

Black Carbon Campaign Briefing Sheet 2

International and UK Policy for Black Carbon

A guide to international agreements on
black carbon and their implementation in
UK policy



Why Do We Need International Agreements for Black Carbon?

The climate and Health impacts of black carbon and other short lived climate forcers are not confined to the country that produced them. Black carbon can be carried for long distances by the winds, and emissions from one country can affect whole regions or even hemispheres of the globe. For this reason national action alone is not enough - international agreements are needed to control emissions.

What International Agreements Control Black Carbon Emissions?

The pre-eminent international agreement for control of air pollutants is the 1999 Gothenburg Protocol to the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution. This agreement sets 'ceilings' (maximum quantities in tonnes) that each signatory has to meet by a target date. In May 2012 new ceilings were agreed to be met by 2020. Under the new agreement EU member states will need to reduce sulphur dioxide emissions by 59%, nitrogen oxides by 42%, ammonia by 6%, volatile organic compounds by 28% and particles by 22%.

There are no ceilings specifically for black carbon, however, as a large proportion of particulate matter is black carbon, action to reduce particle emissions will reduce black carbon. The text of the agreement also encourages signatories to prioritise particle emissions from sources that produce large amounts of black carbon, such as older diesel vehicles and equipment. Cutting emissions of nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds will also help drive down concentrations of ground level ozone, the other main short lived climate forcer.

Map showing signatories (green) to the Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution

Source—Wikipedia



The Black Carbon Campaign believes that the new targets are insufficiently ambitious considering the urgent need to make radical cuts in black carbon emissions. The targets have set below anticipated emissions in 2020 under a 'business as usual' scenario, i.e. current policies should deliver emissions cuts greater than the new targets. There is therefore little pressure on national governments to put in place new policies that cut emissions faster.

In the UK targets for air pollutant emissions, like most environmental legislation, come from the European Union. The two most important pieces of European legislation are the National Emissions Ceilings Directive and the Air Quality Directive. The former sets targets for the total quantity of several pollutants that a country can emit, with targets closely linked to the Gothenburg Protocol, whilst the latter sets targets for the concentration of several pollutants in the air we breathe.

In 2013 the European Commission intends to revise all EU air quality legislation. The National Emissions Ceilings Directive is expected to be revised to incorporate the new Gothenburg Protocol targets, whilst the Air Quality Directive will also be revised to set new limits for common air pollutants in the air we breathe.

Whilst this process is an opportunity to introduce new, demanding targets for air emissions it is also an opportunity for countries who wish to weaken existing agreements. Unfortunately this group may include the UK Government. The UK has often pushed for weaker international air pollution agreements, in stark contrast to the UK's stance in negotiations on climate forcers such as CO₂ where we are seen as a key force for demanding new international targets.

In addition to these binding international initiatives there are other, voluntary initiatives on black carbon. In early 2012 US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the launch of the Climate and Clean Air Coalition, a new initiative focusing on reducing emissions of black carbon, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), and methane. Initial members of the coalition are Bangladesh, Canada, Ghana, Mexico, Sweden, and the USA, together with the UN Environment Programme. The Arctic Council of Nations (where the UK has observer status) is also investigating the issue of black carbon, and may implement some emission reduction projects.

What are the UK's Policies for Black Carbon?

The UK Government does not have specific policies to address black carbon and other short lived climate forcers. Black carbon is, however, indirectly addressed through the UK's policies on air quality, which aim to reduce emissions in order to protect public health and vulnerable eco-systems. These policies are contained in the UK Air Quality Strategy, which was last updated in 2007.

Climate change and air quality are the responsibility of different Government departments – the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). DECC are currently focused exclusively on long lived climate forcers such as CO₂.

The Government's advisory body for Climate Change - the Committee on Climate Change – does not currently cover black

carbon. Extending their remit to cover black carbon and other short lived climate forcers would need amendments to the Committee's Terms of Reference.

There are only weak links between UK policies around air quality and climate change. Climate policies are generally expected to reduce emissions of black carbon and other short lived climate forcers through support for non-combustion electricity generation and the electrification of transport. However, there are also areas where low carbon policies are increasing black carbon emissions. Examples of these include:

- Reduced taxation on vehicles with lower CO₂ emissions, which encourages diesel vehicles. Older diesel vehicles are often unfiltered and have high black carbon emissions.
- Support for biomass combustion through the Renewable Heat Incentive. Whilst this policy will reduce CO₂ emissions, biomass has higher black carbon emissions than traditional fuels such as natural gas.

The Black Carbon Campaign believes that the UK Government needs to take a proactive, integrated approach to air quality and climate change. A unified strategy should be developed around targets to reduce both long and short lived climate forcers. Policies should prioritise actions that reduce both sets of emissions and, if there is a potential trade off involved, the costs and benefits of potential actions for both sets of emissions should be thoroughly investigated.

The UK Government must also take a more positive role in international negotiations, particularly the 2013 revision of EU legislation. The UK's current international position of resisting demanding targets for air pollutants and short lived climate forcers whilst championing big cuts in CO₂ emissions is illogical and demonstrates narrow thinking around climate change.

More Information

The Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution home page gives more information about the Convention and ongoing work:

www.unece.org/env/lrtap/welcome.html

Find out more about EU air quality policy at:

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

Information about the new Climate and Clean Air Coalition can be found at

www.unep.org/ccac

The official UK Government air quality site is:

<http://uk-air.defra.gov.uk>

Climate change policies can be found at

www.decc.gov.uk

About The Black Carbon Campaign



The Black Carbon Campaign is raising awareness of the need to reduce black carbon emissions to help achieve rapid climate change mitigation and slow the rate of Arctic melting. In the UK it is headed by the NGO ClientEarth and forms part of the wider European Soot Free for the Climate alliance.

www.clientearth.org