Opening of the Green Week / Air quality

Dear commissioner Potocnik, dear excellencie, ladies and gentlemen

I am very happy to be here at the opening of the European commission´s Green Week Conference with the title Cleaner air for all. Clean air is something all people appreciate and I trust this conference can help us to identify and advance polices that will improve the situation.

Despite a long history of legislation and major improvements, air pollution is still major public health and environmental problem in Europe:

- Poor air quality is causing nearly half a million (420,000) premature deaths each year
- Air pollutions has also grave impacts on member states finances and the economy with increased hospital admissions, extra medication, millions of working days lost.
- Over 80% of Europeans are exposed to particulate matter level above the WHO air quality guidelines
- Air pollution also damages the environment: in particular acidification and eutrophication with impacts on biodiversity

Costs estimates:
for year 2000 alone, health damage from air pollution amounted to between 277 and 790 billion EUR – these are only health costs.
For coal pollution: health costs of emissions from coal-fired power stations add financial burden of up to 43 billion EUR a year in the EU

Health and medical experts have called air pollution the invisible killer, and there is clearly a need for urgent action on this, action which Europe’s citizens demand.

A recent Eurobarometer has shown that clean air is a top worry for Europe’s citizens:

- Majority of Europeans believe air quality has deteriorated in last 10 years
- 72% are unhappy with efforts of public authorities to improve air quality
- Almost six out of 10 do not feel adequately informed about air quality issues
Almost 4 out of 5 believe the EU should propose additional measures to address air pollution

**Scientists call for urgent action**

Air pollution is the most frequently researched topic of environmental health sciences, ever year hundreds of studies on the health and environmental effects are published; no one doubts that air pollution impacts our health.

World Health Organisation is leading body when it comes to assessing this science, has conducted extensive reviews of the literature and issued recommendations for pollutant concentration levels to protect health: WHO air quality guidelines.

As part of the EU air review, WHO has assessed science again in REVIHAAP project.

Preliminary conclusions which were issued this January:

- Considerable amount of new scientific evidence on adverse health effects of particulate matter (PM), ozone and nitrogen oxide (NO2) has been published in recent years
- This evidence more than confirms the 2005 WHO air quality guidelines
- What is particularly worrying is that
  - damaging effects can occur at lower levels than previously thought,
  - range of health effects appears to be much broader than previously thought, especially for children’s health (harming development of brain+nervous system and cognitive function), and also diabetes

**WHO calls for stronger EU air policies**, for for the re-evaluation of PM2.5 and other standards.

**Particulate matter – PM2.5**

- Is of special concern for health protection, as it is linked to large burden of disease
- WHO underlines that there is considerable gap between the WHO standard for PM2.5 (10ug/m3, annual average), the standard the US has just set (12ug/m3 annual average) and EU standard (25 ug/m3 annual average) which will be a limit value only in 2015.
- Europe should not fall behind the US when it comes to health protection! EU should be a front runner.
What needs to happen?

It’s the EU Year of Air, need to say clearly that it’s unacceptable that air pollution has such a high toll on the people in Europe (but also on the environment, and the economy).

Recent history of EU legislation is one of missed opportunities (for example repeated delays of revision of National Emissions Ceilings Directive) and lack of political will: member states still do not meet the EU standards that have been agreed more than 10 years ago.

**Commissioner Potocnik, what I would like to see from you this autumn are proposals that reflect the urgency of reducing air pollution.** The Air Quality Review taking place this year should clearly be a political priority.

EU has set itself the objective of reaching “levels of air quality that do not give rise to significant negative impacts on and risks to human health and the environment”

This goal has been agreed on in the 1990s (in the 5th EU Environment Action Programme), has been underlined in 6th EAP, and also proposal for 7th EAP

My colleagues and I in the Environment Committee have recently underlined that this goal still stands, and have urged that we need to speed up the action until 2020 and be more ambitious.

Want to see proposals that are focused on the question of what’s needed to reach goal of reducing damage on health and the environmental. It should not be limited to what is currently technically feasible. We need to aim high.

Demands:

Citizens, health experts, environmental and citizens groups are highly concerned about air pollution in Europe and closely watching what we as decision-makers will agree on later this year to see if this will really make a difference for their health and well-being.

More than 60 organisations active at EU, national and local level have stated their 3 priorities for the review:

1. **National Emissions Ceilings (NEC) Directive:**
A cornerstone of EU air legislation, an effective tool which has been relatively well implemented by the member states.
Aim high for NEC: level of ambition should go significantly beyond what has been agreed on in the revised Gothenburg protocol.
An ambitious revised NEC can make major contribution for tackling climate change: introduce binding reduction commitments for methane (potent GHG and ozone precursor), and for black carbon under new mandatory ceiling for PM2.5.
Plus NEC is also opportunity to fill regulatory gap on reducing mercury, as currently no law regulates total mercury emissions into the air.

2. Cut emissions from all major sources
Good that there is focus on source policy this year: emissions at source can deliver quick and effective reductions and help achieve EU air quality standards more easily
Particularly problematic sources: agriculture, domestic combustion, small industrial combustion, road vehicles, non-road mobile machinery, shipping

For these sectors EU legislative framework is insufficient, inadequate or non-existent: we need to regulate all sources

3. Enforcing, strengthening EU air standards
EU-wide binding limit values are absolutely key for health protection, have proven to be effective driver for action at local level.
I am clearly opposed to any attempts to weaken the standards. I would like urge the member states to do their homework, there has been ample time to comply.

Current EU standards do not protect our health enough: review needs to look into strengthening them, we need timeline and date for the revision.

By introducing such regulation, future would look much brighter. Following an ambitious agenda would push further down the number of premature death and suffering caused by air pollution.

I am confident that more ambitious policy would also help European industries to innovate new technologies and systems that can help them to be successful in the future market. We can see for example in China that people are demanding cleaner air, and European companies with cutting edge technologies have a huge potential there.

Ladies and gentlemen, to conclude I would like to state again that
EU citizens have a right to clean air, but this right is still not a reality.
Every day people suffer, especially those who are particularly sensitive: children with asthma, patients with lung disease, the elderly.
Need to put clean air in the spotlight again, and as decision-makers set the path for real reductions. We owe it to the citizens and to our environment.

Mr. Commissioner Potocnik, I would like to urge you to continue to be tough on infringement action.

I wish all very successful Green Week and most fruitful elaborations about making our air cleaner!

Thank you.