

22 September 2022

To: names of national Health Minister and Environment Minister

CC: mayor of capital city

Subject: Call to save lives and protect nature from air pollution with science-based EU air quality standards

Dear Minister of Health and Minister of Environment,

September 22nd marks one year since the World Health Organization (WHO), after a systematic review of the science, published new Global Air Quality Guidelines¹ with recommendations for maximum concentrations of the major air pollutants.

With this letter, we ask you to support **a full alignment with WHO recommendation in the EU's upcoming revision of its clean air standards.**

Air pollution is Europe's largest environmental risk to health, leading to an estimated 400,000 premature deaths annually.² It is also the second leading cause of death from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) after tobacco smoking, according to WHO.³ Ninety-seven percent of the urban population in the EU currently lives in areas with poor air quality.⁴

Air pollution is also a major concern for nature protection. In its Inception Impact Assessment, the Commission highlighted estimates of up to 54 billion EUR per year in costs of ecosystem impacts of air pollution. According to the assessment, eutrophication limits are being exceeded in 62% of ecosystem areas and in 73% of Natura 2000 areas across the EU territory.⁵

1

<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/345329>

2

<https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-quality-in-europe-2020-report>

3

https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/397787/Air-Pollution-and-NCDs.pdf

4

<https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/status-of-air-quality-in-Europe-2022/europes-air-quality-status-2022>

5

https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12677-Air-quality-revision-of-EU-rules_en

The cost of air pollution is estimated to be up to EUR 940 billion annually for the EU. This includes health costs related to premature death and diseases from air pollution, productivity losses due to both workdays lost and reduction in workers' productivity, crop yield losses, the deterioration of the natural landscape affecting the tourism sector, and damage to buildings.

The unacceptably high health and environmental burden from air pollution is largely preventable.

In the context of a pandemic of unprecedented nature, today's times call for a determined focus on health protection and the prevention of disease. At EU level, the publication of the legislative proposal revising EU's Ambient Air Quality Directives, which sets clean air standards, is foreseen for 26 October 2022 as part of the Zero Pollution Package. In this crucial update for public health, the Council has a unique opportunity to save lives and prevent disease on an unprecedented scale.

The new WHO recommendations now suggest considerably lower maximum concentrations for the main pollutants, most notably for particulate matter with diameter $< 2.5 \mu\text{m}$ (PM_{2.5}), which causes the greatest health burden in the EU, for which an annual concentration of $5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ is now recommended, which is a half of the previous WHO recommendation of $10 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, and five times lower than the EU's current standard of $25 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. For nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), which has come under intense scrutiny in discussions on road transport and inner-city driving bans, a new annual concentration of $10 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ is now recommended, a significant decrease from previous WHO recommendation of $40 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, which is also the current EU standard.

We call on you and your services to protect people's health from air pollution, especially that of vulnerable groups such as children or patients already suffering from disease: **in the upcoming revision of the Ambient Air Quality Directive, please support binding EU clean air standards to fully meet WHO air quality recommendations by 2030 at the latest.**

The longer the gap between science and regulation remains open, the longer the EU

will continue to fail to prevent premature deaths and air pollution related disease.
The urgency to act is clear and loud.

Many thanks in advance for your determined support.

Best regards