

Health concerns associated with electromagnetic fields

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The European Parliament adopted by 559 votes to 22, with 8 abstentions, a resolution on health concerns associated with electromagnetic fields (EMFs).

The resolution recalls that wireless technology (mobile phones, Wi-Fi/WiMAX, Bluetooth, DECT landline telephones) emits EMFs that may have adverse effects on human health. Most European citizens, especially young people aged from 10 to 20, use a mobile phone, while there are continuing uncertainties about the possible health risks, particularly to young people whose brains are still developing.

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 3.8 million, 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.

Reviewing the European standards for EMFs: the 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.

Placement of masts and transmitters: the resolution calls for optimal placement of masts and transmitters. It calls for the sharing of masts and transmitters placed in this way by providers so as to limit the proliferation of poorly positioned masts and transmitters. Moreover, MEPs urge the authorities responsible for authorising the placement of mobile telephony antennas to reach agreement, jointly with the operators in that sector, on the sharing of infrastructure, in order to reduce the volume thereof.

Member States and local and regional authorities are called upon 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.

Keeping certain establishments clear: 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.

Research: MEPs stress the need to increase research and development (R&D) funding for the evaluation of potential long-term adverse effects of mobile telephony radio frequencies. The Commission is called upon to 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, with a view to determining whether microwaves might ultimately have undesirable consequences for human health.

The Parliament 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.

Interphone: the Parliament 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.

Overcoming the lack of information: MEPs call on the Member States to make available to the public, maps showing exposure to high-voltage power lines, radio frequencies and microwaves, and especially those generated by telecommunications masts, radio repeaters and telephone antennas. That information should be published on the internet.

MEPs also suggest to the Commission, to make for efficiency in policy and budget terms, that the Community funding earmarked for studies on EMFs be partly switched to finance a wide-ranging awareness campaign to familiarise young Europeans with good mobile phone techniques, such as the use of hands-free kits, keeping calls short, switching off phones when not in use (such as when in classes) and using phones in areas that have good reception.

The Commission is called upon to present a yearly report on the level of electromagnetic radiation in the EU, its sources, and actions taken in the EU to better protect human health and the environment.

Reducing exposure of local residents: the resolution 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.