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Air pollution takes a heavy toll on lives and economy

Short report on the Clean Air Conference in Milan

Air pollution in the European Union has reached alarming levels, taking a high toll on human health and economic productivity. The actions to combat this problem must be intensified but the implementation and execution of already existing EU legislation must also be enforced. These were the main conclusions of a two-day conference on 'Clean air in Italy and in Europe', organised by the Greens/EFA in the European parliament and the Italian Greens from 24-25 February in Milan, Italy.

The figures on the damage caused by air pollution are shocking: 370,000 Europeans die prematurely each year as a result of air pollution, according to a study by the EU Commission, while the health costs are estimated to be 3-9 % of the GDP of the EU25, or 276 to 790 billion euro, per year.

The most harmful air pollutants to health are particulate matter (the smaller the more dangerous) and ozone. Currently, almost a third of urban areas in the EU15 exceed the daily limit values for particulate matter - in Milan the daily limit value was exceeded on more than 100 days last year. **Mario Zambrini** and **Lorenzo Bono** from the Istituto di ricerche Ambiente Italia deplored the state of air in Italian cities. Milan and the region of Lombardy have perhaps the worst quality of air in Europe. **Paolo Crosignani** Director Epidemiologia ambientale, Istituto Nazionale Tumori estimated that almost a quarter of all lung cancer cases in Milan are due to the poor quality of air. Research confirms a correlation of smaller lung size in children living in areas with high air pollution. **Roberto Bertollini**, Epidemiologist, also expressed his concern over a tendency to play down research results on air pollution, for example on NO₂.

Environmental expert **Dr Hanns Moshammer** explained how poor quality air affects vulnerable groups worse, for example those with cardio-vascular diseases. Healthy individuals might be able to handle exposure to individual pollutants but, when combined with multiple pollution and unhealthy diets, even marginal air pollution results in numerous health problems. Concentrations of fine particles fracture and carry allergenic pollen deeper into the lungs and therefore increase aggravate the symptoms of allergies.

EU air quality legislation requires areas which are likely to exceed the limit values to draft two kinds of plans to address this: air management plans for long term measures and actions plans for emergency situations. Green regional councillor **Carlo Monguzzi** said the Lombardy regional plan was pure comedy. Improving air quality would require a change in government.

The President of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, **Monica Frassoni**, stressed in her statement that solutions exist - bad air quality is avoidable - but measures rely on conscious political choices for their implementation. She also warned of the need to be vigilant with regard to the changing of goal posts and relaxing of health standards when political authorities have just ignored their responsibility to act. The health costs of bad air quality are neither imaginary nor hypothetical; they are real and paid for by individuals in terms of increased illness, allergies, childhood asthmas and premature mortality, and by

society in terms of medical costs, lost working days and disimproved quality of life.

Kerstin Meyer from the European Environmental Bureau listed the most important measures in combating air pollution:

- reorganising cities to limit car use,
- establishing low-emission zones; introducing restrictions of polluting vehicles into city centres and decommissioning older buses
- introducing congestion charges - these have proven to be effective: in London the charge has reduced inner city traffic by 20% and congestion by 30%, while the recent introduction of a congestion charge in Stockholm proved to be a huge success and reduced traffic by 25 % within one month of its introduction (prior estimates only predicted a reduction of 10-15 %).
- retrofitting older buses and cars with particulate filters
- introducing speed limits that increase fluidity of traffic: slower is faster

The conference also outlined ideas how to promote increased use public transport during pollution peaks. For example, the Austrian city of Graz offers people free tickets, which can be ordered by mobile phone. If offered viable alternatives, the public are willing to change their behaviour and embrace more environmentally-friendly options.

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