

EU Environmental Policy

The EU is a leading authority in Environmental policy. It is one of the most important and far-reaching areas of EU legislation with up to 80% of UK legislation on environmental affairs estimated to come from the EU. However, critics of EU environmental policy question the efficiency of some measures, arguing that the cost of complying with these regulations leaves European business uncompetitive, especially in the face of increased competition from China and India, which do not have such strict environmental rules.

History

Environmental policy is a relatively recent EU policy area. It was not until 1972 that the first of a series of European Environmental Action Plans (EAP) was launched. The Single European Act (1986) marked the beginning of a more prominent role for environmental protection in EU policy-making, introducing the principal that environmental protection should be considered in all new Community legislation. EU environmental policy was substantially expanded by the Treaties of Maastricht (1992) and Amsterdam (1997), which made *sustainable development* a central objective. Sustainable development also forms a key part of the Lisbon Strategy launched in 2000, which underpins all EU policy regarding the single market.

What does EU Environmental Policy do?

The EU has passed legislation aimed at improving the quality of water, tackling air and noise pollution, assuring the safety of chemicals, setting standards for waste disposal and protecting the EU's native wildlife and plants. The current EAP, which runs from 2002-2012, identifies four priority areas: climate change; nature and biodiversity; environment, health and quality of life, and natural resources and waste. The EU has also taken a leading role in global environmental negotiations, especially the signing of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol at a UN Conference on Climate Change. The EU committed its members to reducing greenhouse gas emissions 8% by 2012, compared to levels in 1990. In March 2007, this target was extended to a 20% reduction by 2020. In order to meet such commitments, the EU created the *Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS)* in December 2002. This includes limits on the amount of carbon dioxide firms can produce in six key industries: energy, steel, cement, glass, brick-making, and paper/cardboard production. The European Commission has recently introduced plans to add aircraft emissions to this, and in December 2007, the EU pledged to force car manufacturers to cut emissions by at least 20% in the next 5 years. The EU's political leaders have also agreed that 20% of the EU's energy should come from renewable sources by 2020, for example 10% of road fuel is to be composed of biofuel by 2020. However there has been criticism that the increased use of biofuels might be contributing to rises in global food prices. The Commission launched an investigation into this link

between biofuels and rising prices in April 2008. Most controversially, such targets are legally binding and theoretically enforceable in the ECJ. In April 2008, the EU Parliament supported the Commission's proposal that environmental 'crimes' be punished by harmonised penalties across the EU.

Facts and Figures

- The EU produces around 22% of global greenhouse gas emissions and creates over two billion tonnes of rubbish a year.
- The cost of compliance with EU environmental legislation for the ten new member states has been estimated at €100 billion. EU funding only covers 4% of this sum.

Arguments

For

- The threat to the environment is global and should be tackled on an international scale – the EU plays an important role in setting this agenda.
- The EU's commitment to environmental protection encourages other countries to adopt similar measures.
- There is a great deal of public support for Environmental action at a Europe-wide level.

Against

- The cost of EU environmental regulation can undermine the competitiveness of EU businesses.
- The amount of greenhouse gas emissions that firms are allowed to produce under the ETS has been set too high so that firms have little incentive to cut their emissions to meet the EU's wider targets.

Quotes

'Even the darkest sceptic has to admit that when it comes to environment policy it makes sense for states to cooperate and do things in common.' Dr Caroline Jackson MEP, 2003

'Nobody has the foggiest idea how the renewables target will be met.' Ernest-Antoine Seillière, Head of Business Europe, March 2007

Technical Terms

Sustainable development: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Emissions Trading Scheme: A scheme to cap emissions of carbon dioxide by allowing firms that exceed their emissions limits to buy extra allowance from firms whose emissions are under target levels.

Links

- <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/newprg/index.htm>
- <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>