

From the Ministries

WHO: ONE EUROPEAN IN FIVE SUFFERS EXCESSIVE NIGHT TIME NOISE

One European in five is exposed to excessive noise overnight that may damage their health, the World Health Organisation has said as it recently released new guidelines for night-time noise in Europe.

“Just like air pollution and toxic chemicals, noise is an environmental hazard to health,” said Rokho Kim, who led the project for the WHO’s regional office for Europe.

“While almost everyone is exposed to too much noise, it has traditionally been dismissed as an inevitable fact of urban life and has not been targeted and controlled as much as other risks,” he added in a statement.

The recommended average level of 40 decibels corresponds to a quiet street in a residential area overnight, the WHO said.

Those who toss and turn with slightly higher levels get away with “mild health effects” such as a bout of insomnia, it added.

But above 55 decibels — the noise of a busy street — people run the risk of more severe effects such as blood pressure problems and heart attacks, as the body and brain react to sound while they are asleep.

“One in five Europeans is regularly exposed to such noise levels,” according to the UN health agency.

The peer-reviewed 162-page set of guidelines was produced with 35 scientists and health experts after a six-year assessment of scientific evidence.

“Noise has emerged as the leading environmental nuisance in Europe, and excessive noise is an increasingly common public complaint,” said Srdan Matic, head of non-communicable diseases and environment at WHO Europe.

URBAN EUROPE POLLUTED BY NOISE

Half of urban Europe endures noise pollution from road, rail and air traffic loud enough to disrupt sleep, impair learning and trigger hypertension at night, according to a recent report. More than 41 million people in cities of at least 250,000 people from 19 countries that submitted road transport data to

the European Environment Agency (EEA) deal with road racket averaging 55 decibels or higher. Among capital cities, Bratislava is the noisiest, with nearly 55 percent of the population thus exposed, followed closely by Warsaw and Paris, the EAA reported. Some 3.6 million urban dwellers cope with noise levels of 70 decibels or higher.

KENYA’S NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT

Authority (NEMA) has said that it will ensure noise and air pollution regulations that came into force in June are adhered to. In a statement, the Authority said it would work with government institutions including Local Authorities, the Kenya Roads Board, the Physical Planning Department in the Ministry of Lands, Kenya Railways Corporation to make strategic noise or vibration maps. Others

involved are the Mines and Geology Department, Meteorological Department, Kenya Bureau of Standards and Kenya Civil Aviation Authority. “Each mapping body will make a noise map indicating noise levels. The noise maps will be reviewed every five years. Mapping bodies will be expected to develop action plans, to control noise levels and protect silent zones,” read the statement released by NEMA.

EU TO SET STANDARDS FOR NOISE LEVELS FROM IPODS

Consumers will benefit from new default settings on personal music players set at safe exposure levels, as well as clear warnings on the adverse effects of excessive exposure to high sound levels, following a decision by the European Commission. In October 2008, the EU Scientific Committee SCENIHR 1, warned that listening to personal music players at a high volume over a sustained period can lead to permanent hearing damage. 5-10% of listeners risk permanent hearing loss. These are people typically listening to music for over 1 hour a day at high volume control settings. It is estimated that up to 10 million people in the EU may be at risk. The European Commission has now sent a mandate to CENELEC (the EU standardisation body) requiring new technical safety standards to be drawn up. Existing EU standards currently prescribe no maximum sound limit nor require any specific labelling in respect of volume levels but require that a statement be put in the instruction

manual to warn of the adverse effects of exposure to excessive sound level. The mandate, proposed by the European Commission, covers all personal music players and mobile phones with a music playing function. It provides that:

- Safe exposure levels shall be the “default ” settings on products. The mandate does not prescribe specific technical solutions in order not to stifle the capacity of industry to innovate. Instead it requires manufacturers to provide that the default settings for normal usage meet safety requirements.

The mandate makes it clear that safe use depends on exposure time and volume levels. At 80 dB(A), exposure should be limited to 40 hours/week. At 89 dB(A) exposure should not exceed 5 hours/week. The safe exposure levels defined above shall be the default settings on products. Higher exposure levels can be permitted, provided that they have been intentionally selected by the user and the product incorporates a reliable means to inform the user of the risks.

HSE: CONCERTGOERS DON'T NEED EARPLUGS

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the agency in the UK that regulates occupational safety and health, has moved to silence critics claiming HSE requires audiences to wear earplugs when attending noisy concerts and music festivals. HSE has become increasingly concerned that some commentators are writing “false stories ” about audience members having to wear ear protection at concerts. There are laws to safeguard the health of employees working in environments where excessive noise can be problematic, the agency explained, but any stories that suggest concert goers must plug their ears are inaccurate. Staff at nightclubs and concert venues may be at risk of suffering hearing damage because they

regularly work in high levels of noise. HSE has guidelines to protect such workers. Employers are obliged to provide protection, but this could be as simple as moving staff away from the noisiest areas or providing suitable earplugs. The healthy top level of noise human ears can cope with is around 55 decibels, but many employees and musicians in concert venues and clubs are regularly exposed to loud music of 85 decibels and above, HSE added. Peter Lennon, head of HSE's Noise and Vibration Policy Unit, said people writing inaccurate stories serve only to confuse the public and detract from real issues such as workers who lose their hearing after repeatedly being exposed to loud environments. “Excessive noise at work can be a real problem and can lead to serious hearing problems,” he said. “However, the idea HSE would

demand people to wear earplugs when seeing their favorite band clearly is summer madness.” According to Lennon, the overriding message is that hearing loss is preventable and it’s

important to protect people so they may enjoy long and successful careers. “The laws are there to control real risks to workers – not to take the fun out of concerts.”

BARKING DOG FINE TO BE \$250 IN CHICAGO

Owners of dogs making excessive noise that “unnecessarily disturbs” their human neighbors soon will face fines of \$50 to \$250 a day under an ordinance Chicago aldermen recently approved. Under the measure, which takes effect Nov. 17, the noise would have to occur continually for at least 10 minutes or intermittently for “a significant portion

of the night.” It also would have to be louder than the average conversation at a distance of 100 feet or more. Police or animal control officials could make that determination, or three residents from different addresses could sign a complaint. “It’s not designed against the dog lovers,” said sponsoring Ald. Richard Mell, 33rd. “It’s against people who let their dogs sit out and bark all night or all day.”

GIVE NOISE MAKERS A CHANCE

While noise complaints dominate the calls made to New York City’s municipal hotline – 300,000 complaints last year – club and bar owners claim the law is loaded against them. Should they not, they argue, be recognised for the over \$700 million in taxes they contribute to the City, and the 95,000 jobs they provide? “Nightclubs are now seen as nuisances,” said Steve Lewis” founder of the Nightlife Preservation Community.

SARASOTA BACKS OFF NOISE RULE

Sarasota police have stopped using the most controversial part of the city’s new noise ordinance that allows officers to impound cars if they can hear its stereo more than 10 yards away. The ordinance made Sarasota the most restrictive, and costly, place in Florida to blast music from a vehicle. But the temporary suspension of seizing vehicles eliminates the most costly part of the law, possibly for another year. The city attorney says the move was made to limit the legal exposure for the city, which faces a lawsuit from two drivers who are seeking damages in federal court. “We just didn’t want to give rise to numerous claims,” City Attorney Robert Fournier said. Sarasota police had seized 11 vehicles and issued 60 tickets under the ordinance in its first six months, even though they said they would give drivers some leeway. Police said they have not seized any vehicles since the lawsuits were filed. Fournier recommended not impounding any more vehicles until the case is resolved. The case is set for trial in November 2010.

NOISE RULES TO MOVE WIND TURBINES AWAY FROM HOMES

The province of Prince Edward Island (Canada) has confirmed that it will increase the distance wind turbines must be from homes, but not by as much as some were looking for. The setback distance will now be four times the height of the turbine, as measured from the ground to the top of the blade. For the biggest turbines, the V90s, that would mean increasing the setback to 500 metres. Currently it is 375 metres. Noise was the biggest concern. The new rules do not apply to existing wind turbines or in municipalities that have their own bylaws.

NOISY DEAF FOLK REFUSED LATE LICENCE

A club for deaf people has been refused a late-night entertainment licence over fears that noise from the venue could disturb neighbours. Council officials received several letters objecting to The Reading Deaf Social Club's application to open until 2am on Fridays and Saturdays. Organisers had hoped to stage events for members such as cabarets with striptease acts. Angus Tweedy from the club in Cardiff Road, Reading, put forward his case through a deaf signer at the licensing hearing on Tuesday. He said the club would like to host special ladies' and gentlemen's nights once a year featuring strippers and 'Chippendale style acts'. However the late licence was refused on the grounds that neighbours in the area would be disturbed and was only granted until 11pm. The council refused a licence for the performance of dance and imposed conditions including a hotline for complaints.

SIGNIFICANT RAIL-NOISE DECISION POSTPONED

Canadian Transportation Agency's decision on a Montreal rail-noise complaint, about commuter trains on Canadian Pacific tracks in Notre Dame de Grâce, has been postponed. The Canadian Transportation Agency sent a letter ordering CP to supply data the railway previously declined to provide, said CTA spokesperson Marc Comeau. The CTA wants information about the age and condition of CP tracks in the area, and maintenance and inspection reports. The N.D.G. case could have implications across Canada, as it is the first case involving commuter trains since Ottawa gave the CTA the power to deal with noise and vibration complaints in 2007.

AIRPORT CONSULTING ON NOISE LEVEL

Stansted airport in Essex is to consult residents about noise in a bid to reduce the nuisance significantly over the next five years. Local councils and MPs in the region are involved in the consultation which may lead the airport to ask operators to use quieter aircraft. Airport expansion campaigners welcomed the step but said the only way to cut noise was to have fewer aircraft. Airport managers insisted it had nothing to do with expansion, it is simply that Stansted is required to publish a noise action plan as part of EU and UK environmental regulations. Stewart Wingate, the airport's managing director, said: "We want to know what people think of our draft plans for the next five years before we finalise them for submission to the Government later in 2009."

BAA'S "NOISE ACTION PLAN" CONDEMNED

In its Noise Action Plan for Heathrow, BAA acknowledged for the first time over 700,000 people are affected by aircraft noise from the airport, more than twice the number it previously admitted to. But the action plan has been described as "deeply disappointing" by campaign group HACAN, because it sets out no firm plans to reduce noise from the airport. HACAN chairman John Stewart said: "At long last BAA has been forced to creep into the real world and admit that many more than 300,000 people are affected by aircraft noise. But even this admission is an underestimate. The World Health Organisation estimates that over a million people are affected. "The European Union requires all member states to draw up Noise Action Plans for airports with 50,000 movements a year. In a move condemned by campaign groups, DEFRA asked the airports themselves to draw up the plans for aircraft noise and they were asked to change the way the measure it. Mr Stewart said: "Overall the Noise Action Plan is extremely disappointing. It contains lots of words but absolutely no firm plans to reduce noise. The fault lies more with the Government than with BAA. DEFRA has completely shirked its responsibilities in asking the commercial operator of the airport to draw up the noise action plan."

FINDING THE BEST ENFORCEMENT SOLUTION

Tampa City Council has decided not to move ahead with a proposed noise ordinance aimed at cracking down on the owners of vehicles with booming stereos. The council plans to ask Police Chief Stephen Hogue, to step up enforcement of a state law restricting the volume of car stereos. Members of several neighborhood organizations pleaded with the council to get tougher on the violators, with some portraying the issue as a citywide crisis. "The noise has gotten to epidemic proportions," said Leroy Benjamin of Tampa. Tampa Police Department officials said they think the laws are working. "We would prefer that citizens call us when they hear loud music," Maj. Marc Hamlin said. "Our police officers need to witness the violation." Tampa police have cited 4,225 violators in the past three years, city figures indicate. In Sarasota, police can impound cars after multiple noise violations, but lawsuits have been filed challenging those restrictions, Tampa City Attorney Chip Fletcher said. Last year, St. Petersburg adopted a noise ordinance that allows officers to determine what is too loud. Before that, police had to use sound meters to determine whether someone was breaking the noise laws. St. Petersburg also has a citizen-reporting system that takes complaints and sends violators a "soft letter" with a warning that they must abide by state and local noise restrictions. Tampa officials said they worry that adopting a similar reporting program would be too time consuming and costly for the police department and do little to fix the problem. Hamlin said many of the violators spend thousands of dollars on stereos and that warnings are unlikely to persuade them to keep the noise down. "I don't think a letter from the police department is going to stop that," he said.