

Interview — How does Europe get to zero pollution?

The European Union has embarked on ambitious plans to drastically reduce emissions and pollution over the coming decades. Part of this includes the recently launched Zero Pollution Action Plan which will focus on cutting air, water and soil pollution to levels no longer considered harmful to human health and the environment. We sat down with Ian Marnane, EEA environment, health and well-being expert working on an upcoming EEA report on Zero Pollution, which is expected to be published later this year.

A lot has been said about the EU's 2050 ambitions, the European Green Deal and in achieving net-zero emissions. How does the EU's Zero Pollution Action Plan fit into these efforts?

The European Green Deal is underpinned by a range of ambitious initiatives and the Zero Pollution Action Plan is an important element of the European Green Deal, setting out a roadmap towards **preventing significant pollution impact** on our health and ecosystems.

The action plan has many synergies with other policy measures under the European Green Deal, such as Farm to Fork, Circular Economy Action Plan, Biodiversity Strategy, Soil Thematic Strategy and the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability, with one of the key objectives of the action plan being to embed pollution prevention in all relevant policy areas.

While **climate change** is not specifically within the scope of the Zero Pollution Action Plan, it is clear that achieving the aims of the action plan will help us to move closer to net-zero objectives, and vice-versa.

The Zero Pollution Action Plan also supports broader international agendas such as the **United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals**, with the action plan acknowledging that **pollution does not stop at borders** and that, for example, our consumption habits and waste management activities in Europe influence pollution levels globally.

What does the Zero Pollution Action Plan involve specifically?

It is a very broad topic and difficult to define, but one of the key objectives is to encourage and promote **inclusion of pollution prevention in all relevant EU policies**. Other key elements of the plan include **addressing inequalities** in exposure to pollution, better implementation and enforcement, collective action and changes across society, championing global change towards zero pollution and developing a more integrated approach to monitoring pollution.

The action plan also recognises that in order to achieve these ambitions we need to ensure that policy measures are based on **prevention of pollution at source**, with concepts such as remediation of environmental pollution and 'end-of-pipe' elimination being less sustainable as long-term measures.

The plan itself includes a comprehensive list of specific actions to be taken to initiate delivery on the zero pollution ambition (with timeframes for these actions) as well as defining nine specific 'Flagships' actions which are set out in the action plan. For example, Flagship 1 is 'reducing health inequalities through zero pollution'.

The overall timeframe for the action plan looks towards 2050, however, the plan also includes targets for 2030 to help gather some initial momentum in delivering on the zero pollution ambition.

What is the EEA's role in the Zero Pollution Action Plan?

We must be able to effectively **monitor progress** in delivering on the zero pollution ambition in order to understand where we are doing well, where progress is slower and where we need to gather further knowledge. This will help to drive delivery of the plan's ambition over the coming years.

The action plan includes a requirement for the EEA and the European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) to produce a **Zero Pollution Monitoring and Outlook assessment**. Specifically, the EEA is responsible for the preparation of the monitoring assessment, with the first assessment due to be delivered in late 2022 and a follow-up assessment in 2024.

This assessment will provide an integrated appraisal of recent pollution trends and whether our current performance puts the EU in a good position to meet the specific zero pollution targets for 2030 and other current policy targets as well as considering the longer-term objectives towards 2050.

How exactly will the EEA monitor progress?

Our assessment later this year will act as a **baseline** against which to measure future progress. The report will be based on available 'indicators', which inform us on recent trends in pollution emissions and impacts. Using this information we will be able to provide an initial analysis as to whether we are on track to achieve the specific 2030 targets and also whether our 'direction of travel' in other areas is aligned with current policy objectives .

Importantly, our analysis will also likely identify areas where our knowledge is incomplete and where we need to develop better information and indicators to use in future assessments. We will also use other sources of information (such as country specific assessment or research outputs) to help **identify emerging issues** and provide early warnings on key future issues to be addressed.

A second assessment, to be delivered in 2024, will build on the 2022 report and include additional available indicators and information to increase our understanding of progress against the zero

pollution objectives. This work will then be used by the European Commission to develop policy briefs to inform and direct future pollution related policy.

How realistic is it that we will ever get to a zero level of pollution?

The level of ambition set out in the Zero Pollution Action Plan is indeed very high and some might question the possibility of achieving zero pollution. However, setting the bar high in this manner provides a clear vision that **we need a more systemic change** and a more integrated approach to addressing pollution and its impacts.

We are already operating beyond the capacity of our planet. Air, soil and water pollution have significant negative impacts on our health and on our ecosystems. Studies such as the IPBES global assessment on biodiversity and ecosystems services show that current human activity is negatively impacting the very ecosystems on which we depend, and this is clearly not sustainable. So we need to work hard to achieve the objectives of the Zero Pollution Action Plan if we want to become a more sustainable society.



Ian Marnane

EEA expert on environment, health and well-being

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