



Environment Council **Brussels, 5 March 2020**

Chair: **Tomislav Ćorić**, Minister of Environment and Energy, Croatia

European Commission representatives: Executive Vice-President of the Commission **Frans Timmermans** and Commissioners **Elisa Ferreira** and **Virginijus Sinkevičius**

Starting time: 09:30

The Environment Council will begin with climate activist **Greta Thunberg** addressing ministers as invited guest of the Presidency.

The European Commission will present its proposals on a **European climate law** and on a **just transition mechanism** as AOB items. The Council will hold an exchange of views on the **European Green Deal**. Ministers will then be invited to consider and adopt the EU's **long-term strategy** with a view to its **submission** to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Before breaking for lunch, the Polish delegation will inform ministers about the implementation of full auctioning for the **aviation** sector under the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS).

During an informal lunch, ministers will have the opportunity to discuss **climate diplomacy** together with Marc Vanheukelen, EEAS Ambassador at Large for Climate Diplomacy.

In the afternoon, the Council will aim to adopt **conclusions on improving air quality**. Ministers will then have an exchange of views on an **evaluation of water legislation**. The Council will also exchange views on **greening the European Semester**.

Finally, under any other business the Portuguese delegation will present the High Level Symposium on Water - Bridging SDG 6 and SDG 14 (Lisbon, 2 June 2020) and the European Commission will inform delegations about the by-catch of common dolphins, harbour porpoises and other protected species in fishing gear.

Press conference: at the end of the meeting, +/- 19.00

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[Environment Council meeting page](#)

[Press conferences and public events by video streaming](#)

[Video coverage in broadcast quality \(MPEG4\) and photo gallery](#)

¹ This note has been drawn up under the responsibility of the press office.

European Green Deal

In public session, the Council will have an exchange of views on the **European Green Deal**. The European Green Deal is a key instrument, addressing all sectors of the economy, for taking work forward on the EU's **transition to climate neutrality by 2050**. It was first presented to the Environment Council on 19 December 2019.

Among the many upcoming initiatives covering climate and the environment, the Presidency will invite ministers to focus on two issues:

- the **next steps and key initiatives** in the context of the EU's **climate neutrality** objective, and
- the **circular economy**.

Building a **climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe** is one of the four main priorities of the EU's **Strategic Agenda** for 2019-2024, which was agreed by the European Council on 20 June 2019. Ensuring that EU policies are consistent with the Paris Agreement was identified as one of the priority actions under this pillar, together with creating an effective circular economy, improving the environment, fighting the loss of biodiversity and preserving environmental systems. The Strategic Agenda recognises that the success of the green transition will depend on significant mobilisation of private and public investments, and that the transition must be taken forward in an inclusive manner, making sure no-one is left behind. Furthermore, the Strategic Agenda highlights the need to promote sustainable development and implement the 2030 Agenda.

On 11 December 2019, the Commission presented its communication on the **European Green Deal**, proposing a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy, where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use. The communication presents an initial roadmap of key actions across different policy areas to support the achievement of the objectives of the European Green Deal. The proposed actions are strongly interlinked, which means that strong coordination will be necessary to make the best possible use of the synergies while avoiding trade-offs. Major new initiatives on climate change and the environment are announced in 2020, including a legislative proposal on a climate neutral EU by 2050, an impact-assessed plan to increase the 2030 climate ambition, a Circular Economy Action Plan and a Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

On 12 December 2019, the **European Council endorsed the objective of EU climate neutrality by 2050**, in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement. The European Council recognised the need for an enabling framework benefiting all member states to ensure a cost-effective, just, socially balanced and fair transition. It called for all relevant EU legislation and policies to be consistent with and to contribute to the climate neutrality objective while respecting a level playing field, and highlighted, inter alia, the role of research, development and innovation policies, the need for significant investments, for ensuring energy security and for preserving the EU's competitiveness.

As one of the main elements of the consumption and production chapter of the new European Green Deal, the Commission is expected to shortly present a new **Circular Economy Action Plan** with the aim of, inter alia, stimulating the development of climate neutral and circular products in the EU and beyond. This action plan is expected to include a **sustainable products** initiative, supporting the circular design of all products and prioritising the reduction and reuse of materials before recycling them. It will also focus on resource intense sectors and include **measures to encourage businesses** to offer reusable, durable and repairable products and to **allow buyers to take informed and more sustainable decisions**.

The Council, in its conclusions of 4 October 2019, acknowledged the actions taken and results delivered within the framework of the first Circular Economy Action Plan of 2015, but stressed that **further ambitious efforts are needed** to trigger a systemic transition to a sustainable society.

Questions for ministers

1. In light of the guidance provided by the European Council, and taking account of the EU's role in the international climate change negotiations, which actions set out in the European Green Deal are essential next steps towards the EU's climate neutrality objective?
2. Which actions need to be put forward in the new Circular Economy Action Plan to allow the development of the circular economy to become beneficial to all economic players across value chains and to support consumers in making sustainable choices?

[Presidency note](#)

[Recording of the Environment Council of 19 December 2019 - exchange of views on the EU environment and climate policy in the new legislative term, including the European Green Deal](#)

Commission communication on the European Green Deal ([15051/19](#) + [ADD 1](#))

[European Council conclusions of 12 December 2019](#)

[The Council adopts conclusions on circular economy \(press release, 4 October 2019\)](#)

[Strategic agenda adopted by the European Council on 20 June 2019](#)

Submission of the EU's long-term climate strategy to the UN

Environment ministers will have a discussion on the **long-term low greenhouse gas emission strategy** of the European Union and its member states with the view to adopting the EU's submission to the UNFCCC **in time before COP26**, the 2020 UN Climate Change Conference, which is expected to take place from 9-19 November 2020, in Glasgow, UK.

The strategy enables the EU to fulfil one of its commitments under the **Paris Agreement**. In line with Article 4, paragraph 19, of the Paris Agreement, "all Parties should strive to formulate and communicate long-term low greenhouse gas emission development strategies, mindful of Article 2 taking into account their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances." The Conference of the Parties, in its decision 1/CP.21, paragraph 35, invited Parties to communicate, by 2020, to the secretariat mid-century, long-term low greenhouse gas emission development strategies in accordance with Article 4, paragraph 19, of the Paris Agreement.

On 12 December 2019, in its conclusions on climate change, the **European Council endorsed the objective of achieving a climate-neutral EU by 2050** and invited the Commission to prepare a proposal for the EU's the long-term low greenhouse gas emission development strategy as early as possible in 2020 with a view to its adoption by the Council and its submission to the UNFCCC. The Commission prepared a draft which was discussed and amended by member states at working party level, and which will be analysed and adopted by the Environment Council.

[European Council conclusions of 12 December 2019](#)

[Climate change: what the EU is doing](#)

[Taking the lead on climate change \(multimedia story\)](#)

[COP26 website](#)

Conclusions on air quality

In public session, environment ministers will have a discussion on the improvement of air quality with the aim of adopting conclusions which **take stock of the progress** made so far in improving air quality, and on the other hand, to provide a forward-looking perspective to **guide future work**, including in the context of actions relevant to air quality announced in the Commission's communication on the **European Green Deal**.

On 19 December 2019, the Environment Council had taken note of the Commission's presentation of a fitness check of two Ambient Air Quality Directives. The fitness check found that the Air Quality Directives have been **partially effective** in achieving their overall objectives of reducing air pollution and curbing its adverse effects. The Commission intends to use the findings of the fitness check to inform **further reflections** on whether the Air Quality Directives continue to provide the appropriate legislative framework to ensure protection from adverse impacts on, and risks to, human health and the environment.

Clean air is essential to human health. It is also essential for sustaining the environment, and provides multiple economic and social benefits. The scientific evidence of harmful effects of air pollution is well-established and robust and points to a clear need for action.

The current **Ambient Air Quality Directives** constitute the third generation of EU level air quality policies since the early 1980s, and have inherited many provisions, including many air quality standards from predecessor legislation. These policies have rendered some successes, as the air quality standards have been instrumental in **driving concentrations downward and reducing exceedance levels**. Air quality standards have been set for a total of 13 air pollutants: sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and nitrogen oxides, particulate matter (PM10, PM2.5), ozone, benzene, lead, carbon monoxide, arsenic, cadmium, nickel, and benzo(a)pyrene.

However, **the air quality challenge is far from being solved**. Although the number of people exposed to air pollution has decreased markedly during the past decade, persistent exceedances above EU air quality standards remain for several air pollutants, and especially for particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, ozone and benzo(a)pyrene – with significant impacts on human health and the environment. **Air pollution remains the most important environmental cause of health problems in the EU**, which is estimated to cause more than 400.000 premature deaths each year. People in urban areas are particularly exposed.

[Draft conclusions](#)

Fitness Check of the Ambient Air Quality Directives ([14712/19](#) + [ADD 1](#))

Evaluation of water legislation

In public session, environment ministers will have an exchange of views on an evaluation of EU **water legislation**. At the Environment Council meeting on 19 December 2019, the Commission presented the main conclusions of the fitness check of EU water legislation. This fitness check is a comprehensive policy evaluation of four Directives on integrated water management:

- The Water Framework Directive;
- the Environmental Quality Standards Directive;
- the Groundwater Directive and
- the Floods Directive.

It is also closely linked to the evaluation of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive.

The fitness check assesses whether the directives are fit for purpose by examining their performance against the five criteria set out in the Commission's Better Regulation agenda: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and EU added value. All directives were assessed with regard to their potential to address new societal challenges such as **climate change** and **contaminants of emerging concern** such as pharmaceuticals and microplastics.

The evaluation found that these legislative instruments are largely fit for purpose, with some **room for improvement** as regards their implementation. It is these improvements that the Presidency will ask ministers to address during the exchange of views.

Questions for ministers:

1. As the evaluation of the water legislation concluded that the Directives are largely fit for purpose, what is the most appropriate follow-up to address new societal challenges such as climate change and contaminants of emerging concern (e.g. pharmaceuticals, microplastics)?
2. How can enhanced integration of EU water legislation objectives in other EU policy areas (notably agriculture, energy, transport, industrial production) be achieved in a mutually supportive way?
3. How can implementation of EU water legislation be improved, taking into account key related challenges, such as availability of funding?

[Presidency note](#)

Commission communication ([15101/19](#) + [ADD 1](#), [15135/19](#) + [ADD 1](#) + [ADD 2](#))

Greening the European Semester

The European Semester is an opportunity to **integrate environmental concerns into broader economic and investment policies**. The mainstreaming of environmental integration in EU policies and activities is an obligation stemming from the Treaties and responds to the ever more pressing need to achieve a sustainable society. Its effectiveness is essential to ensure consistency in EU investments, with a view to **promoting sustainable development and supporting structural reforms**. This is reflected in the European Council conclusions of December 2018, which underline "the need for the Single Market to evolve so that it fully embraces (...) the **transition to a greener economy** and for strengthening the coherence with all related policies".

The impact of **environmental degradation risks increasingly affecting economic activity** through more frequent extreme weather conditions, consequences for human health and less reliable access to material resources and ecosystem services. According to the recent report 'The European Environment – State and Outlook' by the European Environment Agency (EEA), Europe is facing four major environmental crises: **the climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis, the resources crisis and the pollution crisis**. All these bring risks to the environment, our health and wellbeing.

The EU and its member states want to **make sure that the economy continues to grow, while guaranteeing that younger generations will also enjoy a prosperous future**. It is therefore crucial to take into consideration the boundaries of our planet in all our activities. It is in this vein that the Environment Council continuously has insisted on greening the European Semester. The European Semester, with its key coordinating role, is well placed to spur such a development and to position the issues it deals with at the top of the EU and national agendas.

The call for greening the European Semester is now gaining momentum. **The Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS)**, published by the Commission on 17 December 2019, replaced the Annual Growth Survey and can be seen as a **paradigm shift in EU economic policy**. It points out that economic growth is not an end in itself and that an economy must work for the people and the planet. Climate and environmental concerns, technological progress and demographic change are set to transform our societies profoundly. While the Semester remains a tool for coordination of economic and social policies, it is acknowledged that the economic agenda must transform the Union into a sustainable economy, helping the EU and its member states to **achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** to which they committed.

In that regard, it is crucial to analyse how to integrate all SDGs, not just those of macroeconomic importance, without weakening the effectiveness of the European Semester. It is equally important to ensure that monitoring of SDG compliance is consistent with existing monitoring mechanisms, such as the Environmental Implementation Review (EIR) and new instruments announced by the European Green Deal, in order to **avoid possible overlaps and an additional administrative burden**. In this context, the new environmental action programme could propose a new monitoring mechanism to ensure that Europe remains on track to meet its environmental objectives, while the dashboard envisaged in the European Green Deal is set to monitor progress against all of its objectives.

The ASGS points to the **European Green Deal** presented by the Commission as the new EU growth strategy. The Green Deal puts sustainability – in every sense of the word – and the wellbeing of citizens at the centre of all future action, bringing together four dimensions: environment, productivity, stability and fairness. This new framework will offer Environment Ministers opportunities to review with their peers public policies which have environmental and climate impacts, and to operate policy adjustments. It should also support the Semester coordinators in each member state with data and perspectives underpinning the economic and social benefits of environmental sustainability. The **benefits and costs of the green transition** should be well documented and reported on in order to substantiate the necessary measures as well as the resources to be allocated in this respect.

Questions for ministers:

1. How can the reinforced sustainability dimension of the European Semester contribute to achieving the SDGs while maintaining its focus on macroeconomic policies?
2. In order to ensure the consistency of policy instruments in the context of the Green Deal and avoid duplication, how should SDG monitoring be streamlined?
3. How should the new focus of the European Semester on environmental sustainability be implemented at national level, and how can it provide Environment Ministers with the necessary tools to justify the economic and social benefits of sustainability?

The Presidency will include the key messages from the debate in a synthesis report to the **March European Council**. This paper will summarise all European Semester-related debates which took place in the sectoral Council formations.

[European Semester](#)

[Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020](#)

[Draft agenda of the European Council meeting \(26 and 27 March 2020\)](#)

[Report 'The European Environment – State and Outlook' by the European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](#)

Any other business

Fridays for Future

The Presidency invites climate change activist Greta Thunberg to address ministers regarding her views on climate action.

Information from the Presidency and Greta Thunberg

European Climate Law

The Commission will present its proposal for a European Climate Law to ministers. The proposal is unveiled to the public on 4 March 2020.

Information from the Commission

Regulation establishing the Just Transition Fund

The Commission will present its proposal for a Just Transition Mechanism, including a Just Transition Fund, to ministers.

[Information from the Commission](#)

Communication on Sustainable Europe Investment Plan and European Green Deal Investment Plan

The Commission will present its communication on a Sustainable Europe Investment Plan and a European Green Deal Investment Plan to ministers.

[Information from the Commission](#)

Implementation of full auctioning for aviation sector under EU ETS

The Polish delegation will inform ministers on the implementation of full auctioning for the aviation sector under the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS).

[Information from the Polish delegation](#)

High Level Symposium on Water

The Portuguese delegation will inform ministers on the High Level Symposium on Water - Bridging SDG 6 and SDG 14 which will take place in Lisbon on 2 June 2020.

[Information from the Portuguese delegation](#)

By-catch of common dolphins, harbour porpoises and other protected species in fishing gear

The European Commission will inform delegations about the by-catch of common dolphins, harbour porpoises and other protected species in fishing gear.

[Information from the Commission](#)
