

This article first appeared in the June issue of the Ecologist magazine. For more news and features about Climate Change, Health and Pollution please go to the new **[Ecologist website](http://www.theecologist.org)** [link to www.theecologist.org] and search for more articles.

Smoke-screen politics

Green Party leader slams Government's 'embarrassing' application for delay in meeting EU air pollution limits

The UK may be a leader on climate change but it certainly isn't when it comes to air pollution. That's the opinion of Green MEP Caroline Lucas, who has taken the Government to task for applying for yet another delay in meeting EU limits for emissions of particulate matter (PM10) which should have been met in 2005.

In January, the European Commission announced its intention to take the UK government to court over the issue, and its environment commissioner, Stavros Dimas, had already warned that applying for another extension would go against the 'spirit' of the air-quality regulations.

'It is embarrassing for a government trying to position itself as a world-leader on environmental policy that ministers have not yet been able to adequately protect human health through the implementation of effective strategies to meet the EU's basic targets to reduce pollution,' Lucas said.

Although the general trend for PM10 pollution in the UK is in slow decline, eight specific areas of the country – including parts of Greater London, Glasgow and Swansea – have exceeded either daily or annual EU limits.

In London, one of the worst-hit areas of the country, official estimates suggest that air pollution may have contributed to the deaths of 3,000 in 2005 alone. The mayor of London has proposed a series of measures to improve the situation, including an increase in the number of hybrid buses used in the capital, making traffic-flows smoother, encouraging more cycling and walking, and opposing the expansion of Heathrow airport.

But Caroline Lucas is concerned for the rest of the UK, saying Defra 'has no real plan' for tackling PM10 emissions from transport and industrial plants.

The controversy came as the results of a major US study tracking the changes in air quality in 51 cities over 25 years revealed that clean air was responsible for at least 15 per cent of increased life expectancy.

Conversely, said Douglas Dockery of the Harvard School of Public Health, the heavily polluted air in rapidly industrialising cities could shorten lives by some three to four years.