



Commission takes Italy to Court over air pollution and failure to properly treat urban waste water

Brussels, 7 March 2019

The European Commission decided today to refer Italy to the Court of Justice of the EU in two separate cases regarding environment legislation.

The first case concerns air pollution, and a failure to protect citizens against the effects of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). The Commission is calling on Italy to respect agreed air quality limit values and take appropriate measures to cut pollution levels in ten agglomerations covering around 7 million people. The limit values for NO₂ set out under EU legislation on ambient air quality ([Directive 2008/50/EC](#)) had to be met in 2010.

Air pollution directly causes both chronic and serious diseases such as asthma, cardiovascular problems and lung cancer. Ill-health caused by air pollution costs the economy billions of euros in lost working days.

This referral follows similar action against France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in May 2018, for similar failures to respect limit values for NO₂, and for failing to take appropriate measures to keep exceedance periods as short as possible.

In May 2018 Italy was also referred to the Court of Justice over persistently high levels of particulate matter (PM₁₀).

The second Court case against Italy is regarding **water** pollution. Italy is failing to ensure that all agglomerations with a population of more than 2 000 are provided with collecting systems for urban waste water and that urban waste water entering collecting systems is adequately treated before discharge, as required by the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive ([Council Directive 91/271/EEC](#)).

The Commission considers that 620 agglomerations in 16 Regions (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardia, Marche, Puglia, Sardegna, Sicilia, Toscana, Umbria, Valle d'Aosta, and Veneto), are in breach of EU rules on collection or treatment of urban waste water.

Italy has not complied with EU rules in these regions for over 13 years, with significant risks to the environment and human health in a large number of agglomerations. The general and persistent character of Italy's breach of the collection and treatment obligations under the Urban Waste Water Directive is confirmed by two other cases, in which the Court has already ruled against Italy regarding larger agglomerations and has imposed fines in one of those cases.

Background

EU rules on [ambient air quality](#) ([Directive 2008/50/EC](#)) and clean air for Europe require Member States to assess air quality throughout their territory and to take measures to limit the exposure of citizens to pollutants. The Commission in its Communication '[A Europe that protects: Clean air for all](#)' from May 2018 stepped up its action and its engagement with Member States to protect citizens' health by setting out a new approach to the problem, providing national, regional and local actors with practical help to improve air quality in Europe.

In total, there are 14 infringement cases pending against Member States for exceeding NO₂ limits (Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Denmark, France, Spain, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom).

The [Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive](#) requires Member States to ensure that agglomerations or urban settlements (towns, cities) properly collect and treat their urban waste water. Untreated waste water can be contaminated with harmful bacteria and viruses, presenting a risk to human health. It also contains nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous which can damage freshwaters and the marine environment, promoting excessive algae growth that chokes other living organisms, a process known as eutrophication.

For More Information

- On the key decisions in the March 2019 infringements package, see full [MEMO/19/1472](#)

- On the general infringements procedure, see [MEMO/12/12](#)
- On the [EU infringements procedure](#)

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Press contacts:

[Enrico BRIVIO](#) (+32 2 295 61 72)

[Daniela STOYCHEVA](#) (+32 2 295 36 64)

General public inquiries: [Europe Direct](#) by phone [00 800 67 89 10 11](#) or by [email](#)