

Sustainable consumption and production



- The way we produce, use and dispose of goods is unsustainable and is rapidly depleting our planet's natural resources.

- Our quality of life, prosperity and economic growth depend on living within ecological limits.

- The EU is committed to sustainable development, growth and jobs. Achieving this means promoting better products, more efficient production methods and improved consumption patterns.

- Governments, businesses and individual citizens need to take action in order to create more sustainable societies.

- The global nature of modern economies calls for policies that also address the impacts of EU lifestyles in other parts of the world.

Doing more with less

Fact 1: If people in the rest of the world lived European lifestyles it would take the resources of two and a half planets to support them

Europe has enjoyed unprecedented levels of prosperity in recent years: more jobs, stable economies, low unemployment and high productivity. But a healthy environment is essential if the strength and competitiveness of the economy is to be maintained. Continued economic growth, changes in lifestyles and the increasing use of technologies have resulted in ever-greater demand for products and services. The simple fact is that by using our natural and energy resources inefficiently, we are producing more waste than we can recycle as a useful resource, and are contributing to climate change.

In recent decades, progress has been made in addressing the environmental impacts of consumption and production: air quality has improved, waste and industrial pollution are better controlled, products are more efficient and consumers are better informed. These are steps in the right direction, but more drastic measures are needed in the face of huge environmental challenges such as climate change and the rapid loss of natural resources and biodiversity.

Fundamental changes are needed in how natural resources are extracted and the way products are produced, distributed, used and disposed of. Action is needed at all levels of society — from individuals and industry through to central and local government — in order to reverse current trends and live within ecological limits.

The European Union and its Member States have recognised that a shift towards more sustainable economies and lifestyles is necessary. The European Commission launched an action plan on sustainable consumption and production and on sustainable industrial policy in July 2008 that builds on and strengthens existing policies and puts forward new measures and actions.

It proposes a dynamic framework to improve the energy and environmental performance of products, create demand for better products and help consumers make better choices. Measures include ambitious product standards for eco-design, green public purchasing, eco-labelling and eco-innovation. Actions address better products and smarter consumption, leaner production and global markets for sustainable products.

Better products

Fact 2: Energy consumption in the EU is likely to increase by 9% between 2005 and 2020

The products we buy and use every day have a significant impact on the environment, from the materials used in their production, to the energy needed to use them and the waste they create once obsolete.

If modern society is to be sustainable in the long term, products that cause the least environmental impact need to become the accepted standard in all sectors. Phasing out products that use excessive energy or water resources or that contain hazardous materials is an important first step. Addressing the environmental aspects of product design has been successfully used to ban refrigerators and aerosols containing ozone-depleting chemicals, such as CFCs, and reduce the use of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in paints and solvents. The directive on the restriction of the use of certain hazardous substances (RoHS), which is designed to minimise the environmental impact of waste electrical and electronic equipment, ensures that manufacturers do not use materials or components that contain restricted substances.

The design phase of a product is crucial. New minimum product standards need to be developed to reduce the impact of goods on the environment. The European Commission plans to extend compulsory eco-design requirements — already in place for 'energy-using' products such as household appliances — to 'energy-related' products that have environmental impacts during their use, for example windows or water-distribution devices. Green public procurement (see box) is one way to drive demand for the bestperforming products by mobilising the considerable buying power of public authorities. It can give important signals to the market, encouraging innovation and paving the way for mass-market take-up of more sustainable products.





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Responsible and empowered consumers

Fact 3: Households in Europe are major contributors to environmental problems such as climate change, air pollution, water pollution, land use and waste

Although environmental awareness is increasing, most people find it difficult to relate their personal consumption habits to large-scale problems such as climate change. To reverse current unsustainable trends, consumers need to be well informed, empowered and feel that their actions make a difference.

People need clear and better information about which changes in their spending habits will have the biggest impact. They need to know which are the best-performing products, how to make the most efficient use of them and the cleanest ways to dispose of them.

A number of labelling systems have been introduced to inform consumers. The European eco-label, with its flower logo, identifies products with the best environmental performance in several different product groups (see box). The scheme is being revised to make it more attractive to businesses and consumers.

Another example is the EU energy label, which helps consumers identify the most energy-efficient kitchen appliances and light bulbs.

Several large retail chains and producers are already reducing waste, providing environmental information on goods and selling more sustainable products. Their initiatives will be reinforced through a Europe-wide Retail Forum aimed at reducing the environmental footprint of the retail sector and its supply chain, promoting more sustainable products and providing better information for customers.

Leaner production

Fact 4: The way we produce goods and the efficiency of the products we use has a direct link to the challenges of climate change and the use of natural resources

Policies across the EU have been relatively successful in cleaning up industrial production and encouraging more efficient processes, bringing reductions in pollution and waste and higher levels of recycling. However, more needs to be done to promote the concept of materials efficiency and propel the most innovative eco-technologies into the mainstream. Because it takes a long time to recoup the costs of large-scale investments in industrial production, companies need financial support and a stable regulatory framework to invest in more efficient processes.

Action on products

Design plays a crucial role in the environmental performance of products throughout their lives.

The EU's directive on eco-design of energy-using products (EuP) provides a framework for establishing minimum requirements for everyday products that account for a large proportion of total energy use. Products currently being assessed include street, office and home lighting, water boilers and televisions.

The Commission proposes to extend these requirements to energy-related products, which would make it possible to target priority product sectors such as water-using devices and building materials.

In addition, a number of labelling schemes exist at EU level to enable consumers to identify the most efficient products, such as those for electrical appliances. These will be extended to a wider range of products and environmental impacts in future.

Green procurement

Spending by public authorities accounts for around 16 % of the EU's gross domestic product. Legislation allows authorities to set environmental criteria before awarding public contracts — so-called 'green public procurement' (GPP).

Green procurement can lead to cost savings, both for the public authorities and society as a whole. In addition to the direct environmental benefits, authorities that establish a green public procurement policy stimulate the market for green products and technologies, especially in sectors such as construction, transport and office equipment. The European Commission has launched several actions to encourage greater use of GPP. New initiatives will include common GPP criteria, target-setting and further legal and operational guidance. The setting of mandatory levels of GPP for a number of products is also being considered under the sustainable consumption and production action plan and will be developed further.



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Flower power

With its distinctive flower logo, the EU eco-label is a clear way to help consumers make environment-friendly choices when they choose products and services ranging from washing powder to campsites.



Products have to meet a set of strict environmental criteria to qualify for the ecolabel logo. The scheme has expanded since its introduction in 1992, and now covers 26 product groups, including textiles, paints, paper, detergents, household appliances and services such as tourist accommodation.

The revised scheme will place a stronger focus on products and services with the most significant environmental impacts and the highest potential for improvement. It will also reduce bureaucracy and simplify criteria, allowing the number of product groups covered by the label to increase.

Further information:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/escp_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/index_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/emas/index_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/eco_design/index_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/energy/efficiency/labelling/labelling_en.htm

<http://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/households/eea-activities>

<http://esa.un.org/marrakechprocess/>

One way that businesses can improve their efficiency is through the implementation of environmental management systems such as EMAS (the EU's eco-management and audit scheme), a voluntary system that helps companies optimise their production processes and make more effective use of resources. The European Commission is revising the scheme to make it more attractive for companies, especially small to medium-sized businesses, by reducing costs and administration.

The market for environmental industries is growing fast. The EU aims to foster growth in eco-industries through the creation of a friendlier regulatory environment and by exploring the potential for information and communications technology (ICT) to increase sustainability.



The global dimension

Fact 5: If current patterns of consumption continue, it is estimated that global resource use would quadruple within 20 years

The number of consumer goods and industrial supplies imported into Europe has increased significantly in recent years.

Materials are extracted and processed in other parts of the world and then transported to European countries — all with negative environmental effects. Often, the producing areas are developing countries which are the least able to deal with the mounting pressures on the environment.

In addition, many of the producer countries, such as China, are growing rapidly, both economically and in population number. As these countries become more prosperous, their demand for resources and energy increases. If these countries continue to adopt the established western patterns of consumption, the environmental pressures will increase even more dramatically.

The EU is working to promote good practice internationally, by encouraging more sustainable consumption and production policies as part of the United Nations 10-year framework programme on sustainable consumption and production (known as the Marrakech process).

The European Commission will promote international agreements on carbon emission reductions in individual industry sectors as part of ongoing climate change negotiations. Other efforts will focus on trade policy and industrial dialogue to eliminate trade tariffs for low-carbon technologies and environment-friendly products and services.



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