



Press Release

Luxembourg, 11 September 2018

Air pollution: EU citizens' health still not sufficiently protected, warn Auditors

EU action to protect human health from air pollution has not delivered its expected impact, according to a new report from the European Court of Auditors. Every year, air pollution causes about 400,000 premature deaths in the EU and hundreds of billions of euros in health-related external costs. However, these significant human and economic costs have not yet been reflected in adequate action across the Union, warn the auditors. They add that particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide and ground level ozone are the air pollutants responsible for most of the early deaths and that people in urban areas are particularly exposed.

The 2008 Ambient Air Quality Directive is the cornerstone of the EU's clean air policy, as it sets air quality standards for the concentrations of pollutants in the air. The auditors assessed the Directive's design, whether Member States had implemented it effectively and how the Commission had monitored and enforced it. Moreover, they assessed whether air quality was adequately reflected in other EU policies and supported by EU funds, and whether the public has been well informed on air quality matters.

"Air pollution is the biggest environmental risk to health in the European Union," said Janusz Wojciechowski, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. "In recent decades, EU policies have contributed to emission reductions, but air quality has not improved at the same rate and there are still considerable impacts on public health."

EU air quality standards were set almost twenty years ago, and the auditors found that some of them are much weaker than the World Health Organisation guidelines and what the latest scientific evidence suggests. While emissions of air pollutants have been decreasing, most Member States still do not comply with the EU's air quality standards and are not taking enough effective action to improve air quality, say the auditors.

There is also a risk that air pollution has been underestimated because it may not have been monitored in the right places. Air Quality Plans – a key requirement under the Ambient Air Quality Directive – have often not delivered their expected results.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at www.eca.europa.eu.

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There are limitations in the European Commission's monitoring of Member States' performance in meeting air quality targets. Its enforcement procedures so far have not ensured that Member States comply with the air quality limits set by the Directive. Despite the Commission taking legal action against many Member States and achieving favourable rulings, Member States continue to breach air quality limits frequently, say the auditors.

The auditors note that EU funding for air quality can provide useful support, but that funded projects are not always sufficiently well targeted. During their visits to Member States they did see some good projects – particularly among those supported by the EU's LIFE programme.

Air pollution is a pressing public health issue, and public awareness and information has a critical role to play in addressing it, say the auditors. Recently, citizens have been getting more involved in air quality issues and have brought cases before national courts, which in several Member States have ruled in favour of their right to clean air. Yet the auditors found that the Ambient Air Quality Directive is less explicit in protecting citizens' access to justice than some other environmental Directives. The information made available to citizens on air quality was sometimes unclear, they say.

To improve EU air quality, the auditors recommend that:

- the European Commission should take more effective action;
- the Ambient Air Quality Directive should be updated;
- air quality policy should be prioritised and mainstreamed into other EU policies;
- public awareness and information should be improved.

Notes to Editors

The ECA presents its special reports to the European Parliament and Council of the EU, as well as to other interested parties such as national parliaments, industry stakeholders and representatives of civil society. The vast majority of the recommendations we make in our reports are put into practice. This high level of take-up underlines the benefit of our work to EU citizens.

Special report 23 /2018 "Air pollution: Our health still insufficiently protected" is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages.