

Since the mid-1970s, EU environment policy has been guided by action programmes defining priority objectives to be achieved over a period of years. The current programme, the seventh of its kind, was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union in November 2013 and covers the period up to 2020.

It's a common strategy that should guide future action by the EU institutions and the Member States, who share responsibility for its implementation and the achievement of its priority objectives.

“ In 2050, we live well, within the planet’s ecological limits. Our prosperity and healthy environment stem from an innovative, circular economy where nothing is wasted and where natural resources are managed sustainably, and biodiversity is protected, valued and restored in ways that enhance our society’s resilience. Our low-carbon growth has long been decoupled from resource use, setting the pace for a safe and sustainable global society. ”

The programme lists nine priority objectives and what the EU needs to do to achieve them by 2020. They are:



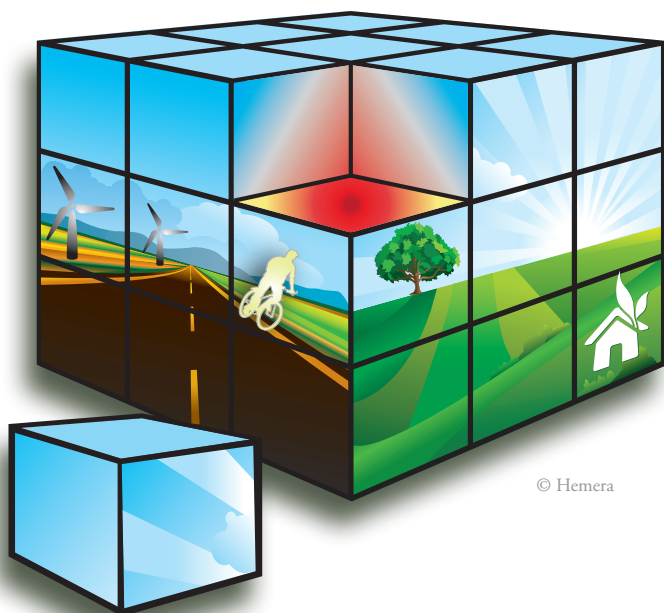
1. to protect, conserve and enhance the Union's natural capital
2. to turn the Union into a resource-efficient, green, and competitive low-carbon economy
3. to safeguard the Union's citizens from environment-related pressures and risks to health and wellbeing
4. to maximise the benefits of the Union's environment legislation by improving implementation
5. to increase knowledge about the environment and widen the evidence base for policy
6. to secure investment for environment and climate policy and account for the environmental costs of any societal activities
7. to better integrate environmental concerns into other policy areas and ensure coherence when creating new policy
8. to make the Union's cities more sustainable
9. to help the Union address international environmental and climate challenges more effectively.

Thematic priorities

The programme identifies three priority areas where more action is needed to **protect nature and strengthen ecological resilience, boost resource-efficient, low-carbon growth, and reduce threats to human health and wellbeing** linked to pollution, chemical substances, and the impacts of climate change.

1. The first action area is linked to **“natural capital”** –from fertile soil and productive land and seas to fresh water and clean air – as well as the biodiversity that supports it. Natural capital includes vital services such as pollination of plants, natural protection against flooding, and the regulation of our climate. The Union has made commitments to halt biodiversity loss and achieve good status for Europe's waters and marine environment. Moreover, it has put in place the means to achieve this, with legally-binding commitments including the Water Framework Directive, the Air Quality Directive, and the Habitats and Birds Directives, together with financial and technical support. Nevertheless, our environment is under considerable pressure. Biodiversity in the EU is still being lost, and many ecosystems are seriously degraded, so greater efforts are needed.

To get there, the EAP expresses the commitment of the EU, national authorities and stakeholders to speed up the delivery of the objectives of the **2020 Biodiversity Strategy** and the



Blueprint to Safeguard Europe's Water Resources. There are also topics which need further action at EU and national level, such as soil protection and sustainable use of land, as well as forest resources. The programme sets out the need for more effective action to protect oceans and seas, safeguard fish stocks and reduce marine litter.

2. The second action area concerns the conditions that will help transform the EU into a **resource-efficient, low-carbon economy**. This requires:

- full delivery of the climate and energy package to achieve the 20-20-20 targets and agreement on the next steps for climate policy beyond 2020;
- significant improvements to the environmental performance of products over their life cycle;
- reductions in the environmental impact of consumption, including issues such as cutting food waste and using biomass in a sustainable way.

There is a **special focus on turning waste into a resource**, with more prevention, re-use and recycling, and phasing out wasteful and damaging practices like landfilling. Water stress is increasingly affecting more parts of Europe – not least because of climate change – and the need for further action towards more efficient use of water is highlighted.

In the context of rising natural resource prices, scarcity and dependency on imports, Europe's competitiveness and capacity for sustainable growth will depend on improving resource efficiency across the economy. The EAP calls for **indicators and targets for resource efficiency to be established**, to guide public and private decision-makers.

The benefits of a resource-efficient economy are being felt in many sectors. **Environmental technologies and services are a major success story**, with employment growing at 3 % per annum. The global market for eco-industries, currently valued at a trillion euros, is forecast to double over the next 10 years. This is good news for European companies that already have a global lead in recycling and energy efficiency.

3. The third key action area covers challenges to **human health and wellbeing**, such as air and water pollution, excessive noise, and toxic chemicals.

According to the World Health Organisation, environmental factors could be responsible for up to 20 % of all deaths in Europe. Europe already has high standards for air quality, but in many cities, pollution remains above acceptable levels. The EAP sets out commitments to improve implementation of existing legislation,

and to secure further reductions in air and noise pollution. The EAP also sets out a long-term vision of a **non-toxic environment** and proposes to address risks associated with the use of chemicals in products and chemical mixtures, especially those that interfere with the endocrine system. In parallel, a more predictable framework combined with more investment in knowledge is intended to encourage innovation and the development of more sustainable solutions.

A solid foundation

The new programme includes an "enabling framework" with the next four priority objectives to help Europe deliver on these goals: better implementation of legislation, better information by improving the knowledge base, more and wiser investment for the environment, and full integration of environmental requirements and considerations into other policies.

4. Better **implementation** of existing legislation will bring numerous benefits. A study prepared for the Commission in 2012 estimated that full implementation of EU waste legislation would save €72 billion a year, increase the annual turnover of the EU waste management and recycling sector by €42 billion and create over 400,000 new jobs by 2020. If properly implemented, EU environment legislation creates a level playing-field and opportunities in the single market for sustainable investments, in addition to environmental benefits.

The EAP recognises the importance of much greater public access to information in improving public understanding of environmental issues and in helping people secure improvements to their own environment. It recognises the need for an enhanced system of inspections and surveillance, as well as better access to justice in environmental matters.



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5. Scientific research, monitoring and reporting environmental developments mean that our understanding of the environment is constantly increasing. This **knowledge base** should be made more accessible to citizens and policymakers to ensure policy continues to draw on a sound understanding of the state of the environment. At the same time, the precautionary principle¹ will continue to guide the EU's approach to policy-making in this field.

Our current knowledge tells us we need immediate action in areas like climate change, species loss, environmental thresholds and ecological tipping points, but the issues are complex and we need to refine our understanding if we are to develop the most effective approaches. The EAP aims to address these challenges by improving the way data and other information is collected, managed and used across the EU, investing in research to fill knowledge gaps, and developing a more systematic approach to new and emerging risks.

6. Adequate **investments** and **innovation** in products, services and public policies will be needed **from public and private sources**, in order to achieve the objectives set out in the programme. This can only happen if impacts on the environment are properly accounted for and if **market signals** also reflect the true costs to the environment. This involves applying the polluter-pays principle more systematically, phasing out environmentally harmful subsidies, shifting taxation from labour towards pollution, and expanding markets for environmental goods and services. As a concrete example, the EAP calls for a minimum 20 % share of the EU budget 2014-2020 to be devoted to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Companies increasingly see advantages in expanding eco-innovation and taking up new technologies, in measuring the environmental impact of their businesses and disclosing to their investors and customers environmental information in their annual reporting. The EAP sets out some ways in which this can be further developed.

7. The fourth enabling condition in the programme is better **integration** of environmental concerns into other policy areas, such as regional policy, agriculture, fisheries, energy and transport. Systematically assessing the environmental, social and economic impacts of policy initiatives and full implementation of Environmental Impact Assessment legislation will ensure better decision-making and coherent policy approaches that deliver multiple benefits.

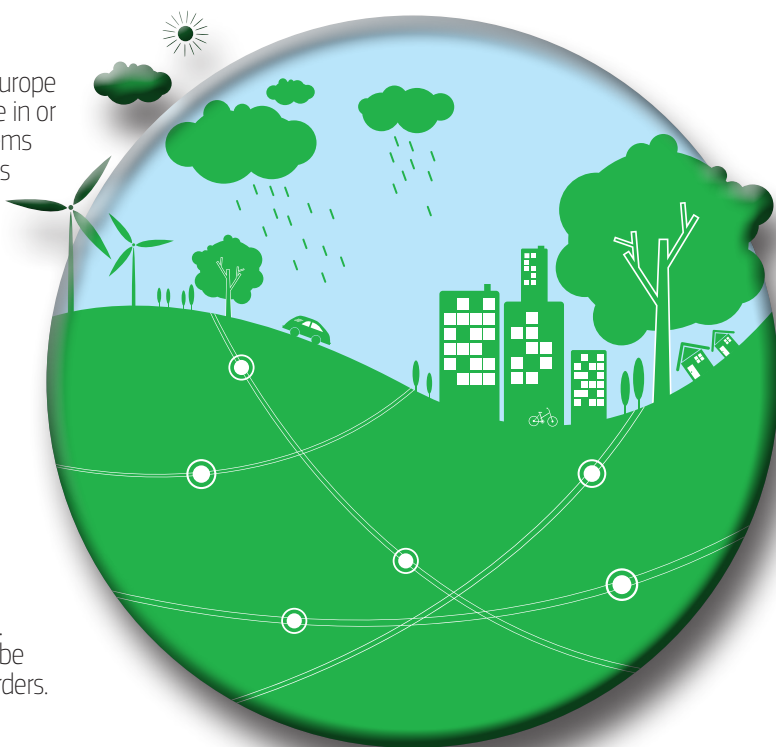
¹As set out in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the precautionary principle aims at ensuring a higher level of environmental protection through preventative decision-taking in the case of risk: http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/consumers/consumer_safety/l32042_en.htm

Local, regional and global challenges

Two further priority objectives complete the programme.

8. The first is to help **cities** become **more sustainable**. Europe is densely populated and 80 % of its citizens are likely to live in or near a city by 2020. Cities often share a common set of problems such as poor air quality, high levels of noise, greenhouse gas emissions, water scarcity, and waste. Addressing these problems means working together. This is why the EAP aims to promote and expand initiatives that support innovation and best practice sharing in cities. The aim is to ensure that **by 2020, most cities in the EU are implementing policies for sustainable urban planning and design**, and are using the EU funding available for this purpose.

9. The final priority concerns **wider global challenges**. Many of the priority objectives in the EAP can only be achieved in cooperation with partner countries or as part of a global approach. The EU and its Member States are committed to engage more effectively in working with international partners towards the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals as a follow-up to the Rio+20 conference. The EAP also proposes to explore further steps that could be taken to reduce impacts on the environment beyond EU borders. «Living well, within the limits of our planet» is a global aim.



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Links

You can find more details about the General Union Environment Action Programme to 2020 here:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/newprg/index.htm>.

In addition, DG Environment's website features more detailed information on policies and actions:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment>



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