

RIFS-Blogpost

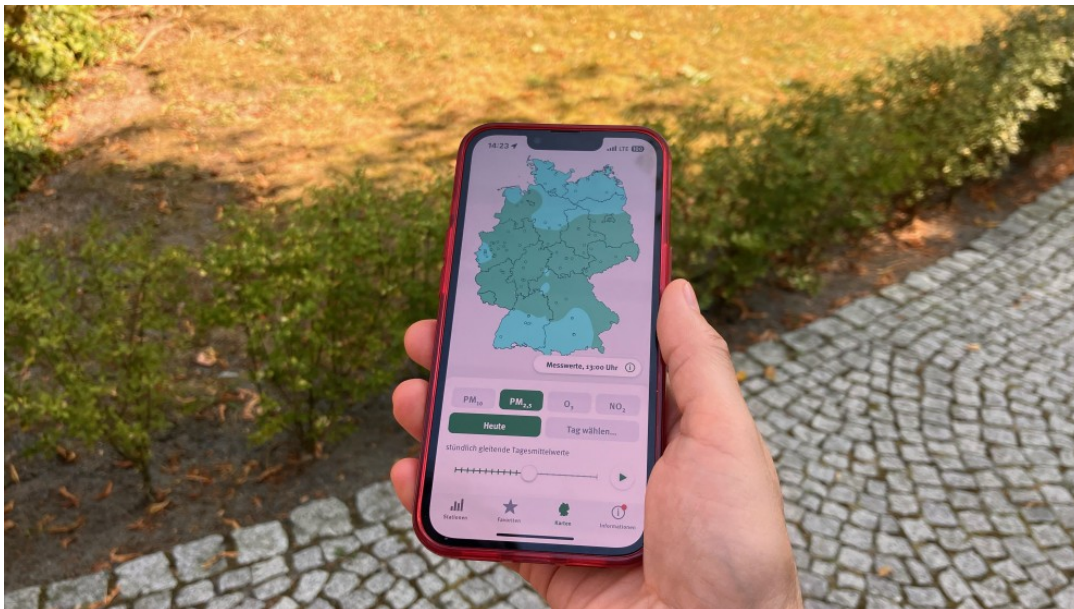
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Projekt:

It's Time We Raise Our Ambition for Meeting "Safe" Levels of Air Pollution]

Fließtext



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How good is the air that we breathe? Progress made on improving air quality is good for our health, our ecosystems and agriculture, and in mitigating climate change.

The EU's air quality standards fall short of WHO recommendations, so too do their plans for updating them. More substantial action is

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needed to provide clean air for the people of Europe. That includes large-scale policies to reduce emissions and shift mobility habits.

To understand the present status of air quality in Germany, we must first acknowledge the developments of the last several years, before we can diagnose what is about to come.

Close your eyes, spin back the wheel of time to 2018. You turn on the evening news, one of the headline stories of the day is read out by the host: “Bans on diesel cars spread across German cities in response to the failure to meet German air quality standards.” Car-drivers shudder; cyclists and pedestrians rejoice.

1.1 The question is, how did we get there and what has happened since?

The core issue at hand in 2018 was Germany’s failure to live up to air quality standards laid out in the European Ambient Air Quality Directive (AAQD), as determined by the European Court of Justice. In response to the legal proceedings underway, the German government put pressure on the federal states, and thereby on cities, to implement quick fixes to improve air quality. Et voila: we got bans on diesel cars on problematic streets conspicuously near air quality monitoring sites.

Since then, air quality across Germany in many of these cities has continuously improved, with far fewer monitoring sites reporting exceedances of limit values in recent years. Measurements from Berlin highlight this trend well, with none of its 17 monitoring sites reporting exceedances of the annual average limit-value of $40 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) since 2020.

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1.2 There's just one problem: we were using the wrong standards.

The AAQD (Directive 2008/50/EC) set the air quality standards according to evidence available at the time and guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO). This led to the establishment of the air quality standards that have been used for almost two decades now. These seemed reasonable, until the WHO updated its air quality guidelines in 2021 in line with new scientific evidence.

The large body of research that now exists, based largely on longitudinal health studies looking at decades worth of data, shows that almost no level of air pollution is safe. In fact, some of the largest increases in health effects are seen at low concentrations. As such, the WHO drastically reduced some of its recommended air quality levels in its 2021 revision; for NO₂, the change in recommended annual average concentrations was from 40 µg/m³ to 10 µg/m³.

Under current policy in Germany (still following Directive 2008/50/EC), if a measurement site were to report an annual value of 39 µg/m³ for NO₂, this would be considered “good”. When compared to the new WHO recommended level and to available evidence suggesting no NO₂ pollution is safe, then this is “bad”. For further context: in 2023 only two air quality monitoring stations in all of Germany reported exceedances of the EU limit-value for NO₂. By contrast, 74% of all stations exceeded the new WHO recommended safe level of NO₂ pollution.

It's time we raise our ambition for meeting “safe” levels of air pollution.

Thankfully, in the past several years, the European Commission has been working on revisions to the AAQD, which were approved by the European Parliament in April of this year and are awaiting adoption by the European Council to be put into law. All Member States are

required to translate this into local laws within two years, once approved.

A key aspect of this revised AAQD are stricter air quality limit-values for most key pollutants, including particulate matter (PM) and NO₂. The only problem is that the ambition to match the WHO revisions failed during negotiations on the law. The new annual limit-value for NO₂ will be 20 µg/m³, twice that of the WHO recommended level.

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1.3 So, what does this all mean?

In short, simply by moving the legal bar for “safe” air pollution levels, we will be lighting a fire under the topic of air quality in Europe for the next five to ten years. With the revised directive stating that the new pollution levels are to be met by January 2030, Member States will be scrambling to adjust their air quality management plans. The new directive allows for this deadline to be extended if certain conditions are met, but only temporarily and under the requirement of regular, ambitious revisions to their air quality management plans.

This move by the EU is a welcome recognition that it has a long way to go before meeting its Zero Pollution Targets for 2050. But acknowledgement is not enough; European citizens need substantial action in order to finally breathe clean air after centuries of pollution.

As recent studies have shown, targeted measures such as street closures or new bike lanes can reduce NO₂ pollution locally, though they have little effect on concentrations of particulate matter. But these are just band-aids for a chronic problem. What we need, especially in large cities, are comprehensive large-scale policies that reduce emissions and encourage shifts in mobility habits. The policies should be a combination of carrots and sticks for encouraging shifts away from individual car use towards more public transport and

safe cycling infrastructure, and in cases where cars are a necessity, to zero-tailpipe-emissions, like electric vehicles and buses. We also need to address long-range pollution from coal-fired power plants and big agriculture by cutting out fossil fuels from our energy supply and reducing the use of industrial fertilizers.

Patting ourselves on the back that we have finally achieved “good” levels of air pollution using falsely-informed and highly politicized benchmarks is not enough. Some have taken this false narrative of success to heart, even suggesting an increase of speed limits from 30 to 50 km/h now that these air quality benchmarks have been reached, as recently put into plan by the conservative Senator for Transportation and the Environment of Berlin. Such a justification has no basis in fact, ignores other benefits of lower speeds, such as safety concerns, and is quite frankly embarrassing.

To be clear, Germany has made tremendous progress in the past several decades in improving urban air quality. However, the road ahead is still long and we cannot afford any loss in momentum. Progress made on improving air quality is good for our health, our ecosystems and agriculture, and in mitigating climate change.

