Environmental Audit Committee
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Jean-Claude Juncker
President of the European Commission

Dear President,

15 December 2014

Circular economy and Air pollution

I am writing to express my concern about reports that two vital pieces of EU legislation may be cancelled or postponed when the European Commission meets on Tuesday 16th December to consider its 2015 work programme, and to urge that these remain in the programme.

I understand that at that meeting the Commission may consider ceasing further work on the prospective ‘Zero Waste Programme for Europe’ and the ‘Clean Air Policy Package’. The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, which I chair, published its report on Growing a Circular Economy[1] in July 2014, highlighting the importance of international collaboration in taking advantage of the economic and ecological opportunities that improved resource productivity could bring.

We called on the UK Government to take an active role in developing a circular economy, urging it to support the Commission’s Zero Waste Programme for Europe and work with it to establish eco-design standards across a range of products. We recommended that “it should support the European Commission’s proposals for recycling and the accompanying proposed targets, and use these to drive change”.

Earlier this month, the Committee also published its report on Action on Air Quality,[2] recommending a raft of measures to tackle air pollution from road traffic in particular, including developing a new Strategy. Our report highlights how “air pollution continues to be an invisible killer, costing the lives of 29,000 people per year” in the UK and new research due to be published soon looks set to double that figure. We were told by Karl Falkenberg, the Director General responsible for the Environment in the Commission that poor air pollution leads to 400,000 premature deaths a year in Europe. Our report concluded that the UK Government “should work with the European Commission ... to make the proposed new EU air quality directives effective and robust”. We recognised the vital importance of the Commission’s Clean Air Policy Package in protecting the health of European

[2] Action on Air Quality, HC 212
citizens, noting that it would include measures to help existing targets to be met and set objectives for 2030, but would still fall short of WHO targets.

It is essential that the Commission seeks to retain these two vital areas. While I appreciate that the Commission is “seeking to respond to member states' calls for a priority focus on jobs and growth”, it would be short-sighted to throw out measures that could deliver billions of euros in resource productivity gains in a dash to boost short term growth. Our reports have shown how we need to promote sustainable economic activity that supports the health and wellbeing of all citizens. In addition, it would run counter to the call for action from the UN Secretary General earlier this month. His Synthesis report, published less than two weeks ago, launched the start of international negotiations on new Sustainable Development Goals, which (as we note in another report published today by my Committee[3]) includes a clear focus on sustainable consumption and production and transforming our economic activity. Abandoning plans for serious action on air pollution and a circular economy would not be a good initial response to the Secretary General's initiative. Europe should be encouraging all countries to introduce effective standards, rather than weakening our own proposals in the name of economic competitiveness. This will only lead to a 'race to the bottom', and environmental and social damage.

I am copying this letter to the UK Prime Minister, and also writing separately to him today urging him at the European Council this week to work with other leaders in developing a European common position favouring a comprehensive coverage of sustainability issues in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Joan Walley MP
Chair, Environmental Audit Committee