

## Particulate matter pollution a major cause of air quality illnesses

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Opinion Plus

The EU must do more to tackle the problem of particulate matter (PM), argues Jaume Loffredo.



**The heating sector is responsible for most of Europe's PM emissions | Photo credit: Fotolia**

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As the winter season approaches, we are likely to see news reports of alarming levels of air pollution across Europe's cities and towns. According to the World Health Organization, globally, approximately three per cent of cardiopulmonary and five per cent of lung cancer deaths are attributable to particulate matter (PM) pollution. It's clear that this is not a problem to be underestimated.

The European Union has made great efforts in tackling PM pollution, but it needs to do more. Not enough measures have been taken to promote cleaner energies and technologies in the heating sector, which is responsible for most of Europe's PM emissions.

Eurostat data shows that the amount of PM emissions produced by buildings has significantly grown over the last 10 years, increasing from 46 per cent in 2005 to 57 per cent in 2014, despite a decrease in overall energy consumption.

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This apparent paradox is easily explained as, over that time period, the consumption of high-polluting solid fuels (primarily coal and solid biomass) has increased significantly. Therefore, it is no surprise that the European Commission, in its recent heating and cooling strategy, highlighted that, in some EU member states, more than 50 per cent of PM emissions are now linked to residential heating using biomass.

The European Parliament's own-initiative report on the EU heating and cooling strategy is a welcome signal that MEPs are paying attention to the heating sector. It rightfully puts emphasis on the potential that the sector has to cut CO2 emissions and improve energy efficiency. However, this was also a missed opportunity for the EU to put the issue of air quality at the top of its agenda.

The forthcoming proposals on the energy efficiency directive and on the energy performance of buildings directive are a golden opportunity for the EU to take concrete action to tackle air pollution. In those pieces of legislation, the EU should stimulate the uptake of low-polluting fuels, such as gaseous fuels, in order to cut PM emissions.

This is particularly true in areas not covered by the natural gas grid, that are home to around 20 per cent of the EU's population, where consumers' choices are more limited. In those areas, mostly rural and intermediate areas, high-polluting fuels make up the vast majority of the residential energy mix. LPG, as a low-polluting fuel, can play a key role in cutting buildings' PM emissions in areas not covered by the natural gas grid. A biomass stove can generate up to 4000 times higher PM emissions than an LPG appliance for the same thermal output.

Furthermore, coal and heating oil appliances respectively have 100 times and 10 times higher PM emissions, compared to LPG boilers. In addition, LPG can also significantly help the EU to achieve its climate targets, as it produces 49 per cent less CO2 than coal and 17 per cent less than heating oil.

LPG is a low-hanging fruit that can considerably help the EU to cut PM and greenhouse gas emissions generated by the residential sector. We look forward to seeing if the European Commission will consider the unique nature of rural and peri-urban areas in its forthcoming legislative proposals.

## About the author

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