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Better protection against air pollutants

Health and environment still in jeopardy despite compliance with current limits in force

How has air quality improved in Germany? Which pollutants in the air have either increased or decreased? Are limits on air pollutants appropriate? These are the issues which will be discussed by 150 experts at a conference in Dessau on 16-17 September in the framework of the European Year of Air. The conference will focus on air quality in cities and in regions with high population density. Compared to the air quality standards in force, many agglomerations still have too many harmful atmospheric pollutants, especially nitrogen oxides and particulates. Jochen Flasbarth, President of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA), says, "Many German cities exceed the critical limits for nitrogen oxide and particulates. The World Health Organization (WHO) is recommending even stricter limits for some air pollutants such as particulates and ozone for the protection of human health. Since more and more people are living in cities, this is an urgent need for action." However, current efforts are focused on meeting compliance with the limits in force at sites which are exposed to particularly high levels of pollution. Another environmental problem is nitrogen emissions from agriculture, which harm the biodiversity of ecosystems. Nevertheless, overall air quality in recent decades has improved considerably, thanks mainly to action taken by the manufacturing industry, power plants and the automotive industry.

Compared to the limits in force in the EU, the levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulates in particular are still too high in Germany, despite a steady decline in the atmospheric emissions of these pollutants or their precursors in recent years. The highest levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulates occur in the vicinity of their source; that is, in agglomerations and in areas with heavy traffic. The major source of nitrogen oxides is road traffic. Particulate emissions are mainly the result of combustion processes.

Human health still suffers from exposure to pollutants despite compliance with limit values. The recommendations issued by the WHO are to set considerably lower critical loads for particulates. There is good reason for this: current studies indicate that there is a 20 per cent higher risk of lung cancer if particulate concentration rises by 10 µg/m³. Even the relatively clean air in Canada has higher levels of particulate concentrations which is associated with a higher rate of mortality. The objective of air pollution control must not be limited to mere compliance with limit values. Measures to improve air quality must also help to reduce background concentrations in

cities and rural areas. In addition, two-thirds of the ecosystem land areas in Germany are exposed to inputs of nitrogen compounds from the air which exceed their critical loads. Jochen Flasbarth remarks, "To guarantee the effective protection of human health and our ecosystems, we must make further efforts in both transport and at industrial installations. Emissions from other sources such as small firing installations in private homes which are being fuelled more and more with wood, as well as agriculture which is a significant emitter of ammonia, must be reduced to further improve air quality." The goal of "clean air" can only be achieved through a package of parallel measures. These measures include the speedy introduction of the Euro 6/VI emission standard for motor vehicles, tapping into the existing potential to reduce ammonia from agriculture, waste air purification in livestock buildings, and the reduction of emissions from domestic wood burning. Efforts by German experts to implement the EU Directive on Industrial Emissions are helping to establish ambitious emission standards. At the same time we must address the challenges that climate change poses to air pollution control. The Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC), of which Germany is a member, is one way to make use of the synergies in climate protection and air pollution control to achieve better air quality in emerging countries in particular. One way these synergies may result is through reduction of black carbon emissions: a plus for both health protection and the climate.

Further information and links

Information on the clean air conference *Reine Luft - Luftreinhaltung heute und morgen: Gute Luft braucht einen langen Atem* is here:

http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/luft/infos/veranstaltungen/tagung_reine_luft_2013.htm

Frequently Asked Questions about nitrogen dioxide is available here:

<http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/luft/schadstoffe/no.htm>

The UBA publication *Das Luftmessnetz des Umweltbundesamtes [The Air Quality Monitoring Network of the Federal Environment Agency]* is here:

<http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien-e/4573.html>

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