EEA policy evaluation: EU law on combustion plants very effective in greening the energy sector

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Air pollution Policy instruments Industry

Emissions of key air pollutants from large combustion plants have significantly decreased in the European Union (EU) over past years. According to a European Environment Agency (EEA) assessment published today, the EU Large Combustion Plant Directive regulating this sector was the main reason behind these major emission cuts from 2004 to 2015. Understanding the reasons for past policy successes is essential to inform how new policies can be designed to ensure that Europe meets its health, environment and climate targets.

The EEA report ‘Assessing the effectiveness of EU policy on large combustion plants in reducing air pollutant emissions’ analyses how and why the EU Large Combustion Plants Directive was successful in reducing emissions of sulphur dioxide (SO2), nitrogen oxides (NOx) and dust in the period from 2004 to 2015. These pollutants are important as they are detrimental to human health, damage ecosystems and cause a wide range of economic losses.

During the period, SO2 emissions from large combustion plants in the EU decreased by 81 %, NOx emissions by 49 % and dust emissions by 77 %. According to the EEA assessment, the Directive accounted for most of these emission reductions.

The EEA assessment also shows that the Large Combustion Directive has played an important role in harmonising the sector’s environmental performance across the EU. According to the analysis, EU Member States with the highest emission factors in 2004 improved their environmental performance most, leading to much smaller differences between Member States by 2015.

The emission reductions in large combustion plants provide a clear success story to build upon and many elements of the policy can be useful to implement the new rules and design regulation in other sectors. At the same time, the report notes aspects of the directive that could have been even more ambitious. This knowledge is valuable for the energy sector to meet its current targets for decarbonisation and cutting pollutant emissions.

Large industrial facilities were among the most significant sources of SO2, NOx and dust pollution in the EU from 2004 to 2015 and, despite emissions cuts, they still represent significant sources of such emissions in many European countries.

Evaluating and understanding the reasons for past environmental and climate policy successes are key to ensure that new policies are effective in stimulating a transition to a more sustainable Europe. This assessment builds on the EEA's recent policy evaluation highlighting the value of using previous experiences for stronger policy implementation.