

EU Action Plan “Towards a Zero Pollution Ambition for air, water and soil” EU Roadmap

The [**European Public Health Alliance \(EPHA\)**](#) is the largest European public health NGO advocating for better health. Our 82 member organisations encompasses public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, disease groups, academia and population group representatives working together to improve health and strengthen the voice of public health in Europe.

Summary

The EU ambition on zero pollution is essential for developing a comprehensive ‘One Health’ approach: planetary, animal and plant health are prerequisites for human health. EPHA considers that securing clean air, water and soil is essential to ensure a healthy life for all Europeans, especially the most vulnerable populations. The unfolding environmental and climate emergencies are major threats to public health and the COVID-19 pandemic exposed that “business as usual” is no longer an option if we take public health seriously.

The [**European environment - state and outlook 2020**](#) written by the European Environment Agency underlines that "Europe's environment is at a tipping point." The systemic changes in ecological conditions will have far-reaching effects on human health and well-being, including through infectious diseases, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and mental ill-health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how our biodiversity, human and animal health and well-being are all connected. Degradation of nature, e.g. caused by air, water and soil pollution, are causing an existential crisis for our planet. To tackle these challenges, a coherent policy approach is needed to urgently change the way our society is organised.

To this end, the European Green Deal aims to lead the European transition to “a sustainable, fair and inclusive ecological transition.” This means Europe needs to move from an economy based on fossil fuels to a decarbonised and zero pollution society using renewable energy sources, whenever available and wherever possible across all sectors of the economy.

An ambitious, cross-sectoral policy package should improve people's health. In order to achieve "a *Zero Pollution Ambition for air, water and soil*", **the European Union needs to define, monitor and tackle every type of pollution, with tangible actions, binding timelines and goals**, aligned with the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#).

EPHA position

The response to the pollution emergency could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century and **no one should be left behind**.

EPHA identifies concrete policy measures which the EU can promote by legislation, and through funding and promotion of good practices.

The opportunities for climate and health of phasing out coal or using the reform of the *Common Agricultural Policy* (CAP) and the new *Farm to Fork Strategy* to tackle pollution from the agricultural sector, while contributing to a resilient food system able to achieve sustainable food and nutrition security, are immense.

Coherence is needed with the *EU Climate Law* as well as with *Europe's Beating Cancer Plan*, stressing that GHG emitting activities also emit carcinogenic substances. Likewise, mainstreaming zero pollution into cohesion policy will enable countries to contribute to reach the targets of the 2030 UN Agenda for *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs).

Ambitious zero-emission targets go hand in hand with **lowering health-harmful substances emissions**. Air pollution increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, cancers, dementia, and diabetes, it can trigger new asthma cases in children, and it damages nearly every organ in the human body. It is estimated to cause about 16% of lung cancer deaths, 25% of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) deaths, about 17% of deaths occurring as a result of heart disease and stroke, and about 26% of respiratory infection deaths.

EPHA policy recommendations

EPHA suggests including the following elements into the EU proposal to contribute to a "*Zero Pollution Ambition*".

As overarching principles, the European Commission shall :

Take note of the latest scientific evidence on the health damage of pollution, as a basis of any future policy;

Identify, monitor and tackle every type of pollution;

Define tangible actions, binding timelines and goals;

Prioritise prevention and precaution to avoid pollution at source;

Mainstream the *Zero Pollution Ambition* into all the EU policies;

Include a calculation on how much will the initiative contribute to prevent cancer, in relation to the *European Beating cancer plan*;

Support legal, financial, coordination or promotion tools to develop ambitious policies, such as expand zero-emission vehicles.

The new EU action plan must be based on three principles:

1. Zero harm from pollution

The aim of a *Zero Pollution Ambition Action Plan* should be to urgently and drastically reduce the exposure of the entire population to products harmful to their environment and health. EU decision-makers must focus on the most at-risk populations affected by one or multiple forms of biological or social vulnerability, for instance people living with serious health conditions, children, older people, and people living in poverty.

This action plan should aim to prevent impacts of pollution in early life and at critical windows of development, which can increase the risk of developing disease much later in life.

The *Zero Pollution Ambition* should recognise the interlinkages between environmental, health and social inequalities, and propose integrated measures.

2. Zero money for pollution

Preventing pollution means ending direct or indirect public financing of polluting processes. This requires fully aligning the EU budget and COVID-19 recovery funds with the zero pollution objective of cutting pollution at the source.

The EU should adopt a comprehensive climate and *One health* conditionality list for the MFF and Next Generation EU, with a full application of the polluter-pays-principle.

The Common Agricultural Policy is the EU's single largest budget item, but in its current state, the proposal still allows large sums of public money to be allocated to polluting activities. The European Commission should consider withdrawing the current proposal, which was prepared under a previous Commission, and come with a new proposal that fully aligns the policy with the *European Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies* and the *Zero Pollution Ambition*.

3. Zero delay in stopping pollution

To protect Europeans' health today and in the future, EPHA urges the EU to:

- enable the path to achieving climate neutrality by 2040, including through upping the EU's 2030 GHG target to at least -65%, and ending subsidies to any fossil fuels by 2025, including phasing out the internal combustion engine by 2028; and
- achieve good air quality with no significant health harm by 2030 through the following measures:
 - aligning EU air standards with WHO guidelines and the latest scientific evidence;
 - further cutting pollution at the source; and,
 - continuing to act firmly on the exceedances of air quality standards, including proper monitoring of air pollution all over Europe.

There is a need to develop a comprehensive approach for tackling the effects of the climate and pollution emergencies. Especially considering the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union needs a public health driven, green recovery. To this end, the European Green Deal, and especially the *EU Action Plan Towards Zero Pollution Ambition*, must be strengthened to lead the European transition to a sustainable and healthy continent.

Undeniably, tackling all kinds of pollution is one of the greatest health challenges of the 21st century. The highest level of ambition in the European strategy is needed to ensure a transformation towards sustainability of all economic and societal spheres. With health at the heart of policymaking, the new strategy has the potential to improve our lives, including those of future generations.