

Briefing: German UNECE vehicle noise standards proposal

September 2011

Context: new EU noise standards expected this month

The European Commission's Enterprise and Industry directorate is due to publish a proposal to set new standards for noise emissions from cars, vans, lorries and buses this month. The first noise standards were set in 1970, but the Commission recognises that over the last 40 years and despite numerous updates, these have failed to protect the health of the European population by making our roads any quieter. The new standards look set to offer a small step forward, cutting the number of 'highly annoyed' people by 11 million, and highly sleep disturbed people by 5 million, by requiring action on the noisiest vehicles.ⁱ

The UNECE process

The European Commission decided to bring forward the proposal, after years of negotiations failed to make any progress at the noise working group of the UNECE in Geneva (an international standard-setting body for the automotive sector).ⁱⁱ

However, Germany will present their own proposal for international (not EU) vehicle noise standards at the next UNECE noise meeting on 19-21 September 2011. The German proposal would create some important loopholes, which means significant action will not be asked of the worst offenders – heavy lorries and high-powered cars.ⁱⁱⁱ The noise from heavy lorries and high-powered cars is especially relevant for sleep disturbance, which affects one in five people Europe according to the World Health Organisation (WHO)^{iv}. Sleep disturbance caused by road traffic noise is shown to pose a serious and widespread risk to health.^v

Under the German proposal:

- A real noise reduction bringing environmental benefit would only be required in a distant third step, kicking in only 10-14 years after the regulation is agreed, with varying deadlines for different vehicle classes.
- Even in this third step, cars with over 160kw/t power-weight ratio would be granted an additional 5dB allowance, which means they could be almost 4 times louder than normal cars (+6dB is a quadrupling of the sound pressure). At full throttle, these cars could be allowed to be 10dB louder – which is as loud as 10 normal cars.
- Cars with between 120-160kw/t power-weight ratio would be granted an additional 2dB compared to normal car (for comparison +3dB represents a doubling of sound pressure). This would apply, for example, to the BMW 330i, Audi A4 3.2FSI, VW Golf 3d GT and the Mini Cooper Works coupe.
- All Porsche models, except the Cayenne, could claim allowances of either 2dB (Boxster; Cayman) or 5dB (911 Carrera, Boxster S).^{vi}
- Heavy lorries (>250kw) would only be required to be around 1dB quieter than the current standards, which were set back in 1992 – and the deadline for this reduction would be only be in 14 years after new regulation is agreed. Realistically this means the new standards will kick in around 2027 or 2028, and even then because of the slow pace of fleet renewal it will take at least twelve years until they are fully effective on the roads – so 2040. Germany's Daimler is the biggest truck maker in the world.

This is in stark contrast to the German national Traffic Noise Protection Strategy (2009, re-confirmed in 2011) which boasts that they are “working to significantly tighten the current noise limits” to “challenging standards” for all modes of transport.^{vii} The Strategy includes an explicit goal for the UNECE noise working group, which is currently chaired by the German Ministry for Transport, to set standards in 2011 to achieve an effective noise reduction of 3dB.

For further information:

‘Quiet Please’ – T&E report on noise pollution from transport
www.transportenvironment.org/Publications/prep_hand_out/lid/638

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ⁱ See www.transportenvironment.org/News/2011/5/EU-announces-plan-to-make-cars-and-lorries-quieter/

ⁱⁱ See *How the motor industry hijacked regulation of vehicle noise*, T&E, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ German proposal published ahead of the UN noise working group meeting, to be held 19-21 September 2011:
<http://live.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trans/doc/2011/wp29grb/ECE-TRANS-WP29-GRB-54-inf03e.pdf>

^{iv} WHO (2011) *Burden of Disease from Environmental Noise*, Bonn. www.who.int/topics/noise/en/

^v See: *Quiet Please – Better Health through strong EU regulation of road and rail traffic noise*, T&E and HEAL, 2011.

^{vi} <http://www.porsche.com/all/comparemodels/Select.aspx?pool=germany>

^{vii} BMVBS, Nationales Lärmschutzpaket II, 2009 :

<http://www.bmvbs.de/SharedDocs/DE/Artikel/UI/verkehrslaermschutz.html?nn=36090>

Confirmed in Sustainability Report 2011:

http://www.bundesregierung.de/nsc_true/Webs/Breg/nachhaltigkeit/Content/___Anlagen/2011-04-15-bmvbs-nachhaltigkeitsbericht-2011,property=publicationFile.pdf/2011-04-15-bmvbs-nachhaltigkeitsbericht-2011