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Clean air policy in Switzerland

Horrific situation leads to progress

Switzerland has the reputation of possessing some of the most progressive environmental policies in the world. This favourable view of things is largely based on the federal government's clean air policies – which are repeatedly praised abroad. Together with clean water, clean air seems to have gone down in history as one of the central features of Switzerland's environmental protection policy.

Switzerland's clean air policy is based on an environmental protection law whose declared purpose is "to protect persons, animals and plants, their biological communities and habitats against harmful effects and nuisances".

Action in two stages

The environmental protection law states that this purpose is to be achieved by action taken in two stages. In an initial stage the emission of pollutants is to be limited as far as technically possible and economically acceptable. Such preventive measures must be taken in all cases, regardless of whether precisely defined thresholds have been exceeded or not.

If such measures prove insufficient, i.e. if the rate of immissions remains too high, then pollutant emission levels must be reduced further – this time, however, without considering economic acceptability.

Immission impact thresholds

A definition of "too high immissions" is contained in the Ordinance on Air Pollution. Immission impact thresholds are laid down for pollutants which according to the present state of scientific knowledge are considered to possess a particularly harmful potential for the environment. It is significant in this respect that the establishment of impact thresholds is not only based on what a normally healthy human being might be expected to tolerate but also takes account of the situation of children, the sick and the elderly, as well as the effect of air pollution on vegetation.

This regard for those members of society who are most at risk has resulted in relatively strong immission impact thresholds, although in all cases these have been established according to scientific criteria and of course fall well within the standards laid down by the World Health Organisation. An increasing number of countries, including members of the European Community, are now approaching the impact thresholds laid down in Switzerland.

Clean air concept

Besides the Ordinance on Air Pollution, Swiss clean air policy rests on another important indicator: the clean air concept laid down by the



It is not only our way of life which suffers from pollution, but also our valuable cultural heritage which has come through so many centuries unharmed (Photo: Docuphot).

Federal Council in 1986, which has received very wide support in Parliament. According to this concept sulphur dioxide (SO₂) emissions must be brought back to the 1950 level by 1990, while nitrogen oxide (NO_x) and hydrocarbons should be brought back to the 1960 level by 1995. For SO₂ emissions this aim has already been reached to a very large degree, but a number of further efforts will have to be made to meet the requirements for the other pollutants – and it may happen that the target date will have to be put forward.

In order to reach the aims of the clean air concept the Federal Council has enacted numerous regulations and agreed to still more in principle. But today it unfortunately has to be recognised that the aims in question cannot be reached only by technical measures, such as the introduction of catalytic converters and periodic pollution controls on motor vehicles. Further measures are proving necessary, and at present economic instruments such as duties aimed at changing consumer attitudes (e.g. specific duties on CO₂ and volatile organic carbon emissions), as well as maximum speed limits, are increasingly under discussion.

Painful experiences

This clean air consensus certainly stems from the fact that the Swiss people are relatively

well informed on such matters. The majority of Swiss citizens are aware that something unpleasant has happened to the air they breathe. And every summer thousands of people have started to experience within their own bodies what it means when they read that ozone thresholds have been vastly exceeded. Their eyes burn, their noses run, and even breathing can be a pain. This experience in their own

bodies, together with the sight of similar and perhaps worse symptoms with children and old people, have made our citizens very sensitive about the dangers of air pollution. And such sensitivity is being increased by the many information campaigns run by various government agencies, as well as by private associations for the protection of the environment, on the causes of pollution and possible ways of fighting it.

Pietro Cavadini

Information Service of the Federal Office for Environmental Protection



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