

Statement by Commissioner Karmenu Vella following Air Quality Ministerial meeting

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

A few words about this morning's Air Quality ministerial meeting.

This Commission has consistently said that it wishes to be 'big on the big things'. And it doesn't get bigger than the loss of life due to air pollution.

First of all, I must stress that I invited ministers to Brussels because my primary concern, the primary concern of this Commission in fact, is with protecting citizens. When I say citizens, I mean the people who are already suffering and all the others who are at risk. Children who have asthma and their parents. Parents who have obstructive lung diseases and their children.

And that concern was one shared by the Ministers. I want to thank them for coming at such short notice. And I want to thank them for sharing my perspective that protecting citizens is the priority.

Furthermore Ministers expressed an understanding that to be credible with citizens, effective action must be taken and that means respecting the process that ensures that.

Every year, an astonishing number of citizens' lives are cut short because of air pollution. We have known this for decades, and the air quality limit values have been in place for almost as long.

And yet, still today, in 2018, 400 000 people are still dying prematurely every year because of a massive, widespread failure to address the problem. And many more suffer unnecessarily from air quality related diseases.

I am sure that those present at this morning's meeting share my frustration that a sense of urgency is not always evident across Member states, and across other Ministries.

Secondly, I must also stress that this is not just a personal initiative. Today's meeting was held not only with the full support of President Juncker, but also the full support of 500 million citizens. We are also determined – as a College – to act on this problem, with the seriousness it demands.

The State of the Union commitment to protecting citizens cannot be illustrated more clearly than by protecting the air people breathe.

And thirdly, a reminder about the ongoing legal process. The deadlines for meeting the legal obligations have long elapsed.

And some say, we have waited already too long.

But we can delay no more. And I have made this very clear to Ministers this morning.

And I want to underline that I consider Environment Ministers as my key allies in redressing the situation by taking all possible measures without delay.

As much as protecting our citizens is a key priority for President Juncker and the entire College of Commissioners, in Member States, this needs to become a key priority of the entire governments, of all Ministers concerned: be it Ministers for transport, energy, industry, agriculture or finance. Our shared credibility depends on it.

In our exchange, there were some positive suggestions. But at first sight these were not substantial enough to change the big picture. Without new and effective measures, in many cases, air quality standards will further continue to be exceeded for months and years, even well beyond 2020. In the face of such longstanding failures to take serious action, and in view that the ongoing legal process will continue, I urge all Member states to address this life-threatening problem with the urgency it deserves.

Inaction has consequences. It has consequences for citizens and the polluted air they breathe. Member states have responsibilities. Responsibilities to act. Inaction also has legal consequences for the Member States in question. Ministers were reminded of both these responsibilities as well as the legal consequences.

Thank you!