

Political declaration

of the Benelux countries

**on the vigorous continuation of cooperation to achieve health gains
for their citizens by reducing air pollution**

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Introduction:

Clean air is vital. Air pollution is one of the most important health risk factors. Due to European, national and decentralized policy, emissions of air pollutants in the Benelux have approximately been halved since 1990 and the air has become much cleaner, especially in metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, air pollution still causes significant premature mortality (for instance PM_{2,5}, NO₂ and ozone concentrations together caused in 2018 at least 21.000 premature deaths). In addition, air quality also affects human health and thus the quality of life. The list of proven health effects is long; cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases, bronchitis complaints in children, chronic bronchitis in adults, lung cancer, emergency admissions to hospital for cardiovascular and respiratory complaints, lower birth weight. Increased absenteeism of work and school also has its adverse consequences. In addition to the negative effects of pollution on human health, it also causes damage to nature, especially due to nitrogen deposition; for many nature sites in our region far above critical levels. Also from this perspective, it remains important to continue our work towards less emissions and a permanent improvement of the air quality.

Taking into account:

- that air pollution does not stop at borders;
- the European Green Deal, aiming to make the EU's economy sustainable and to significantly decrease pollution in general, and the recently published EU Zero Pollution Action Plan that can be considered as promising if all stakeholders commit themselves to its ambition and make it work;
- the target mentioned in the Zero Pollution Action Plan that by 2030 the EU should reduce the health impacts (premature deaths) of air pollution by more than 55% compared to 2005 for which full implementation of existing EU law like the NEC-Directive on the reduction of national emissions is paramount;
- that the European Commission is working on proposals to revise the Ambient Air Quality Directive, the Industrial Emissions Directive and the E-PRTR Regulation;
- the 2021 WHO Global Air Quality Guidelines for ambient air pollutants with recommendations for air quality standards for the classical air pollutants particulate matter (PM_{2,5} and PM₁₀), ozone (O₃), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), sulphur dioxide (SO₂) and carbon monoxide (CO) going beyond those in the EU Ambient Air Quality Directive; and the announcement in the Zero Pollution Action Plan to align the EU's air quality standards more closely with the new WHO recommendations of 2021;
- the Council of the EU's Conclusions of 5 March 2020 on the improvement of air quality.

Considering that:

- based on broad similarities of both urban and rural areas, transport infrastructure, public transport, industrial layout and activities and the nature and size of the (often intensive) livestock farming, together with high population densities and other relevant external factors such as comparable meteorological and climate conditions, it

is reasonable to assume that a targeted and concerted clean air approach would achieve additional health and nature gains in the short, medium and long term;

- innovation and new technologies could be a solid basis for more stringent source control measures to be taken at European level;
- scientific knowledge of the effects of air pollution is still evolving; research is currently running into a possible correlation between high levels of air pollution and the spreading of viruses.

The signatories,

set as an ambition to:

- make efforts to seek common positions on proposals for new EU legislation or on other EU initiatives and to set the agenda at EU level; aim as appropriate to increase the level playing field for all EU Member States for matters that fall under the competence of the EU;
- strengthen the existing cooperation to improve air quality in the Benelux region, as well as Nordrhein-Westfalen and Hauts-de-France, when (1) updating their national or regional air quality plans and the national plans for the implementation of the NEC-directive and (2) elaborating and implementing their policies and measures on relevant issues, such as:
 - joint activities in measuring and modelling of Benelux and neighbouring regions and the development of common rules for modelling emissions;
 - citizen science or other public activities towards knowledge transfer regarding air quality;
 - targeted policies for wood heating;
 - development of a model-based cross-border information system for episodes of higher fine particle pollution;
 - the widespread introduction of non-road mobile machinery (NRMM) and mopeds and scooters with low or zero emissions;
 - measures to reduce primary and secondary fine particles – and also odor nuisance – linked to intensive livestock farming;
 - minimizing the contribution of inland shipping;
 - the promotion of cycling;and where appropriate to carry out joint projects on these issues;
- exchange systematically relevant scientific and technical knowledge and experiences contributing to the reduction of air pollution, and exchange scientific findings on the relationship between the spread of viruses (including COVID-19) and air pollution and their mutual negative impact.

Call upon the Member States to:

- implement EU legislation in a manner that serves the future improvement of air quality and public health best, in particular with regard to the Ambient Air Quality Directive, the National Emission Reduction Commitments Directive and the Industrial Emissions Directive;
- ensure that the conditions of the IED-permits are complied with through effective inspections and enforcement;
- support further tightening of source control measures in the field of transport, energy, domestic heating with solid fuels, livestock farming and products;

- work in a positive, constructive and ambitious manner in the upcoming legislative process to revise the Ambient Air Quality Directive, the Industrial Emissions Directive and the Ecodesign Directive.

Call upon regional and local authorities to:

- Design and implement - now and in the years to come - policies and measures to reduce air pollution and to improve air quality in order to achieve health benefits for their own citizens and those outside the geographical scope of their administrative area as well, while at the same time achieving ecosystem benefits;
- Support each other by sharing knowledge and experiences or by taking joint action, in particular on issues that are difficult to tackle alone.

Nature of the Political Declaration

This document sets out a political intent. It is not meant to establish any legal commitments.

The fact that the focus of the document is on the achievement of health gains by reducing air pollution, does not in any way prevent that the Benelux also seek cooperation in the field of nitrogen deposition that negatively affects biodiversity.

Other countries and regions, in particular the associated partners of the Benelux Nordrhein-Westfalen and Hauts-de-France, are invited to endorse this political declaration

Signatories

For the Federal Authority of Belgium



For the Flemish Region

Zuhal Demir
Flemish Minister for Justice and Enforcement,
Environment, Energy and Tourism

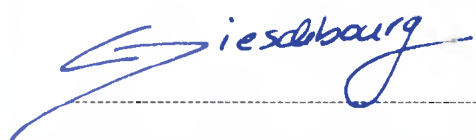
For the Walloon Region



Céline TELLIER
Ministre de l'environnement,
de la Nature, de la Forêt,
de la Ruralité et du Bien-Être animal

For the Brussels Capital Region

For the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg



For the Netherlands



the State Secretary for Infrastructure and
Water Management,
S.P.R.A. van Weyenberg