

Cour des comptes



PUBLIC POLICIES FOR THE PREVENTION OF AIR POLLUTION

Survey requested by the National Assembly's Public Policy
Assessment and Audit Committee

December 2015

DISCLAIMER

The following report was drawn up at the request of the President of the National Assembly acting in the name of the Public Policy Assessment and Audit Committee (CEC), within the framework of the parliamentary assistance procedure provided for in Article L. 132-5 of the Financial Courts Code.

This summary is intended to aid in understanding and using the report prepared by the Cour des comptes. Only the report is legally binding on the Cour des comptes.

Public policies for the prevention of air pollution

The health and economic impact of atmospheric pollution warrants an ambitious public policy. Experts believe that this type of pollution is responsible for between 17,000 and 42,000 premature deaths a year in France and carries a minimum economic cost of €20-30 billion, with figures varying depending on the pollutant and the illnesses related to it. The impact on the public finances is evident already, with air pollution-related illnesses costing the national health insurance fund (CNAM) at least €1 billion. Health studies show, moreover, that the most severe effects of pollution are caused by prolonged exposure to pollutants in the shape of harmful aerosols.

The European Union (EU) has been the driving force behind most of the measures and tools deployed in France to combat air pollution in the last 30 years. It is vital to pursue this policy within an international framework, for while the effects of air pollution are local, emission conditions and the influence of atmospheric movements necessitate shared standards to ensure that no European nation is penalised for emissions produced by neighbouring countries that are not cutting their own emissions. Yet France sometimes implements European directives late or in ways that leave it exposed to legal action.

That being said, a number of the measures put in place have had significant effects.

France has an effective air quality monitoring system, even if efforts are still needed to capture pollutants whose harmful effects have been identified more recently, such as pesticides or ultrafine particles.

Emissions of industrial pollutants have declined considerably, and not merely because of deindustrialisation. Stricter standards and work in recent years with economic agents to develop better techniques have played a part in sharply reducing the share of pollutant emissions attributable to the industry and energy production sectors. The transport sector has also taken significant strides forward, despite the shelving of measures that would have had a major effect on pollution, such as the ecotax and identification of the most polluting vehicles, which is necessary to create restricted traffic areas. The residential, services and farming sectors remain relatively unaffected by emission-cutting measures, even though they represent a growing share of the emissions of certain polluting substances.

The many different emitters present and the mobile or spread-out nature of pollution sources, which range from on-road vehicles to farming operations and individual heating systems, make it more complicated to carry out anti-pollution measures at the local level and preclude a national one-size-fits-all solution.

Public policies for the prevention of air pollution

Despite a regular and in some cases pronounced decline in emissions since 1990, some parts of France are still in a non-compliant situation in terms of concentration levels for certain pollutants, including ozone, fine particles and nitrogen dioxide. And indeed the European Commission has begun potentially costly legal action against France owing to breaches of the authorised standards for these last two substances.

In the face of these challenges, France has yet to establish a stable air pollution prevention policy. Although it first emerged in the 1980s, this policy today is built on a variety of overlapping mechanisms, not all of which have improving air quality as their primary and explicit objective. In fact, the goal of preventing pollution actually clashes at times with the objectives of other public policies, notably those geared to prevent climate warming. For example, the emphasis placed on cutting CO₂ emissions has led to support for technologies that emit atmospheric pollutants with harmful short-term effects, such as nitrogen dioxide or fine particles. Measures taken over the years to promote diesel or wood-based heating methods illustrate this point.

Aside from those applied to the industrial sector and energy production, the measures taken have not gone down the “polluter pays” route. Rather, regulatory tools have primarily been used, offering few specific financial incentives other than those aimed at limiting emissions linked to individual heating systems.

Furthermore, the subsidiarity principle is not fully applied, which undermines the effectiveness of the initiatives taken. While air pollution is an essentially local problem that requires a concerted response by those responsible on the ground, the way that responsibilities are distributed creates strain. Too many initiatives at national level disrupt local action by prefects and local authorities, delaying or hindering the implementation of effective tools. This is notably observed during spikes in pollution.

To be effective, the fight against air pollution requires much greater involvement by all economic agents, including individuals. Changes in individual behaviour, particularly in terms of transport and energy consumption, are what must be promoted.

The last five years have brought a string of national plans without any assessment of the measures put in place. Spending by general government on this issue has not been tracked. All of this is evidence that while steps have been taken to promote air quality, there is still no structured policy spanning all polluting sectors and backed by clear communications.

Orientation and recommendations

To the Agriculture, Agrifood and Forestry Ministry:

1. Include measures in the next national plan to reduce emissions of atmospheric pollutants (PREPA) so that the State can meet European emission ceiling targets by 2030;

To the Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy Ministry:

2. Measure the impact of measures taken to prevent air pollution within the framework of national and local plans and also during pollution spikes;
3. Ensure consistency in the timing of national plans, regional schemes and local air pollution prevention plans to ensure that the framework for local action is better defined;
4. In national and local plans, quantify the financing associated with planned measures;
5. Implement funding for the air quality monitoring network in accordance with the “polluter pays” principle in all economic sectors;
6. Make it mandatory for approved air quality monitoring associations (AASQAs) to monitor the airborne presence of the most harmful pesticides;
7. Tax diesel and petrol according to their respective negative externalities (atmospheric pollutants and greenhouse gases) to rebalance the tax treatment for these two fuels;
8. Owing to the phase-out of the ecotax, review the special tax rates for certain on-road vehicles to more effectively take account of the impact of HGV emissions on air pollution;
9. Introduce stickers to identify vehicles according to their pollutant emissions, so that traffic restriction measures can be set up more quickly;
10. Track all credits assigned not only to monitoring but also to measures to improve and conduct research into air quality;
11. Enhance the information provided to Parliament by adding air quality indicators to the budget annex dealing with environmental protection;

To the Social Affairs, Health and Women’s Rights Ministry:

12. Set up information-sharing for epidemiological purposes between occupational health services, regional health agencies and interregional epidemiology units (CIREs).