

EU report finds air pollution kills 310,000 Europeans annually

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Air pollution is killing more than 300,000 Europeans annually and costing EU countries €80 billion a year in sick leave, according to the latest assessment of air quality by the European Commission.

The Commission's report, which is to be presented today to the Clean Air for Europe steering group in Brussels, also found that air pollution is reducing the life expectancy of Europeans by almost nine months on average.

A map with the report shows that the problem is at its worst in Belgium, the Randstat area of the Netherlands, northern Italy and new member-states - particularly the southern part of Poland and the central part of Hungary.

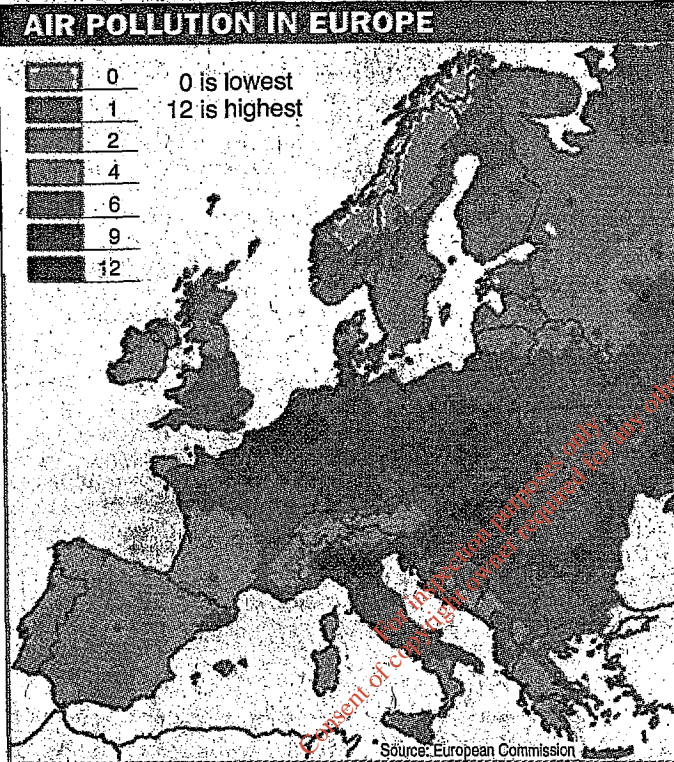
Ireland is shown relatively low down in the scale, though there are regional variations. The east and south has more air pollution than the west, north-west and south-west, reflecting differences in population, industrial development and traffic.

Overall, the report equates the premature deaths of 310,000 people a year with the loss of over three million life years. It also notes that every working European is on sick leave for at least a half-day a year due to illnesses caused by air pollution.

The main pollutants of concern for human health are fine dust particles, known as PM₁₀, which can penetrate deep into the respiratory tract, and ground level ozone, or photochemical smog mainly caused by traffic.

In its most recent review of Ireland's environment, published last May, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) also identified pollution from rapidly increasing road traffic as "the primary threat to the quality of air in Ireland".

The results of monitoring, which showed high levels of nitrogen dioxide levels in some



parts of central Dublin, indicated that compliance with the stringent new NO₂ and PM₁₀ standards "may present problems in some urban areas".

Abatement of PM₁₀ pollution would be "much more difficult" than eradicating winter smog in Irish cities in the early 1990s. To cut PM₁₀ might even involve short-term traffic bans, which would represent a major new challenge for local authorities.

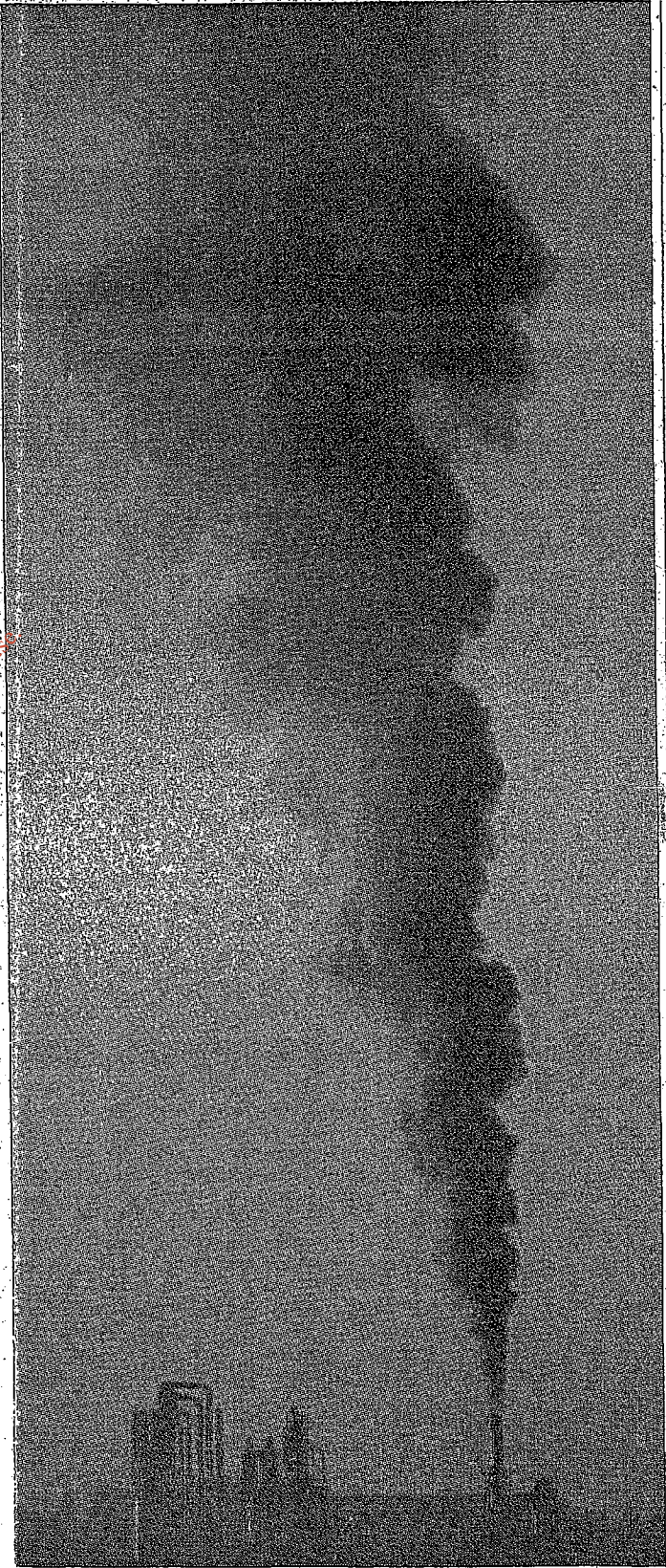
The European Commission's report was produced as a prelude to the adoption of a new "Thematic Strategy on Air Pollution" in May 2005. This strategy will set objectives on considerably reducing premature deaths and illness-caused by air pollution.

It aims to reduce by three months the nine-month loss in average life expectancy from exposure to PM₁₀ between now

and 2020 as well as cutting the estimated 288,000 premature deaths caused annually by this pollutant by 80,000. The strategy also sets targets to reduce the 3 million life years lost annually by 1.1 million and the estimated 83,000 serious hospital admissions every year of people suffering from PM₁₀-related illnesses by 30,500.

These improvements are to be brought about by implementing more effectively current policies to combat air pollution, such as vehicle exhaust limits, national emissions ceilings, industrial pollution controls and air quality laws.

However, the report concedes that air pollution will continue to cause "very significant adverse impacts on human health" in 2020 - including more than 200,000 premature deaths a year.



Air pollution is worst in Belgium, the Randstat area of the Netherlands, northern Italy and in new member-states.