

Executive summary

France has pursued an ambitious environmental policy even if the results sometimes fall short of expectations

France has set itself ambitious environmental objectives, especially in the 2009 and 2010 Grenelle legislation and the 2015 Energy Transition for Green Growth Act. At the international level, France was a driving force in the adoption of the Paris Agreement by the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21). Against a domestic backdrop of low economic growth over the last decade, France has made progress in decoupling by reducing emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) and main atmospheric pollutants, curtailing freshwater abstraction and stabilising the generation of municipal waste.

Nevertheless, a number of environmental pressures remain. Like many other European countries, France has not achieved the “good status” objective set for 2015 by the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD), due mainly to diffuse pollution by nitrates and pesticides. France is one of the largest users of plant protection products in the world, and consumption has increased, also leading to soil and air contamination. Modal shift objectives are not on track and concentrations of ozone, NO₂ and particulates in the air regularly exceed human health protection thresholds in some areas. Land take is gaining pace, especially on the outskirts of towns and cities and along the coast, fragmenting habitats and diminishing biodiversity. The recovery rate for municipal waste (recycling and composting) remains well below those for Germany and Belgium.

Reforms have been undertaken to modernise environmental governance and law

By extending the powers of the Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development to cover transport, infrastructure, tourism and the sea, and then energy, France has been able to align sector and environmental policies, yet some integration issues remain unresolved. The creation of the General Commissariat for Sustainable Development (CGDD) in 2008 helped improve inter-ministerial co-ordination in this area. However, the implementation of environmental policies remains challenged by the complexity of the multiple layers of French administration. The recent reform of regional organisation is going smoothly, clarifying the powers of local authorities, simplifying planning documents and encouraging inter-municipality co-operation. There are still over 35 000 public water distribution and waste water treatment utilities in France, most of which are not big enough to benefit from economies of scale.

The legal framework governing strategic environmental assessments of plans and programmes and environmental impact assessments (EIA) of projects has been strengthened, but clarification of the links between the respective regulations is required.

The French approach results in projects having several EIAs, which prevents any global overview of the project and its potential impacts. France has simplified environmental permitting and streamlined control and compliance procedures. However, the transition of installations to the new registration scheme is taking longer than expected and inspection planning fails to adequately account for the track record of regulated installations.

The Grenelle Forum founded a five-part governance system to involve all stakeholders in policymaking. This system of participatory governance was carried over into the annual environmental conferences and institutionalised by the National Council for the Ecological Transition. Nonetheless, stronger environmental democracy remains a challenge and requires public consultation to be sufficiently in advance of decision making.

Increasing priority given to green growth

Investment in sustainable modes of transport, energy-efficient building renovation and clean technologies were promoted as growth engines in the 2009 fiscal stimulus package. France is a European leader in eco-innovation, with particular strength in water management, waste management and technologies to combat climate change. Tax breaks and subsidies for research and development, such as the Investments for the Future Programme, have helped some French green industries maintain and develop their competitive advantage. Over the last ten years, value added and employment in eco-activities have grown faster than the economy as a whole. A national plan to promote green jobs and careers has been drawn up and a specific national observatory has been created. Since 2012, the Environmental Taxation Committee, which was renamed the Green Economy Committee in 2015, promotes greater use of economic instruments in environmental policy.

However, environmental taxation remains relatively light. Fuel and vehicle taxes have given preferential treatment to diesel-powered vehicles, which pollute more, and the proportion of private diesel cars jumped from 35% in 2000 to 62% in 2014, one of the highest rates in Europe. The incorporation of a carbon component into fossil fuel taxation in 2014 was a significant step towards harmonising carbon prices. The climate-energy contribution will rise from EUR 22 per tonne of CO₂ in 2016 to EUR 30.5 in 2017 (2015 Budget Act). Future Budget Acts are expected to follow suit, with target values of EUR 56 per tonne of carbon in 2020 and EUR 100 in 2030, levels that are compatible with commitments to reduce GHG emissions. The recent reduction in the tax differential between diesel and petrol is encouraging, and could be stepped up. While France has abolished several subsidies which are harmful to the environment, there is room for improvement in reorienting direct and indirect public subsidies towards environmentally friendly behaviour, and the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

More details are needed regarding implementation of the energy transition

France is one of the lowest-carbon economies in the OECD due to the predominance of nuclear power in the energy mix, and outperformed the objective that it had set, in the context of the Kyoto Protocol, of limiting its GHG emissions over the period 2008-12 to their 1990 levels. However, it is not on track to meet its renewable energy and energy consumption targets under the European climate and energy package for 2020. Policy governance and tracking progress have been complicated by the multitude of energy and climate objectives with different timeframes. The effectiveness of policies has also been diminished by the instability of measures to support renewable energies and energy efficiency, complex regulation and the accumulation of instruments.

The Energy Transition for Green Growth Act created new governance tools, including the pluriannual energy programme (PPE) and the national low-carbon strategy (SNBC) which are expected to improve energy policy steering and visibility for investors. The Act sets ambitious objectives: increasing renewable energy to 32% of final energy consumption by 2030; cutting final energy consumption by 20% by 2030 and by 50% by 2050; cutting GHG emissions by 40% between 1990 and 2030 and by 75% by 2050. It also provides for a 50% reduction in the share of nuclear power in electricity production by 2025. The targets, however, are numerous and difficult to reconcile. Reducing the proportion of nuclear power while also reducing energy consumption will mean setting clear rules concerning the lifetime of reactors and wide-scale deployment of renewable energy sources. In particular, it will require developing the interconnection of the European network, tighter control over energy demand and the production costs of the different energy industries, and adapting support schemes for renewable energies.

France has strengthened its role as a leader in biodiversity

Due to its geographical position in Europe and overseas, France has an extremely rich natural heritage. It is also one of the ten countries with the largest number of endangered species and therefore has huge responsibilities in this regard. Like other countries, it did not meet the commitment set out in the Convention on Biological Diversity of reducing biodiversity loss by 2010. In metropolitan France, three-quarters of habitats of Community interest have an unfavourable conservation status and one species in five is threatened. The situation is even more alarming overseas. The main threats to biodiversity are the homogenisation of the landscape as a result of the intensification of agriculture, habitat fragmentation, and land take, as well as alien invasive species, overexploitation of fish stocks and climate change, which are particularly critical overseas. France has already achieved the objectives defined in the context of the Convention on Biological Diversity of protecting at least 17% of its land area and at least 10% of its territorial waters by 2020. However, barely 0.7% of metropolitan France is covered by protected areas in the strictest protection categories of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) classification.

At the international level, France has strengthened its role as a leader by almost tripling official development assistance for biodiversity since 2007-08 and by supporting the creation of the International Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Significant progress has been made in renewing the national legislative and institutional framework. In particular, the Grenelle II Law strengthened the “avoid, reduce, offset” sequence in impact assessments, and established a national green and blue belt network and regional ecological consistency schemes. The law on biodiversity conservation, which is scheduled to be adopted in 2016, seeks to rationalise governance, mainly through the creation of the French Biodiversity Agency. It also provides for the introduction of a scheme providing access to genetic resources and to the sharing of advantages arising out of their use following the ratification of the Nagoya Protocol. In order to strengthen the effectiveness of instruments for integrating biodiversity into regional development, France will have to promote the use and sharing between actors of outcome indicators. A culture of economic effectiveness of biodiversity policies still needs to be developed. Efforts must also be continued to promote agro-ecology as a solution for environmental challenges.



From:
**OECD Environmental Performance Reviews:
France 2016**

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264252714-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2016), "Executive summary", in *OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: France 2016*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264252714-6-en>

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