#); HEAL Citizen science investigation [Healthy Air, Healthier Children](#) highlighting the indoor air quality dimension in air quality and climate efforts ([FR](#), [DE](#), [BG](#), [SP](#)); HEAL report on [Chronic Coal Pollution](#) and opportunities for EU action on the Western Balkans to improve health and economies across Europe

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### In order to deliver on the first European Climate law:

#### Climate action for health

The World Health Organization and the leading medical journal the Lancet state that climate change is the biggest health threat of the 21st century; yet action to tackle it can provide immediate and significant health benefits, which offset the decarbonisation costs.

**Question 1** - Which measures will you support that will provide the greatest boost to health?

**Question 2** - Walking and cycling is the healthiest and most climate-friendly form of mobility, it helps to cut down on air pollution and contributes to an increased quality of life in cities. What kind of EU support do you suggest to incentivise this type of active mobility in urban areas, and help city authorities in the process of decarbonising the local transport sector?

**Question 3** - What are your proposals to better involve the health sector in climate action?

More resources: HEAL [infographic on climate change and health](#)

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**In order to deliver on the new Just Transition Fund:**

**Protection of the most vulnerable**

A polluted environment is most dangerous for children, older people, those already sick and people living in poverty.

**Question 1** - How will you end environmental health inequalities and protect the most vulnerable?

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**In order to deliver on energy and health:**

**Healthy, renewable and efficient energy**

Burning coal for energy production is the most polluting and most health-harming form of power generation, leading to high health costs. Europe is still a major global producer and consumer of lignite (brown coal), despite all objectives for climate mitigation.

**Question 1** - How will you contribute to providing Europeans with healthy energy, and put an end to Europe's addiction to coal?

**Question 2** - What will you do to speed up action in member states to end subsidies to coal?

**Question 3** - How will you work on decarbonising the power sector in EU neighbouring states, especially the Western Balkans, where coal power generation is the dominant energy source, and where heavy Chinese investment is taking place for more coal?

**Question 4** - Healthy Buildings: How will you tackle energy poverty in Europe and what kind of instruments and financial incentives will you propose so that energy efficiency renovations start with those buildings where vulnerable groups spend their time?

More resources: HEAL [campaign on healthy energy](#); Healthy Energy briefing ([EN](#), DE, [PL](#), [CZ](#)); Lignite briefing ([EN](#), [TK](#), [DE](#)); Chronic Coal report ([EN](#), [SB](#), [RO](#))

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**In order to reduce the carbon footprint our Europe's transport sector:**

**Healthy mobility**

Fossil fuelled cars, buses and trucks are noisy, pollute the air and threaten our health.

**Question 1** - How will your action contribute to healthy mobility in the EU?

More resources: HEAL [project on healthy transport in Germany](#)

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In order to make real steps in changing Europe's packaging policy:

### Halting chemicals in food contact materials from putting our health at risk

Nobody should have to worry about toxic substances moving from packaging into our food. Yet, because of current loopholes in the European legislation on food contact materials, the objective to provide a high level of protection for health is not fulfilled. Consumer testing routinely finds toxic substances in food packaging (e.g. [fluorinated](#) compounds in pizza boxes made of recycled paper, suspected [carcinogens](#) in disposable cups and straws) and it is estimated that plastic food packaging alone contains at least [63 chemicals](#) toxic for our health.

Numerous chemicals involved in the processing and packaging of our food are not tested for toxicity; chemicals identified as substances of very high concern (SVHCs) such as bisphenol A are tolerated in food contact materials, and endocrine disruption is not routinely assessed. Finally, only 5 out of the 17 types of existing food contact materials are regulated at the European level.

**Question 1** - Preliminary results of the current evaluation of the food contact materials legislation reveal significant loopholes that put the health of Europeans at risk. What are your proposals to remedy this situation, in particular to ensure that all materials used in the processing and packaging of our food are regulated at the European level, and that all chemicals involved are tested for health hazard such as endocrine disruption?

More resources: [HEAL briefing](#) on chemicals in food contact materials ([summary](#))

*The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is the leading not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects human health in the European Union (EU) and beyond. HEAL works to shape laws and policies that promote planetary and human health and protect those most affected by pollution, and raise awareness on the benefits of environmental action for health.*

*HEAL's over 70 member organisations include international, European, national and local groups of health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, patients, citizens, women, youth, and environmental experts representing over 200 million people across the 53 countries of the WHO European Region.*

*As an alliance, HEAL brings independent and expert evidence from the health community to EU and global decision-making processes to inspire disease prevention and to promote a toxic-free, low-carbon, fair and healthy future.*