



Commission warns Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom of continued air pollution breaches

Brussels, 15 February 2017

The European Commission sends final warnings to Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom for failing to address repeated breaches of air pollution limits for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). NO₂ pollution is a serious health risk. Most emissions result from road traffic.

The European Commission urges 5 Member States to take action to ensure good air quality and safeguard public health.

More than 400 000 citizens die prematurely in the EU each year as a result of poor air quality. Millions more suffer from respiratory and cardiovascular diseases caused by air pollution. Persistently high levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) caused almost 70 000 premature deaths in Europe in 2013, which was almost three times the number of deaths by road traffic accidents in the same year.

EU legislation on ambient air quality ([Directive 2008/50/EC](#)) sets limit values for air pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide. In case such limit values are exceeded, Member States are required to adopt and implement air quality plans that set out appropriate measures to bring this situation to an end as soon as possible.

Today's reasoned opinion concerns persistent breaches of NO₂ limit values in:

- **Germany** (28 air quality zones, including Berlin, Munich, Hamburg and Köln);
- **France** (19 air quality zones, among them Paris, Marseille and Lyon);
- The **United Kingdom** (16 air quality zones, among them London, Birmingham, Leeds, and Glasgow);
- **Italy** (12 air quality zones, including Rome, Milan and Turin);
- **Spain** (3 air quality zones, one being Madrid and two covering Barcelona).

Possible measures to lower polluting emissions, at the same time accelerating the transition to a low-carbon economy, include reducing overall traffic volumes, the fuels used, switching to electric cars and/or adapting driving behaviour. In this context, reducing emissions from diesel-powered vehicles is an important step towards achieving compliance with EU air quality standards.

While it is up to the Member State authorities to choose the appropriate measures to address exceeding NO₂ limits, much more effort is necessary at local, regional and national levels to meet the obligations of EU rules and safeguard public health. If Member States fail to act within two months, the Commission may decide to take the matter to the Court of Justice of the EU.

Background

EU legislation on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe ([Directive 2008/50/EC](#)) sets air quality limits that cannot be exceeded anywhere in the EU, and obliges Member States to limit the exposure of citizens to harmful air pollutants.

Despite this obligation, air quality has remained a problem in many places for a number of years. In 23 out of 28 Member States air quality standards are still being exceeded – in total in over more than 130 cities across Europe.

The Commission has taken legal action against Member States over poor air quality since 2008, focussing initially on particulate matter (PM₁₀), for which the compliance deadline was 2005, and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), for which the compliance deadline was 2010.

To date legal action on NO₂ involves 12 Member States, with ongoing infringement cases against Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. Action against other Member States may follow.

Road traffic is responsible for around 40% of nitrogen oxides (NO_x) emissions in the EU. At ground-level the relative contribution of traffic is much higher (as emissions from high industrial stacks are diluted before reaching the ground). Of the total emitted NO_x from traffic, around 80% comes from diesel powered vehicles.

For More Information:

- General information on infringements proceedings in the areas of [Environment](#).
- On the overview of implementation of EU environment policies and laws in Member States, see [Environmental Implementation Review](#).
- On the key decisions of the February infringements package, please refer to the full [MEMO/17/234](#).
- On the general infringements procedure, see [MEMO/12/12 \(an info graph\)](#).
- On the [EU infringements procedure](#).

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