



BRUSSELS, 29 January 2021

To: António Costa, Portuguese Prime Minister

CC: João Pedro Matos Fernandes, Portuguese minister for environment and climate action; Marta Temido, Portuguese health minister; Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for the EU Green Deal; Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries; Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety; Thierry Breton, European Commissioner for the Internal Market

Subject : Advancing on the zero pollution ambition, especially in recovery financing and investments, under the Portuguese Presidency

Dear Prime Minister Costa,

Since 2021 started, Portugal has taken over from Germany the role of President of the Council of the EU for six months. Your Presidency coincides with the opening of the new budgetary cycle in the EU (2021-2027), and the implementation of the Next Generation EU – the block's economic recovery package addressing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic economic effects, which will play a central part in your [programme](#).

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is a leading European not-for-profit organisation working for better health through a healthier environment. With our over 90 member organisations across the European region, we are ready to work with you during the Portuguese EU Presidency to make a healthy, sustainable and just recovery a reality. We welcome that your programme is giving a prominent space to public health, and plans to “also attach importance to environmental health”, yet we are disappointed that there is no explicit reference to the EU's zero pollution ambition.

2021 is the year when the EU starts truly implementing its Green Deal **that introduces a “do no harm” principle, which guides Member States in their resilience and recovery plans. A crucial pillar for health is the commitment to a zero pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment. We are concerned by the absence of this overarching frame in your Presidency programme**, given that the EU Commission will soon launch the EU Action Plan “Towards a Zero Pollution Ambition for air, water and soil—building a Healthier Planet for Healthier People”.

This EU Zero Pollution Ambition is extremely timely: according to the latest figures from WHO and EEA, 1 in 8 deaths in the EU are attributable to the environment. **HEAL considers that actioning the Zero Pollution Ambition is a pivotal instrument to [prevent disease](#) now and in the long run.** Last May, the World Health Organisation (WHO) published a [Manifesto for a healthy recovery](#) from COVID-19, highlighting that “decisions made in the coming months can either ‘lock in’ economic development patterns that will do permanent and escalating damage to the ecological systems that sustain all human health and livelihoods, or, if wisely taken, can promote a healthier, fairer, and greener world”. HEAL contributed to a recently published paper from the EU research consortium HERA (Health Environment Research Agenda for Europe) which synthesized and organized the research needs on the [interlinkages of the COVID-19 pandemic with Environment Climate and Health and links with the Green Deal's policy commitments](#).

Although the EU and its Member States are today facing unprecedented challenges to address the deepening social and economic consequences of the outbreak of this pandemic, the EU is equipped with the necessary tools to lead the way towards a healthy planet for healthy people.

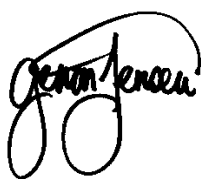
As part of a focus on the zero pollution ambition, we would like to share some **concrete steps** on advancing specific policy files during your Presidency:

- **Tackling climate change:** support trilogue negotiations to increase EU's 2030 target to 65% GHG emissions reduction as "at least 55%" is [near a miss but still a miss](#) which is expected to be adopted.
- **Tackling ambient air pollution :** [swiftly fully align EU standards on WHO guidelines](#)
- **Tackling chemical pollution and driving the transition of the chemical industry:** assess the [implementation of the Chemicals Strategy for sustainability](#) (CSS) in Environment Council conclusions to ensure speedy delivery on commitments, and to ensure that the EU's industrial strategy is in line with this CSS.
- **Setting the path for climate and environment EU policies beyond 2024:** complete the council negotiations on the [8th Environment Action Programme](#) with the European Parliament

Putting the zero pollution ambition at the center of a healthy, just and green recovery and making it a prerequisite for any recovery funding at national level will contribute immensely to protecting the health of Europeans and increasing the bloc's resilience in the face of future pandemics.

Creating a non-toxic, low carbon circular economy that promotes and protects health, resilience and our environment is within our reach. HEAL and its members look to your leadership, and are ready to work with you in this transformational time.

Yours sincerely,



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

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 90 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.

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