

EU Wants to Cut Greenhouse Gases in Cars, Shoes

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By Jeff Mason

LUXEMBOURG (Reuters) - The European Union's battle against global warming will force companies to change automobile air conditioning systems and restrict the sale of air-cushioned sports shoes, European Union ministers said on Thursday.

The measures, included in draft legislation, are part of the EU's commitment under the Kyoto Protocol to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The draft laws will also limit the leakage of environmentally-harmful fluorinated gases from items like refrigerators.

Sports shoes with air pockets filled with so-called F-gases will be banned from sale within the 25-nation bloc under the proposed legislation.

"F-gases have huge global warming potential -- in some cases almost 24,000 times that of carbon dioxide," EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallstrom said in a statement. "By agreeing this legislation, member states have once again taken concrete action to fight climate change."

From 2011 new vehicle models will be prohibited from using hydrofluorcarbon (HFC) 134a, the refrigerant used globally in car air conditioners. From 2017 the gas will be banned from all new vehicles sold in the EU.

Before the complete phase out, air conditioners will not be allowed to leak more than 40 grams of HFC-134a annually.

Commission officials said the car industry would face costs of 30-40 million euros (\$37-50 million) a year initially, rising to 200-400 million euros annually once the legislation is in full force.

The rules will apply to all cars sold in the EU, whether manufactured in Europe or imported from abroad, a Commission official said. He said alternatives to the gas could be used instead, including carbon dioxide (CO₂), which is also considered harmful to the environment but less so than the fluorinated gas currently standard in car air conditioners.

He said HFC-134a was 1,300 times more harmful to the environment than CO₂.

CUT AND CONTAIN

Though more harmful than CO₂, fluorinated gases are also less common. F-gases in general account for only two percent of total EU greenhouse gas emissions currently.

But their potency is high. The Commission estimates the legislation agreed on Thursday, which must still be approved by the European Parliament, will reduce the gases by more than 20 million tonnes a year in CO₂-equivalent terms by 2012.

More than changes in cars will contribute to that decline. The legislation will ban marketing and use of certain products like sport shoes and some vehicle tires, windows, and "novelty aerosols" that contain F-gases. The footwear ban could begin as early as 2006.

More important, Commission officials say, will be efforts to contain the amount of F-gases that leak into the atmosphere from items like stationary air conditioners, refrigeration units, and fire extinguishers.

The draft legislation will set minimum standards for the inspection of such equipment, which contain at least 3 kg (6.6 lb) of F-gases or more like those used in supermarkets. It will also set up minimum standards for "training and certification of personnel," the Commission said.

Final adoption of the legislation is expected near the end of 2005, but it may face criticism in parliament. The Greens issued a statement saying the legal basis agreed by the ministers would limit countries from taking a more progressive stance on F-gases if they wished.

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