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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Outcomes of the second EU Clean Air Forum (Bratislava, 28-29 November 2019) - Information from the Slovak delegation

Delegations will find in the Annex an information note from the Slovak delegation on the above subject, to be dealt with under 'Any other business' at the Council (Environment) meeting on 19 December 2019.

**Outcomes of the second EU Clean Air Forum
(Bratislava, 28-29 November 2019)**

- Information from the Slovak delegation -

Introduction

While air quality has improved across the European Union over the past few decades, air pollution remains the number one environmental cause of premature deaths in Europe – over 400 000 are attributed to air pollution. Following the first EU Clean Air Forum in Paris in 2017, the European Commission, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic, organised a second EU Clean Air Forum on 28 and 29 November 2019 in Bratislava. This second Forum focused on four themes: air quality and health; air quality and energy; air quality and agriculture; and clean air funding mechanisms¹. It brought together over 400 decision-makers, stakeholders and experts on these topics to reflect on the development and implementation of effective European, national and local air policies, projects and programmes. Social media activities around the conference generated, inter alia, over 2 million views on Twitter.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/events/eu-clean-air-forum-2019-nov-28_en

Opening speeches

As was underlined on behalf of Zuzana Čaputová, President of the Slovak Republic, careful day-to-day democracy-building, raising public awareness, creating good conditions for civil participation, and improving of environmental legislation are important preconditions to achieving clean air. Slovakia will strive to meet the standards of the Ambient Air Quality Directives and support efforts to strengthen air policies at international, national and local level, and invites all EU Member States to do the same. Lastly, it will be important to ensure that climate and air action mutually reinforce one other and that trade-offs are avoided, including in the context of achieving climate neutrality by 2050.

As European Commissioner Vella pointed out, EU air quality policy has been partially effective. However, the Union and its Member States can and must do better to achieve full compliance with EU air quality standards. Efforts made at EU level in recent years should be further strengthened, for example by securing funding for air quality measures, carrying out continued enforcement action where needed, and providing additional implementation support, including Clean Air Dialogues. The EU and all Member States can benefit from their efforts under the revised National Emission Ceilings Directive to improve air quality domestically. More efforts are especially needed in sectors such as residential heating, transport and agriculture.

Clean air for health

The Clean Air Forum saw a clear confirmation of the scientific underpinning of the health effects of air pollution. The panellists and participants noted the existing gap between EU air quality standards and WHO air quality guidelines. At the same time, it was pointed out that enforcement is paramount when standards are not met. The importance of the Ambient Air Quality Directives as a driver for action at national level was underlined.

Better heating for better quality of life

The link between air quality and the production and use of energy was also debated, in particular in the context of the use of fossil fuels and wood for domestic heating and cooking. Speakers called for increased policy coherence in these areas to further reap co-benefits and avoid trade-offs, i.e. as regards biomass use. They showed strong support for win-win solutions for reducing air pollutant and greenhouse gas emissions, in particular through improved building insulation and the replacement of outdated heating installations.

Agriculture for a clean environment

A session on agriculture focused on how existing measures to reduce emissions can be implemented in everyday farming practice, and how this makes economic sense and can help to make agriculture in the EU more sustainable and future-proof. The panellists noted that agriculture is the sector that has made the least progress in air pollutant emission reductions since the turn of the century. They underlined the importance of making the most of funding available under the Common Agricultural Policy to reduce air pollutant emissions, and pointed out the need to focus action first and foremost on the largest emitters.

Funding clean air measures

The discussion on EU funding mechanisms for action on and innovation for air quality concluded that action for clean air can be used as leverage to fund the climate transition: the direct benefits of clean air actions – which often also benefit the climate – can be communicated to citizens more easily, which makes funding more easily acceptable and supported. Speakers underlined the importance of tapping into all relevant funds available, as indirect funding will remain the most important source for air quality action. Leveraging private investment can provide additional funds. Panellists also called for coherence in providing and using funding, in order to avoid negative side-effects resulting from other EU-funded actions on air quality.

Conclusions

The forum concluded with a reflective and forward-looking debate on the general challenge that air pollution poses and how this should be tackled over the coming years. In particular, this included lessons learnt from the Fitness Check of the Ambient Air Quality Directives, which was published by the Commission on 28 November² and will be presented by the Commission to Council today.

Side events

In addition to the core conference programme, the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic, together with various partners, organised a number of events focusing on air quality with a view to reaching out to wider audiences, including the European Environment Agency (EEA) Eionet Air Quality meeting, the panel on clean air in cities, the environmental education festival SISKÁ, and a public discussion in which high-level panellists from DG ENV, the EEA, the Ministry of Environment, the City of Bratislava and NGOs discussed challenges related to efforts to improve air quality.

The Slovak Ministry of Environment has also joined CleanAir@School, a joint citizen-science initiative of the EEA and the European Network of the Heads of Environmental Protection Agencies (EPA Network), measuring indoor and outdoor levels of NO₂ at schools in Bratislava from mid-November to mid-December. The project aims to raise awareness of air pollution in school environments, its sources and its impacts on children's health.

² https://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/quality/aqd_fitness_check_en.htm