

Press Release No. 10/2013

Press Relation Officer: Martin Ittershagen

Deputy Press Relation Officer: Stephan Gabriel Haufe

PR-staff: Marc Rathmann, Martin Stallmann;
Office: Doreen Redlich, Uwe Weber

Telephone: +49 340 2103 -2122, -6625, -2250, -2507, -2669, -2637

Address: Federal Environment Agency, P.O. box 1406, 06813 Dessau-Roßlau

E-Mail: pressestelle@uba.de

Internet: www.umweltbundesamt.de

Facebook: www.facebook.com/umweltbundesamt.de



More than half of German people suffer noise exposure

Noise protection is third key area of UBA activity in 2013 along with oceans and sustainable building and living

The Federal Environment Agency (UBA) is making an urgent plea for more commitment in the area of noise protection. "Noise is a source of stress which may only be felt locally, but noise occurs practically everywhere in Germany. Every second person in Germany feels disturbed or annoyed by noise, and noise can also make you ill", said the Agency's President, Jochen Flasbarth, upon publication of UBA's *Schwerpunkte 2013* in Berlin. He pointed to studies done by the Agency which prove that even low, continuous night-time noise levels of 40 dB(A) significantly increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases and psychological disorders. The main source of noise has long been road traffic: according to a representative UBA survey, about 54 per cent of German people report feeling disturbed or annoyed by cars and lorries in their residential surroundings. The World Health Organization (WHO) says that 61,000 "healthy" years of life are lost in western Europe every year owing to traffic-induced cardiovascular diseases.

According to the UBA survey, every third person in the country feels disturbed by rail traffic, ranking this mode of transport second among traffic-related noise sources. The large rail freight corridors with night-time activity in particular are worrisome. "Unnecessary noise from freight trains may not continue to be the weak point, as compared to the heavy goods vehicle, in the otherwise very environmentally friendly railway as mode of transport. There are several stretches with heavy traffic in the Middle Rhine Valley and elsewhere with noise levels that are far above what is considered healthy", said Flasbarth. However, railway train noise can easily be reduced: tracks must be kept as smooth as possible by regular grinding of the rails. The most important - and cost-efficient - way to achieve this lies in the freight wagons themselves; that is, in their brakes. "It is worthwhile, especially in the old freight wagons in the stock, to replace the classic cast iron brake blocks with modern alternatives made of plastic. This prevents the wheels from roughening and causing damage to the rails. The trains are much quieter, too. Rail infrastructure access charges which are differentiated according to noise level offer an incentive to accelerate the retrofitting of existing stock", said Flasbarth.

Another thematic focus area for UBA in 2013: oceans. Whereas they are largely uninhabitable for man, they cover more than 70 per cent of the Earth's surface. Yet more and more economic activity is occurring in some of the zones of the high seas which had been pristine up to now. These activities include fishing, shipping and, most recently, the hunt for raw materials. The "blue economy" has created some 5.4 million jobs in Europe alone and accounts for a gross value added of 600 billion euros. The ecological damage done by excessive use of the oceans also has a negative impact on the economy. The most serious of human interventions in the oceans is the overexploitation of fish stocks. It is the result of many years of unsustainable fishing policy of excessively high catch levels and fishing methods that damage the environment. According to the EU Commission, 80 per cent of the fish stock in the Mediterranean Sea has been overfished. UBA therefore welcomes Commission plans to introduce a discard ban of accidental catch between 2014 and 2020. The European Parliament had shown support of the EU Commission's proposal in February 2013. That same night the EU's Fisheries Ministers agreed to the proposal but seek to keep the level of allowed accidental catch at seven per cent. The ban is to be phased in until it takes full effect in 2019. The EU Parliament must still agree to the compromise. The greatest problem in the German North and Baltic Seas is eutrophication (over-fertilisation). Rivers feed about three-quarters of the nitrogen compounds into these bodies of water. The main source of nitrogen is agricultural activity. This over-fertilisation is also noticeable to humans, especially in the summer: certain toxic algal bloom, whose growth is triggered by the excessive nutrition in the seas and often recognizable because of the white capping. When consumed with shellfish, these toxins can even cause vomiting and diarrhoea. Dead algae cause acute lack of oxygen, which can affect entire populations of organisms such as crabs, mussels and snails that live on the seabed. "Agricultural activities are the major source of nitrogen in the North and Baltic Seas. The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) can create more incentives in this context, for example by establishing guidelines on good soil conditions to avoid of nutrient run-off due to erosion. Another measure to stop the unwanted fertilisation of seas and oceans is to put wider buffer strips along rivers and lakes which would ideally have one use only, and that is as grassland", said Flasbarth.

The UBA's third thematic focus is "sustainable building and living". Says UBA President Jochen Flasbarth: "Sustainable building and living means more than just climate protection. In addition to good insulation and the use of renewable energy, it includes the conservative use of building materials which were made with efficient use of raw materials. The building materials industry is one of the most resource-intensive sectors in Germany. The entire stock of building and civil engineering work harbours some 60 billion tonnes of mineral construction materials in, with another 500 million tonnes added every year. The building sector consumes 25 million tonnes of cement alone every year, in addition to six million tonnes of steel and a half million tonnes of copper. UBA recommends that the raw material content and recyclability be labelled on building materials and giving preference to materials made with recovered secondary raw materials.

Further information and links

Schwerpunkte 2013 (in German) can be downloaded free of charge or ordered at <http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien-e/4405.html>

Dessau-Roßlau, 27 February 2013