

EEB COMMENT: THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION MUST ACT ON CHEMICAL POLLUTION AND NOT FURTHER DELAY THE LEGISLATION ON THE SUSTAINABLE USE OF PESTICIDES

At stake is the trust of European citizens in the EU project

The one planet: one health approach to tackle planetary crisis

In these troubled times of Covid-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine, trust is more important than ever. European citizens need to trust that their political leaders will hear them and act on their behalf. European citizens are asking the EU institutions to act now in order to build a better society that is resilient, future-proof, has justice, takes social and environmental factors at its heart. We are facing several parallel planetary crises, namely climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution that are already negatively affecting food security.. Many European citizens are well aware of these threats and ask that urgent action is taken to tackle them.

In 2019, the European Commission presented The European Green Deal (EGD), an ambitious and holistic effort to tackle all crises via a large number of policies. It was, in the words of President von der Leyen, a “[man in the moon moment](#)”. One of the key areas of work was pollution, with the goal of achieving a toxic-free environment. Flagship initiatives for achieving this goal included the Zero Pollution Action Plan (ZPAP), the Chemical Strategy for sustainability (CSS) and the Farm to Fork Strategy.

A holistic “One planet: one health” approach is necessary because climate, biodiversity and pollution crises are interrelated and need to be tackled together for policies on those areas to be efficient. As an example of this, scientists warn of the [combined effects](#) on chemical pollution and climate change on biodiversity. Chemicals can affect biodiversity’s future resilience as threats are posed by climate change, like higher temperatures or increased drought conditions. Climate change can affect the fate and toxicity of chemicals in the environment, for example by influencing the pH and with it the uptake and bioavailability of chemicals.

An urgent call to address the pollution crisis

Pollution is responsible for [9 million deaths](#) per year worldwide, this is to one in six deaths worldwide, making it the world's largest environmental risk factor for disease and premature death. Pollution has already reached the [most remote corners of the globe](#), from the deepest oceans to the highest mountains. Babies are born pre-polluted, with a wide range of man made toxic chemicals [such as PFAS](#). Prenatal exposure to hazardous chemicals is associated with a [wide range of diseases](#) both in childhood and as adults. As the global chemicals sales are expected to double [by 2030](#). Scientists recently declared that pollution had crossed the planetary boundary and is one of the [main drivers](#) of biodiversity loss, [pushing 1 million species to extinction](#).

The EU is not leading by example

European Environmental Bureau

• Rue des Deux Églises 14-16, 1000 Brussels, Belgium • ☎ +32 228 91090 • eeb@eeb.org • www.eeb.org

*International non-profit association • Association internationale sans but lucratif (AISBL) • EC register for interest representatives:
ID number: 06798511314-27 • BCE ID number: 0415.814.848 • RPM Tribunal de l'entreprise francophone de Bruxelles*

The European Union has failed to listen to independent science and is not putting the health and safety of its citizens first.

The situation is critical and by not taking urgent action we are sawing the branch on which we sit. By siding with lobbies with heavy [vested interests](#), the European Commission is currently delaying some of its own initiatives and watering down others. This is an attack by lobbies on the European Green Deal's goals of tackling pollution and addressing the planetary crises.

For example, the revision of the legislation on the sustainable use of pesticides (SUD) that should halve the use of chemical pesticides by 2030, an objective committed to in the Biodiversity and Farm to Fork Strategies and Zero Pollution Action Plan, was to be published on the 23rd of March, alongside with the Nature Restoration Law. It was postponed because of the pressure from [private interests](#), as some [politicians](#) are [misusing the war in Ukraine](#) as an excuse to derail the Farm to Fork Strategy. The publication of the SUD was postponed, despite the differing [broad consensus](#) amongst the scientific community. Their stance is that in the light of war in Ukraine, the full implementation of the Farm to Fork Strategy is more necessary than ever. These attacks on the Farm to Fork Strategy are not new. The very same groups already tried to derail the Farm to Fork Strategy using the [Covid-19 pandemic](#) as an excuse.

Independent science has linked exposure to chemical pesticides to severe illnesses like [cancer and Parkinson's disease](#). A delay in the proposed law will delay efforts to prevent them. The first [victims of pesticides](#), farmers and farm workers, are currently being left to fend for themselves. More farmers and farm workers will become victims because of political inaction. Chemical pesticides are also responsible for the over-pollution of our [environment](#) and consequences to mankind are to be found [everywhere](#) around us.

The Commission has also delayed any the decision on the bans of harmful chemicals such as microplastics, and, since 2015, it is delaying a decision that would put an end to the use of a toxic phthalate, named DEHP, in PVC articles, giving it a 'de facto' authorisation for 7 years now. It is also not delivering on the Chemical Strategy for Sustainability commitment to ban the most harmful chemicals in all consumer and professional uses, because the proposed legislation has been watered down, following heavy lobbying by the chemical industry.

Worryingly enough, European scientific bodies have had their credibility seriously undermined in the eyes of citizens, as they are not acting based on independent science to adequately protect them from polluting harmful substances. The most recent example of this is the [failure](#) of the European Chemicals Agency's Committee for Risk Assessment (RAC) to recognise widely-used pesticide-active substance glyphosate as a carcinogenic or genotoxic agent, even when the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified glyphosate as [probably carcinogenic to humans](#) already in 2015.

All these decisions also raise serious doubts on whether the precautionary principle, enshrined in the Treaty of Functioning of the European Union and which is an essential protection from harm principle, is being applied.

The far-reaching consequences

Delaying the implementation of several initiatives of the Green Deal, which aim is to move towards a resilient and toxic-free environment, and not taking strong action where needed on chemical

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pollution is not without consequences. These consequences are more far-reaching than the very harmful effects of exposure to toxic substances in an over-polluted environment.

In the last decade, trust in the European institutions has been eroded often by nationalist on national political interest. Merchants of doubts have exploited the Covid-19 pandemic to gain support and make their base of Eurosceptics grow. In these post-truth fake-news times, science has also been dangerously subject to many attacks that have undermined it and dangerously eroded its credibility.

It is more important than ever that the European Institutions lead by example, show clearly that they listen to their citizens' legitimate demand to be protected from harmful pollution and live in a toxic-free resilient environment. They must act promptly and ambitiously to do so, applying the precautionary principle when necessary. The European Institutions must listen to independent science and stand as their most firm advocate against the growing number of merchants of doubt. They must stop these merchants from gaining more support by continually eroding the foundations of the European Union and a science-based society of democracy.

As a first step, the European Commission must not delay again the legislative package containing the revision of the legislation on the sustainable use of pesticides and the nature restoration law. It has to be published on the 22nd June. The European Commission must also publish proposals to revise the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD) and update the list of priority water pollutants in surface and groundwater (EQSD, GWD) without delay. Currently the indicative timing for publishing those proposals has been postponed from the third to the fourth quarter of 2022. The Commission must also stop delaying decisions on the bans of harmful chemicals, advance on implementing existing commitments, and ensure that the reform of REACH and the classification and labelling of (CLP) regulations are aligned with the goals and ambition of the European Green Deal and the CSS.

The EU must defend its Green Deal

On 16 July 2019, Ursula von der Leyen made The European Green Deal one of her top priorities in the [Political Guidelines "A Europe that Strives for More"](#), that she delivered at the European Parliament, an agenda that allowed her to be elected President of the European Commission. In her speech she stated ***'For the health of our citizens, our children and grandchildren, Europe needs to move towards a zero-pollution ambition. I will put forward a cross-cutting strategy to protect citizens' health from environmental degradation and pollution, addressing air and water quality, hazardous chemicals, industrial emissions, pesticides and endocrine disrupters.'*** She also said, ***'If elected, I will strengthen the links between people, nations and institutions.'***

It is essential, at this half-way point in the implementation of the European Green Deal, that the commitments taken are honoured. They need to be delivered and Member States and citizens must see the commitment turned into ambitious laws that are implemented promptly in their countries. This will help citizens trust in the European Project and in their futures. In these troubled times, EU citizens need to trust that the EU institutions will listen to them and have their interests at heart.