

Clean air in Europe: beyond the horizon?

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Abstract

The current EU limit values for PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ are far too high <http://ow.ly/E6HUR>

When the European Union (EU) set its first Air Quality Limit Values for particulate matter in outdoor air (particulate matter <10 µm in diameter (PM₁₀)) back in 1999, it promised to set a much stricter limit by 2010 [1]. The goal at the time was for an annual limit value of 20 µg·m⁻³, equivalent to the World Health Organization (WHO) Air Quality Guideline set in 2005 [2]. When it was time to do so, however, the new directive adopted in 2008 had no trace of it, and essentially preserved the limit values set in 1999, to which a rather unambitious limit value for fine particles (PM_{2.5}) was added [3]. The limit value for PM_{2.5} is an annual average of 25 µg·m⁻³, to be reached by the year 2015: 2.5 times higher than the WHO guideline value (10 µg·m⁻³), based on the science available already in 2005 [2], and twice the current standard of 12 µg·m⁻³ in the USA. The 2008 directive, however, did introduce a voluntary exposure reduction scheme aiming for much lower levels of urban PM_{2.5} up to 2020, with the intention of being made mandatory by 2013. In December 2013, at the end of the EU Year of Air, the Commission finally presented its new policy plan. This does not revise the limit values in the Air Quality Directive and does not make mandatory the voluntary exposure reduction targets, but now proposes introducing a medium-size combustion plant emissions directive and further reductions of the so-called National Emission Ceilings [4–6]. These reductions (as we will show here) are rather unambitious until 2020, but call for much stronger reductions in 2030, *i.e.* well over the horizon.

So there seems to be a pattern here: weak policies are proposed for the short to medium term, accompanied by nonbinding promises of truly clean air at some suitably distant point in the future, promises which then are not kept when that distant future becomes uncomfortably close to the messy present.