New EU labelling rules are new frontier in energy efficiency

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Opinion

The new energy efficiency labelling rules are set to transform Europe's energy savings, writes Dario Tamburrano.

Dario Tamburrano | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

The new energy efficiency labelling has been in place since last summer. It is based on the initial report that I wrote and presented in December 2016 to the European Parliament's industry, research and energy committee.

This report contained the corrections I wanted to make to the legislative proposal on labels put forward by the European Commission.

Above all, I wanted to get rid of the muddle of labels that we currently see in shops as quickly as possible.

A request based on simple common sense, and yet vital, as the labels that we are now saying goodbye to are based on nine different scales of energy e¬fficiency, which can be confusing for consumers.

I therefore asked for the speedy relabelling of devices according to just one scale and automatic mechanisms for reviewing labels to be triggered at the same time for future improvements in the energy efficiency of products, so that the current chaos will never be seen again.

The fundamental idea of 'my' labels, consists of designing them as a sort of bridge to a digital world, which includes both much more information than what can be contained on a piece of paper, and the tools made available by technology to maximise energy saving.

I also wanted it to be possible to have a bottom-up approach to 'my' labels: this included, among other things, the possibility for citizens to report any suspicions of non-compliance and to get a refund in the event of fraud.

The amendments wanted by the European Parliament and the trilogue with Council removed the possibility of reporting instances of non-compliance and getting a refund. Above all, they slowed down the process of relabelling devices: the first new labels will not appear in shops until late 2019; we will have to wait until as far away as 2030 for the new labels to be used on boilers.

This is proof of how, unfortunately, legislators lag behind technological innovation: I find consolation in the fact that it is quite likely that the boilers we have today will not even exist in 2030, and that in the meantime, other European norms on energy e¬fficiency will help to reduce the consumption associated with heating our homes.

The fact remains that the regulation still bears my most important stamp: the paper label that indicates the energy e¬fficiency of a device has embraced the digital world, so it is possible to boost energy saving. In fact, the label does not just express e¬fficiency via a single scale with a letter from A to G and colours from green to red. It makes room for two important things.

First: manufacturers have the option of adding a symbol to the label that shows a device's capacity for being smart. This is the new frontier in energy e¬fficiency. Smart devices can be programmed to start working when electricity costs less or when more of it is available.

They also help to balance out the energy grid, where growing quantities of energy come from renewable sources, which are by their very nature intermittent. Because while it is true that energy efficiency is linked to the quantity of energy that is consumed, it is also true that when and where the energy is produced and consumed is important too.

Second: the label can contain a QR code, a link or something similar offering instant access, including from a mobile phone, to a database for all the products covered by the labelling.

It will therefore become possible in the EU to develop smartphone apps similar to those already in use in Australia for example, which allow buyers to instantly compare different models and choose the one that saves them more according to their personal usage habits: this is quite different from using average consumption as a reference point.

Obviously it is still too early to know what will develop over the years thanks to these label features. I am delighted to know that this regulation boasts huge potential thanks to the link to the database and the smart appliances symbol: two features that I really wanted.

Notwithstanding the potential of these two features, the regulation will result in energy savings estimated by the European Commission to be 17 Mtoe per year: around the same amount of energy consumed in one year by Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia combined.

This is in addition to the 175 Mtoe (approximately the amount of energy consumed in one year by Italy) saved every year thanks to eco-design and current energy saving measures, including the old energy labels.

In other words: in the worst case scenario, the regulation still deserves its place in the world, and will be useful both for the whole of society and for the environment: but there is every likelihood that it can do even better.

About the author

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