

---

## Foreword

---



© Stephen Mynhardt / EEA

The European Union has provided global environmental leadership for some 40 years. This report synthesises the information resulting from four decades of implementation of a well-defined and ambitious EU policy agenda. It represents the tip of the knowledge available to EEA and its network, Eionet.

The overall findings point to successes in reducing environmental pressures. These achievements are especially remarkable when seen in the context of vastly changed European and global settings over the past decades. Without a strong policy agenda, the large growth of the economy over this period would have resulted in much stronger impacts on ecosystems and human health. The EU has demonstrated that well designed, binding policies work and deliver huge benefits.

In the 7th Environment Action Programme, 'Living well, within the limits of our planet', the EU formulates an engaging vision of the future to 2050: a low carbon society, a green, circular economy and resilient ecosystems, as the basis for citizens' well-being. Yet, looking ahead, this report, like its 2010 predecessor, highlights major challenges linked to unsustainable systems of production and consumption and their long-term, often complex, and cumulative impacts on ecosystems and people's health. In addition, globalisation links Europeans to the rest of the world through a number of systems that enable the two-way flow of people, finance, materials and ideas.

This has brought us many benefits alongside concerns around the environmental impacts of our linear buy-use-dispose economy, our untenable dependency on many natural resources, an ecological footprint that exceeds the planet's capacity, external environmental impacts on poorer countries, and unequal distribution of the socio-ecological benefits from economic globalisation. Achieving the EU 2050 vision remains far from self-evident. Indeed the very idea of what it means to live within planetary limits is something that we have a hard time grasping.

What is clear, however, is that transforming key systems such as the transport, energy, housing and food systems lies at the heart of long-term remedies. We will need to find ways to make them fundamentally sustainable, by decarbonising them, making them much more resource efficient and making them compatible with ecosystem

---

resilience. Also relevant is the redesign of the systems that have steered these provisioning systems and have created unsustainable lock-ins: finance, fiscal, health, legal and education.

The EU is leading the way through policies such as the 7th Environment Action Programme, the 2030 Climate and Energy package, the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. These and other policies share similar goals and in different ways seek to balance social, economic and environmental considerations. Implementing and strengthening them smartly can help to push science and technological frontiers in Europe, create jobs and enhance competitiveness, while common approaches to solving shared problems make full economic sense.

As a knowledge actor, the EEA and its partners are responding to these challenges by designing a new knowledge agenda that links supporting policy implementation to an increased understanding of how to achieve more systemic long-term objectives. This is guided by innovations that break out of silo-thinking, facilitate information sharing and integration and provide new indicators to enable policymakers to compare economic, social and environmental performance. Last but not least, foresight and other methods will be increasingly used to inform the pathways towards 2050.

The opportunities and challenges are equally huge. They require common purpose, commitments, efforts, ethics and investments from all of us. Starting in 2015, we have 35 years to ensure that the children born today will live on a sustainable planet by 2050. This may seem like a distant future, but many of the decisions we make today will decide whether and how we are going to deliver on this societal project. I hope that the content of the SOER 2015 will support everyone who is looking for evidence, understanding and motivation.



*Hans Bruyninckx*, Executive Director

The EEA's report SOER 2015 gives a comprehensive assessment of the European environment's state, trends and prospects, in a global context. The EEA's task is to provide timely, targeted, relevant and reliable information on Europe's environment.

For **more information**, see [www.eea.europa.eu/soer](http://www.eea.europa.eu/soer) or scan the QR code.

PDF generated on 07 Mar 2015, 12:16 AM

