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Seven messages on air pollution for ministers



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Seven messages on air pollution for ministers

Note by the Chair of the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution

Introduction

1. The present information document was prepared by the Chair of the Executive Body for the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution (Air Convention), as mandated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (ECE/CEP/S/2016/2, forthcoming). The seven messages below are derived from the summary for policymakers of the assessment report under the Air Convention (ECE/BATUMI.CONF/2016/12). The present document aims to support the ministers' discussion on improving air quality for a better environment and human health.

Seven messages for ministers

One

Air pollution causes serious damage to health and ecosystems

2. Air pollution is the number one environmental cause of premature death in Europe, causing cardiovascular, cerebrovascular and respiratory diseases and lung cancer. Nearly 600,000 premature deaths, attributable to ambient air pollution, occur in the ECE region every year. That is 10 times the number of lethal traffic accidents.



3. More than 95 per cent of the urban population in Europe is exposed to concentrations of fine particles and ozone above the World Health Organization (WHO) guideline levels.¹
4. Toxic heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants with adverse effects on human health and the environment accumulate along food chains and in individuals. Even low concentrations can lead to significant exposures over time.
5. While recovery of ecosystems from acidification is ongoing in parts of Europe, excess deposition of nitrogen is currently a major cause of changes in flora that may lead to a decrease of threatened species, as identified in the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species,² and to an increase in plants and insects that cause allergies or diseases. Excess nitrogen also contributes to algae blooms in water ecosystems.
6. Current ozone concentrations substantially reduce potential wood and crop production in Europe.

Two

Air pollution is more than a local problem

7. In several European cities a significant part of the concentrations of fine particles is caused by the long-range transport of secondary particles formed in the air out of emissions of ammonia, sulphur and nitrogen oxides.
8. Background concentrations of ozone, mercury and several persistent organic pollutants in Europe and North America are significantly influenced by emissions outside of these continents.
9. To combat air pollution, national and international coordinated actions and scientific and policy collaboration across the Northern Hemisphere are indispensable.

Three

Solutions are available

10. Sufficient and effective measures are available to reduce further emissions from, for example, combustion installations, vehicles, ships and farms in order to reach the WHO guideline levels and to avoid further destruction of nature areas.

Four

There is an established policy arena

11. The ECE Air Convention offers a platform for mutual learning and the finding of solutions. Ratification and implementation of the Convention's protocols would, for many parties, reduce health and environmental impacts in a more cost-effective way than through unilateral action. The Convention sets a level playing field for industries, preventing

¹ WHO Air quality guidelines for particulate matter, ozone, nitrogen dioxide and sulphur dioxide, Global update 2005, Summary of risk assessment, WHO/SDE/PHE/OEH/06.02 (Geneva, Switzerland, 2006).

² See www.iucnredlist.org.

countries from competing with each other at the expense of the environment and health within free trade zones.

Five

Socioeconomic effects will be positive

12. The costs of control are generally far less than the costs of damage to human health and the environment. For industry, the cost of absences from work due to air pollution alone is higher than the cost of abatement measures. The socioeconomic benefits of fewer absences from work will be felt immediately. In the longer run, health benefits would increase gross domestic product.

13. With an international, cooperative approach, a larger market for clean technologies will reduce the costs of producing the required equipment and thus the abatement measures.

Six

There are important synergies with other policy areas

14. Air pollution policy is closely linked to climate, energy, agriculture and biodiversity policies. Most air pollution policy measures will have a positive effect of reducing climate change and vice versa. Energy savings and shifts in the energy mix have contributed to both cleaner air and reduced climate impact and will continue to be important. However, promoting the use of biomass and biofuels without additional measures could increase emissions of air pollutants.

Seven

Air pollution policy can contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goals

15. Air pollution policy can significantly contribute to achieving several of the Sustainable Development Goals, notably to: ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all; end hunger, achieve food security and promote sustainable agriculture; make cities and human settlements safe and sustainable; ensure access to sustainable and modern energy for all; and protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems and halt biodiversity loss.
