

Health concerns associated with electromagnetic fields

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The Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Frédérique RIES (ALDE, BE) on health concerns associated with electromagnetic fields (EMFs).

The report recalls that wireless technology (mobile phones, Wi-Fi/WiMAX, Bluetooth, DECT landline telephones) emits EMFs that may have adverse effects on human health.

The dispute within the scientific community regarding the potential health risks arising from EMFs has intensified since 12 July 1999, when exposure limits for fields in the 0 Hz to 300 GHz range were laid down in Recommendation 1999/519/EC. Among the scientific projects arousing both interest and controversy is the Interphone epidemiological study, financed by an EU contribution of EUR 3 800 000, primarily under the Fifth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, the findings of which have been awaited since 2006. The purpose is to establish whether there is a link between use of mobile phones and certain types of cancer, including brain, auditory nerve, and parotid gland tumours.

The European Commission is called upon to review the scientific basis and adequacy of the EMF limits as laid down in Recommendation 1999/519/EC and report to the Parliament. MEPs call for particular consideration of biological effects when assessing the potential health impact of electromagnetic radiation and for active research to address potential health problems by developing solutions that negate or reduce the pulsating and amplitude modulation of the frequencies used for transmission.

As well as, or as an alternative to, amending European EMFs limits, the Commission, working in coordination with experts from Member States and the industries concerned, should draw up a guide to available technology options serving to reduce exposure to EMFs.

The committee calls on the Member States and local and regional authorities to create a one-stop shop for authorisation to install antennas and repeaters, and to include among their urban development plans a regional antenna plan.

MEPs consider that it is in the general interest to encourage solutions based on negotiations involving industry stakeholders, public authorities, military authorities and residents' associations to determine the criteria for setting up new GSM antennas or high-voltage power lines. In this context, it is important to ensure at least that schools, crèches, retirement homes, and health care institutions are kept clear, within a specific distance determined by scientific criteria, of facilities of this type.

The committee deplores the fact that, as a result of repeated postponements since 2006, the findings of the Interphone study have yet to be published. MEPs consider that it is up to the Commission to ask those in charge of the project why no definitive findings have been published and, should it receive an answer, to inform Parliament and the Member States without delay.

MEPs also stress the need to:

- make available to the public, maps showing exposure to high-voltage power lines, radio frequencies and microwaves and to publish this information on the internet;
- finance a wide-ranging awareness campaign to familiarise young Europeans with good mobile phone techniques;
- increase research and development (R&D) funding for the evaluation of potential long-term adverse effects of mobile telephony radio frequencies;
- launch, during the 2009-2014 parliamentary term, an ambitious programme to gauge the electromagnetic compatibility between waves created artificially and those emitted naturally by the living human body;
- work with all relevant stakeholders (such as national experts, non-governmental organisations and industrial sectors) to improve the availability of, and access to, up-to-date information understandable to non-specialists on wireless technology and protection standards.

The committee proposes that the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE) be given the additional task of assessing scientific integrity in order to help the Commission forestall possible cases of risk, conflict of interests, or even fraud that might arise now that competition for researchers has become keener.

The report encourages the introduction of a single standard designed to ensure that local residents would be subjected to as low a degree of exposure as possible when high-voltage grids were being extended. It also calls on the Member States to follow the example of Sweden and to recognise persons that suffer from electrohypersensitivity as being disabled so as to grant them adequate protection as well as equal opportunities.