
Made in Italy: Food, fashion, Fiat, smog

Experts criticize EU standards as lax, while children's health suffers as result

By Elisabeth Rosenthal

MILAN: Northern Italy is renowned for fashion, food, Fiat. But now it has another, less welcome claim to fame: some of the worst air pollution in Europe.

By mid-May, Milan had already exceeded European Union and World Health Organization limits for particle pollution in the air on 80 days. Last year was bad, too. By the end of March, Milan had 64 such days, Turin had 77, Bologna 51 and Venice 49.

Particulate pollution is tied to respiratory and heart disease, including asthma, and poor lung development in children.

While Europe's other big polluters — Germany and Poland — have reduced emissions since 1990, Italy's emissions increased. This year, the European Commission deemed Italy's plan for emission reduction to be inadequate, and the country faces billions of euros in fines unless it corrects the problem.

And so, when a coalition of parents and scientists fitted teenagers with portable monitors that measure ultrafine particles in November, it was no big surprise that the results were often harrowing. Tommaso Abbate, 16, found that the pollution levels at night in his living room were "really high" — 200 micrograms per cubic meter at one point. His home is along a busy thor-

oughfare, he said, and "we always open the windows."

During his 24 hours wearing the monitor, his average exposure was 127 micrograms per cubic meter. The World Health Organization says a safe target for such particles is 10 micrograms per cubic meter.

"We're not warriors — we don't want to fight, we want to cooperate," said Anna Gerometta, president of Parents Against Smog, who organized the monitoring program. "But we want people to rebel and politicians to pay attention. This is really bad for health."

All across Europe, cities are facing air pollution levels that medical research has shown harm health and that routinely

breach World Health Organization guidelines for particulate pollution. "Many countries are distant, in some cases very distant, from that level," said Dr. Roberto Bertollini, director of the WHO European Center for Environment and Health. "We have a lot of countries where the value is at least double our guidelines."

The vast majority of particulate pollution is caused by traffic and traffic jams, which are a growing problem in most European cities. Major contributors are slow city driving and diesel engines.



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Politicians face competing pressures. On the one hand, doctors and citizens' groups are advocating binding standards; on the other, industries and businesses argue for greater leeway to foster economic development.

In recognition of those pressures and of the high cost of cleaning the air, particularly in new member states, the European Union proposed a target two years ago for ultrafine particles, those smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter. The EU proposal for such particles, 25 micrograms per cubic meter, is well above the WHO recommendation of 10 or the U.S. standard of 15.

Many doctors' groups are bitter about the decision. Dr. Isabella Annesi-Maesano, a researcher at the French National Institute for Health and Medical Research in Paris, who is an official of the European Pulmonary Society, has found that even a tiny increase in the smallest particles causes asthma.

"In Europe we feel the limits are now set too high, and countries can ignore them — which is really, really dangerous," she said.

Both she and Bertollini said the European auto industry had lobbied hard against stricter limits. "In a country with Renault and Citroën, I've learned that you can't say cars are a problem," Annesi-Maesano said.

Politicians in Milan say they are making slow progress. "We've had some victories," said Roberto Formigoni, president of Lombardy, the region that encompasses Milan, noting that ozone and benzene levels have sharply dropped in the past decade. But he conceded that reducing ultrafine particles had been difficult.

"We've reduced them 10 percent in 10 years, but they're still well above EU standards," he said.

Many air pollutants, like sulfur dioxide and benzene, have significantly dropped throughout Europe, the World Health Organization says, a victory gained through cleaner fuels and cars. At the same time, particulate matter has emerged as a stubborn holdout.

No part of Europe is meeting the

WHO standard of 10 micrograms per cubic meter for ultrafine particles, though many meet the EU proposal of 25. For 2006, Milan's average was 38, and there are times with readings in the 150 to 200 range, Bertollini said.

Athens averages about 25, Warsaw 34, Turin 41 and Vienna 24. Even at the lower end, cities are still well above the WHO standard; Paris and London measure 16, and Lisbon 19.

In a study released last year, scientists estimated that 22,000 fewer people would die annually across 26 European cities if these small particles were cut to the level suggested by the World Health Organization.

Here in Milan, officials have begun a number of programs to reduce emissions, though critics say they have not moved nearly forcefully enough. On July 1, the city will replace 2,000 old buses with more efficient models. There are car-free Sundays. City officials are installing more efficient heating systems.

Formigoni said "the only city that compares" to Milan in its pollution woes was Los Angeles, which also has an automobile-based culture and is hemmed in by mountains.

"We've also campaigned for less-polluting cars, but no one is willing to give up their cars in Italy," said Formigoni, who gave his staff members bicycles for Christmas. "It's impossible for the Italian mentality, and it will take at least 20 years to move in this direction."

As a backstop, the Italian government offers tax incentives for buying conventional cars with cleaner engines. But that has not discouraged car use. To the contrary: the incentives have meant more new-car purchases than in any other part of Europe, recently rising at a rate of 9 percent a month.

Parents Against Smog would like to see free public transport for children, charges for cars entering the city center, bike lanes and special lanes for buses. In the meantime, the group's work has at least provoked a degree of self-questioning.

"Sorry," said Francesco Zuliani, 16, waiting outside his school on a recent afternoon. "My dad's picking me up in a car."