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Europe's Health and Competitiveness Suffering Due to Slow Pollution Laws Implementation, New Report Finds

Key policies: EU Zero Pollution Action Plan, European Green Deal, Environmental Noise Directive, Water Resilience Strategy, Chemicals Industry Action Plan, Ocean Pact, Vision for Agriculture and Food, Circular Economy Action Plan

A new mid-term review of the EU's Zero Pollution Action Plan has concluded that faster implementation and enforcement of environmental legislation are essential if the European Union is to achieve its pollution reduction targets by 2030.

The report highlights that pollution remains one of the most significant threats to public health, ecosystems and economic prosperity across Europe. While important progress has been made in reducing air pollution, pesticide use and marine plastic litter, challenges persist in areas such as water quality, waste generation, microplastics and noise pollution.

The findings underline that pollution prevention is not only an environmental objective but also a major public health and economic priority, delivering benefits ranging from improved quality of life and lower healthcare costs to enhanced productivity and competitiveness.

Strong link between environmental quality and public health

The review emphasises the direct connection between pollution reduction and improved public health outcomes.

Reducing air, water, soil and noise pollution contributes to lower rates of:

- Asthma and respiratory illnesses
- Cardiovascular diseases
- Certain forms of cancer
- Mental health disorders
- Premature mortality associated with environmental exposure

The report stresses that investments in pollution prevention generate immediate and long-term benefits for citizens while reducing pressure on healthcare systems.

According to the Commission, achieving zero pollution objectives is fundamental to creating healthier and more resilient communities across Europe.

Pollution reduction supports competitiveness

Beyond environmental and health benefits, the review highlights the economic opportunities associated with pollution reduction and environmental innovation.

Businesses, cities and regions that invest in cleaner technologies are increasingly benefiting from:

- Higher productivity

This project is supported by the Interreg Danube Region Programme co-funded by the European Union.

- Improved resource efficiency
- Increased agricultural yields
- Lower environmental remediation costs
- Access to emerging green technology markets

The report notes that approximately 80% of European companies now integrate sustainability considerations into their innovation strategies, while hundreds of cities have committed to reducing their pollution footprint through targeted local actions.

These investments are helping European businesses strengthen their position in fast-growing global markets linked to clean technologies and sustainable solutions.

Significant legislative progress since 2021

Since the adoption of the Zero Pollution Action Plan in 2021, the European Union has strengthened its main pollution-related legislation and developed several complementary policy initiatives.

Recent actions include:

- Strengthening key EU pollution legislation
- Developing a European Water Resilience Strategy
- Launching the Ocean Pact
- Presenting a Vision for Agriculture and Food
- Establishing a Chemicals Industry Action Plan

The report acknowledges that much of the legislative framework required to achieve the Action Plan's objectives is now in place.

However, it warns that legislation alone cannot deliver results without effective implementation and enforcement at national, regional and local levels.

Mixed progress towards 2030 targets

The review presents a mixed picture regarding progress towards the EU's pollution reduction objectives.

Areas showing positive progress

Encouraging developments have been recorded in:

- Air pollution reduction
- Reduced pesticide use
- Lower antimicrobial sales
- Declining levels of plastic pollution at sea

These areas are currently on a trajectory broadly consistent with achieving the EU's 2030 targets.

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Areas requiring urgent action

Other pollution challenges remain largely unchanged or are worsening, including:

- Water pollution
- Waste generation
- Microplastics pollution
- Certain forms of chemical contamination

The report identifies these areas as requiring additional policy attention, investment and enforcement efforts during the remainder of the decade.

Growing concern over PFAS pollution

Particular attention is given to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), often referred to as "forever chemicals" because of their persistence in the environment.

PFAS contamination has become an increasing concern for citizens, policymakers and regulators due to its potential impacts on human health and ecosystems.

The report highlights ongoing Commission initiatives aimed at assessing the societal and economic costs associated with PFAS pollution and supporting future regulatory measures.

Noise pollution remains a major challenge

The review raises serious concerns regarding environmental noise, particularly from transport infrastructure.

The European Union is currently not on track to achieve its target of reducing the number of people chronically affected by transport-related noise by 30% by 2030.

Road traffic, railways and aviation continue to expose millions of Europeans to harmful noise levels that can negatively affect sleep quality, cardiovascular health and mental wellbeing.

To address the issue, the Commission is:

- Strengthening noise emission standards for vehicles
- Promoting quieter rail technologies
- Supporting efforts to reduce aircraft noise
- Improving implementation of the Environmental Noise Directive
- Assessing potential future revisions of the Directive

Need for stronger implementation and investment

The report concludes that achieving the EU's zero pollution ambitions will require stronger action across multiple policy areas.

Key priorities include:

- More effective enforcement of environmental legislation
- Increased investment in innovation and digital technologies
- Development of green skills and workforce capacity
- Better integration of environmental objectives into energy, transport and agricultural policies
- Enhanced cooperation between public authorities, businesses and civil society

According to the Commission, coordinated implementation will be essential to ensure that environmental protection, economic competitiveness and public health objectives are achieved simultaneously.

Background

The EU Zero Pollution Action Plan forms a central pillar of the European Green Deal and establishes the long-term objective of reducing air, water and soil pollution to levels no longer considered harmful to human health and natural ecosystems by 2050.

The Action Plan serves as a framework for integrating pollution prevention into all relevant EU policies, strengthening implementation of environmental legislation and identifying emerging environmental risks.

The current mid-term review builds on evidence from the Second Zero Pollution Monitoring and Outlook Report, published in March 2025, which confirmed that pollution continues to pose significant risks to ecosystems, public health and economic development despite notable progress in several areas.

The review concludes that while Europe has established one of the world's most ambitious environmental regulatory frameworks, achieving the 2030 pollution reduction targets will depend on faster implementation, stronger enforcement and continued investment in sustainable solutions

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