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The big smoke

Italy's trying to clean up its act after the European Commission issued a final warning on nitrogen dioxide emissions. But campaigners say the government's only dealing with half the problem.

Each year, environmental pollutants cost the lives of 1.7 million children under five, according to a report released on 6 April by the World Health Organization (WHO). In the European Union alone, more than 400,000 citizens die prematurely each year as a result of poor air quality, and millions more suffer from respiratory and cardiovascular diseases caused by air pollution.

Because pollution knows no borders, with bad air spilling out from cities to affect entire regions, the scale of the problem is immense. In its report, the WHO states that "by reducing air pollution levels, countries can reduce the burden of disease from stroke, heart disease, lung cancer, and both chronic and acute respiratory diseases, including asthma".

This is the backdrop against which the European Commission in February gave a final warning to several European countries for failing to address repeated breaches of air pollution limits for nitrogen dioxide (NO_2). Nitrogen dioxide is a nasty-smelling gas which is found in car fumes and has a significant impact on human health.

Choking on air

Short-term exposure to the gas, at concentrations of 200 μg/m3 or more can cause inflammation of the airways, while long-term exposure in children has been found to increase symptoms of bronchitis in asthma sufferers. NO_2, in concentrations found in European cities, has also been linked to reduced lung function.

EU legislation on ambient air quality (Directive 2008/50/EC) sets limits on the concentration of air pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide. Member states that exceed these limits are required to adopt and implement air quality plans setting out appropriate measures to bring

NO2 back to safe levels. The EU Commission's last infringement procedure for breaches of NO2 emission levels affects Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy. If member states fail to act within two months, the Commission says, it may decide to take the matter to the Court of Justice of the EU.

Each of these countries has its own environmental strategy: Germany is pushing to ban petrol-fuelled cars within the next 20 years; the UK is working to create clean air zones for Birmingham, Leeds, Nottingham, Derby and Southampton by 2020; France is focusing on a "clean stickers" policy, where vehicles in high pollution areas are required to display their age, engine size and cleanliness on a scale of one to six; Spain has reduced speed limits and introduced alternate-day travel.

Money for nothing?

Italy, meanwhile, has gone on a spending spree. Responding to the Commission's warning, environment minister Gian Luca Galletti pointed to 11 million euros passed to municipalities that have carried out anti-pollution measures, and a further 35 million earmarked for sustainable public transport. The ministry has promised an extra 50 million euros for green infrastructure, including electric charging station and energy-efficient public transport.

As the EU country reporting the most premature deaths from air pollution, Italy has a miserable record to set straight. Are the new measures enough?

Rossella Muroni, president of Italy's leading environmental association Legambiente, doesn't think so. "To free the cities from pollution, to live in healthier spaces, we believe that looking to urban mobility and traffic flows isn't enough. We need to stop using fossil fuels to heat and cool our homes and offices".

Muroni says there needs to be more emphasis on making public and private buildings energy-efficient, as well as planning towns in a way that works for citizens.



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