Communicating Sustainability under the EMPCO Directive

What Travel Intermediaries Should Know about EMPCO

Accurate | Clear | Substantiated | Not misleading

Empowering consumers for the green transition

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ECTAA
THE EUROPEAN TRAVEL AGENTS' AND TOUR OPERATORS' ASSOCIATIONS

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Disclaimer

This document has been prepared by ECTAA for information purposes only. It is based on Directive (EU) 2024/825 (EMPCO) and the European Commission Questions & Answers on the Directive published on 22 September 2026. It does not constitute legal advice and should not be regarded as an authoritative interpretation of Union law. National implementing legislation and enforcement practice should also be taken into account.

1. EMPCO at a glance - Quick reference guide for travel intermediaries

Before communicating about sustainability, ask yourself these questions:

1. Is this an environmental claim?

An environmental claim may be conveyed through:

✓ Words (e.g. green, eco-friendly, sustainable)
✓ Images, symbols or colours
✓ Sustainability labels
✓ Brand or product names
✓ The overall impression created by the communication

Remember: It is the overall impression on the average consumer that matters.

2. What type of claim is it?

Generic environmental claim:	Specific environmental claim:
"Eco-friendly hotel"	"Hotel uses 100% renewable electricity"
"Sustainable accommodation"	"Hotel eliminated single-use plastic bottles"

3. Does it comply with EMPCO?

✓ **Generic claims:** Do not use without recognised excellent environmental performance relevant to the claim; the term "sustainable" may additionally imply social characteristics.

✓ **Specific claims**: Be accurate, specific and not misleading & ensure they are supported by appropriate evidence.

✓ **Sustainability labels**: Only use labels established by a public authority or based on a qualifying certification scheme.

✓ **Climate-related claims**: Do not claim that a product or service has neutral, reduced or positive greenhouse-gas impact on the basis of offsetting, wholly or partly.

✓ **Future environmental performance**: Only if supported by public commitments, measurable and time-bound targets, an implementation plan and independent third-party verification.

Golden Rule:

When in doubt, replace broad environmental and social claims with factual, specific and verifiable information.

Need more information?

Refer to the document hereafter for practical examples and detailed explanations.

2. Foreword

Sustainability is becoming an increasingly important factor for travellers when choosing destinations, accommodation, transport and package holidays. Travel intermediaries therefore play a key role in providing consumers with clear, reliable and meaningful information about the sustainability characteristics of the travel services they offer.

The Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition Directive (EMPCO) introduces new **rules governing how sustainability information may be communicated to consumers**. While these rules aim to combat greenwashing and strengthen consumer trust, they **should not discourage travel intermediaries from communicating about sustainability**. On the contrary, transparent and credible sustainability communication is essential to help consumers make informed choices and recognise suppliers that are genuinely improving their sustainability performance.

The EMPCO rules are largely principle-based, requiring businesses to exercise judgement when assessing sustainability communications. This document is intended to help travel intermediaries communicate with confidence about the sustainability characteristics of the products and services they offer, while ensuring that consumers receive information that is accurate, transparent and not misleading.

Providing consumers with reliable sustainability information rewards businesses that invest in sustainability, supports more informed purchasing decisions and contributes to the transition towards a more sustainable travel sector.

3. What is EMPCO?

The **Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition Directive (Directive (EU) 2024/825)** ("EMPCO") forms part of the European Green Deal and the EU's broader Sustainable Consumption Initiative. It amends the **Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (UCPD)** and the **Consumer Rights Directive (CRD)** to strengthen consumer protection and enable consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions by ensuring that sustainability-related information is clear, reliable and credible.

The Directive was adopted in response to growing concerns about **greenwashing** and the proliferation of sustainability labels and environmental claims. The European Commission found that many environmental claims made to consumers were vague, misleading or insufficiently substantiated, while the increasing number of public and private sustainability labels made it difficult for consumers to distinguish between trustworthy certification schemes and self-created or unverified labels. As a result, consumers were often unable to make purchasing decisions based on reliable sustainability information.

It is important to distinguish between environmental claims and broader sustainability claims. Environmental claims concern the environmental characteristics or impacts of a product, service or trader. Broader sustainability claims may also refer to social characteristics, such as working conditions or animal welfare. Sustainability labels, which may relate to environmental or social characteristics, or both, are subject to specific rules under EMPCO.

The EMPCO Directive establishes a clear legal framework governing how sustainability-related information may be communicated to consumers. It introduces new rules on environmental claims, sustainability labels and claims relating to future environmental performance, while also adding a number of misleading sustainability practices to the list of commercial practices that are prohibited in all circumstances under the UCPD.

For the travel sector, these changes are particularly significant. Sustainability information increasingly influences consumers' choice of destinations, accommodation, transport and package holidays. Travel intermediaries frequently communicate information relating to environmental certifications, sustainable accommodation, lower-emission transport options and other sustainability initiatives. Since **27 September 2026**, such communications must comply with the new requirements introduced by the EMPCO Directive.

This document explains the provisions of the EMPCO Directive that are most relevant to travel intermediaries. It is based on the Directive itself and the European Commission's Questions & Answers as at 22 September (further updates may be available) and provides practical examples to help travel intermediaries communicate sustainability information in compliance with the new rules.

4. Key concepts and rules of EMPCO with practical examples

4.1. Environmental claims

4.1.1. Definition of environmental claims

The EMPCO Directive **regulates environmental claims made to consumers**. Before assessing whether a communication complies with the new rules, it is therefore necessary to determine what constitutes an environmental claim.

The Directive defines an environmental claim as:

> *"any message or representation which is not mandatory under Union or national law, in any form, including text, pictorial, graphic or symbolic representation, such as labels, brand names, company names or product names, in the context of a commercial communication, and which states or implies that a product, product category, brand or trader has a positive or zero impact on the environment or is less damaging to the environment than other products, product categories, brands or traders, or has improved its impact over time."*

This **definition is deliberately broad**. An environmental claim may therefore be conveyed through:

- text;
- images;
- symbols or logos;
- colours or visual design;
- sustainability labels;
- brand and company names;
- product names; or

- any other commercial communication.

Environmental claims may thus be either explicit or implicit. An explicit claim directly refers to an environmental characteristic (for example "eco-friendly hotel"), whereas an implicit claim conveys the same message through images, colours, symbols or the overall presentation of the communication.

Whether a communication is an environmental claim depends on **how the average consumer is likely to perceive the communication** and should take into account the overall commercial context and the overall impression created by the communication. The decisive question is whether the communication states or implies that the product, service, brand or trader has positive environmental characteristics or performs better environmentally than comparable products, services, brands or traders.

Practical examples

Communication	Likely environmental claim?	Why?
"Hotel awarded the EU Ecolabel"	✓ Yes	Explicit claim based on certification.
Green leaf icon next to a hotel description	✓ Likely	May imply superior environmental performance depending on the context / information provided.
Website using forests and green colours without any sustainability wording	Depends	Images or colours alone are not automatically environmental claims. The assessment depends on the overall impression created for the average consumer.
Company or product called "Green xxx" or “Eco xxx”	Depends	The name is not automatically an environmental claim. The question is whether consumers would understand it as implying environmental benefits in the context in which it is used.

4.1.2. Rules for environmental claims

Generic environmental claims are prohibited unless the trader can demonstrate recognised excellent environmental performance relevant to the claim.

A generic environmental claim is an environmental claim made in written or oral form, including through audiovisual media, that is not included on a sustainability label and for which the specification of the claim is not provided in clear and prominent terms on the same medium. Broad expressions about overall environmental performance are common examples, but even a claim referring to a particular characteristic may be generic where its specification is missing or insufficiently prominent.

Examples include ‘environmentally friendly’, ‘eco-friendly’, ‘green’, ‘sustainable’, ‘responsible’, ‘climate friendly’ or ‘nature's friend.

Recognised excellent environmental performance may be demonstrated by:

- the EU Ecolabel;
- national or regional EN ISO 14024 Type I ecolabelling schemes officially recognised by Member States; or
- top environmental performance under applicable Union law.

Recognised excellent environmental performance must be relevant to the particular claim being made.

The EMPCO Directive makes an important distinction between environmental claims and **broader sustainability claims**. Claims such as “sustainable”, “conscious” or “responsible” cannot be justified solely by recognised excellent environmental performance, because they may also imply social characteristics.

This means that describing a travel itinerary as “sustainable” can be particularly problematic if the claim is supported only by evidence of reduced carbon emissions, without addressing the broader message conveyed to consumers.

Practical examples

Communication	Likely compliant?	Comments
"Book your stay in our sustainable hotel."	✗	A generic environmental claim with no explanation or evidence.
"Eco-friendly accommodation."	✗	Generic environmental claim that is not accompanied by recognised excellent environmental performance.
"Green holiday."	✗	Generic claim relating to the entire package, without demonstrating recognised excellent environmental performance.
"This hotel has been awarded the EU Ecolabel."	✓	Factual statement describing a recognised certification. It does not make a generic environmental claim.
Displaying the EU Ecolabel next to the hotel description.	✓	Permitted, provided the label is used correctly and relates to the certified accommodation.
"Sustainable holiday – hotel awarded the EU Ecolabel."	✗	Misleading if only the hotel is certified but the claim relates to the entire holiday package, including transport and other services.

Specific environmental claims are allowed so long as they are accurate, specific, capable of being substantiated and not misleading.

Unlike generic environmental claims, specific environmental claims identify the particular environmental characteristic or improvement being claimed. Consumers are therefore able to understand the basis for the environmental benefit being communicated.

A specific claim must still be truthful, accurate, capable of substantiation and non-misleading. Providing a vague headline and placing the explanation only somewhere else may not be sufficient: the specification must be clear and prominent on the same medium.

For example, a travel intermediary could replace a broad statement such as "eco-friendly hotel" with a more specific description of the environmental characteristic being communicated, provided that this information appears in the same communication.

For measurable claims, state the relevant scope, reference period and methodology where needed.

Practical examples

Communication	Likely compliant if substantiated	Why
"Hotel uses 100% renewable electricity."	✓	Specific factual claim if the scope and basis of renewable-electricity sourcing are accurate and substantiated.
"Hotel reduced water consumption by 35%."	✓	Specific measurable claim; specify the baseline, reporting period and relevant unit (for example, per guest-night).
"The hotel eliminated single-use plastic bottles in 2025."	✓	Specific operational measure; specify whether it covers the whole hotel or only particular operations.
"Book this environmentally friendly hotel because it has eliminated single-use plastic bottles."	✗	Goes beyond the specific fact and becomes a broader environmental claim.

4.2. Sustainability labels

4.2.1. Definition of sustainability label

One of the key innovations introduced by the EMPCO Directive is the regulation of sustainability labels. The Directive aims to address the proliferation of environmental and social labels that may confuse consumers or create an unjustified impression of superior sustainability performance.

The Directive defines a sustainability label as:

> *"any voluntary trust mark, quality mark or equivalent, either public or private, that aims to set apart and promote a product, a process or a business by reference to its environmental or social characteristics, or both."*

Mandatory labels required by Union or national legislation do not fall within this definition.

4.2.2. Rules governing sustainability labels

Sustainability labels may only be displayed if they are established by a public authority or based on a qualifying certification scheme.

The objective is to prevent traders from creating their own environmental logos or badges that may give consumers the impression that a product or service has been independently certified.

Accordingly, self-created labels, which are not based on a qualifying certification scheme or established by a public authority, are prohibited.

The Directive specifies the **minimum requirements that a certification scheme must fulfil**. In particular, certification schemes should include:

- transparent and publicly available certification criteria;
- open access to traders willing and able to comply with the scheme;
- access must be under transparent, fair and non-discriminatory terms;
- consultation of relevant experts and stakeholders in developing the certification criteria;
- independent third-party verification of compliance;
- the verifier's competence and independence from both the trader and the scheme owner must be ensured through international, Union or national standards and procedures. and
- procedures to deal with non-compliance, including suspension or withdrawal of the label where appropriate.

Before displaying a sustainability label, the trader should ensure, according to the publicly available terms of the certification scheme, that the scheme meets the minimum transparency and credibility conditions.

When displaying a label, the message conveyed by the label must still be truthful, accurate, appropriately scoped and non-misleading. In other words, displaying a valid sustainability label does not provide a "safe harbour". The overall presentation of the travel service must remain accurate and must not create a misleading impression about the environmental performance or scope of the certification.

Practical examples

Communication	Likely compliant?	Comments
A hotel displays the **EU Ecolabel** logo because it has obtained the certification.	✓	Permitted, provided the certification is valid and relates to the hotel concerned.
A travel intermediary displays the **Travelife** certification logo for a hotel that has obtained that certification.	✓	Permitted if the certification scheme meets the requirements of the Directive. *The Commission's Q&A does not specifically assess individual certification schemes such as Travelife*.
A travel intermediary creates its own logo stating **"Green Travel Approved"** without any independent certification scheme.	✗	Prohibited. The label is neither established by a public authority nor based on a qualifying certification scheme.
A hotel displays the EU Ecolabel together with the statement **"This hotel has been awarded the EU Ecolabel."**	✓	Factual description of the certification.
A package holiday displays the EU Ecolabel because the hotel is certified, while the headline states **"Book our sustainable holiday."**	✗	Potentially misleading if consumers are led to believe that the entire package—including flights, transfers and other services—has been certified or demonstrates recognised environmental performance.

4.3. Climate-related claims based on carbon offsetting

Claims that a product or service has a neutral, reduced or positive impact on the environment in terms of greenhouse gas emissions are prohibited where they are based wholly or partly on greenhouse gas emissions offsetting.

This prohibition is intended to prevent traders from creating the impression that a product or service has no, reduced or positive impact on the climate where this result is achieved solely or primarily through carbon offsetting rather than through actual reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

This prohibition includes, for example, claims such as:

- "carbon neutral";
- "climate neutral";
- "net zero";
- "climate positive"; or
- "reduced climate impact"

may not be used where they are based solely or partly on the purchase of carbon credits or participation in carbon offsetting schemes.

This prohibition does not prevent traders from providing factual information about carbon offsetting schemes, provided this information does not amount to an environmental claim about the product or service itself.

Practical examples

Communication	Likely compliant?	Comments
"Carbon-neutral holiday." (neutrality achieved through purchasing carbon offsets)	✗	Prohibited. The claim is based on greenhouse gas emissions offsetting.
"Climate-positive travel package." (based on offsetting)	✗	Prohibited for the same reason.
"Customers may voluntarily contribute to a certified carbon offsetting project."	✓	Factual information about an optional project, provided that "certified" is accurate and no unsupported environmental benefit is implied for the holiday or the project.

4.4. Claims concerning future environmental performance

Environmental claims about future environmental performance must be supported by clear, objective, publicly available and verifiable commitments, a detailed and realistic implementation plan with measurable and time-bound targets, and regular independent third-party verification.

Traders must not make environmental claims relating to future environmental performance without:

- Clear, objective, publicly available and verifiable commitments.
- A detailed and realistic implementation plan, including measurable and time-bound targets.
- An allocation of resources necessary to achieve those targets.
- Regular verification by an independent third-party expert, whose findings must be made available to consumers.

These requirements are intended to ensure that businesses cannot make ambitious future sustainability promises without credible evidence demonstrating how those commitments will be achieved.

A target alone does not make a future-performance claim compliant. The commitments, plan, allocated resources and independent verification must actually exist and meet the

Directive's requirements; any description of the target should accurately reflect its scope and limitations.

Practical examples

Communication	Likely compliant?	Comments
"We are working towards becoming more sustainable."	✗	A vague aspirational statement. Depending on the context, it may constitute a future environmental claim that lacks sufficiently clear and verifiable commitments.
"By 2030, all hotels in our preferred partner programme will meet recognised sustainability certification standards."	Conditional	Potentially compliant only if the specific commitments, credible implementation plan, necessary resources, and regular independent verification satisfy all legal conditions; the scope of the certification standards must also be clear.

4.5. Comparative environmental and social claims

Comparisons must be objective, substantiated and not misleading. Where a trader provides a service comparing products by their environmental or social characteristics, consumers must receive information about the comparison method, the products and suppliers compared, and the measures taken to keep the information up to date.

These requirements help consumers assess the reliability and relevance of a comparison before making a purchasing decision.

Comparisons should concern products serving the same function, use a common method and common assumptions, and relate to material and verifiable characteristics. The basis and scope of the comparison should be clear, so that consumers can understand what is being compared and why one product is presented as performing better than another.

Where a trader provides a comparison service, consumers must receive information about:

- the method used to make the comparison;
- the products being compared and their suppliers; and
- the measures taken to keep the information up to date

An advantage in one environmental or social characteristic must not be presented as proof of better overall performance. Similarly, a comparison covering only a limited selection of products must not give the impression that it covers the entire market. The wording and overall presentation should accurately reflect what the comparison demonstrates and any material limitations.

Claiming as a distinctive environmental advantage that a product or service complies with requirements imposed by law on all products in the relevant category on the Union market is also misleading.

Practical examples

Communication	Likely compliant?	Comments
"Hotel A used 20% less water per guest-night than Hotel B during 2025."	✓ Likely, if substantiated	Identifies the comparator, measurement basis and reporting period. The figures must cover comparable activities and use a consistent measurement method.
"A booking platform compares transport options by estimated emissions and explains the calculation method, the services and suppliers compared, and how the data are kept up to date.	✓ Likely, if accurate and not misleading	Provides the information required for a comparison service. Any material limitations should also be clear.
"The most sustainable hotel", based only on electricity consumption data from ten hotels.	✗ Likely misleading	A limited comparison of one characteristic does not establish overall sustainability or superiority over all other hotels.
"This holiday is more sustainable because its flight has lower estimated emissions", without assessing accommodation or other elements of the package.	✗ Likely misleading	An advantage in one component is presented as evidence of better overall sustainability.

4.6. Prohibited sustainability claims

EMPCO amends **Annex I of the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive**, which lists commercial practices that are **prohibited in all circumstances**. These "blacklisted" practices are always unfair and may not be used by travel intermediaries, regardless of the specific context.

For sustainability-related communications, the most relevant newly blacklisted practices include:

- **Presenting legal requirements as a sustainability feature**

  For example, marketing compliance with mandatory environmental standards as a distinctive "green" advantage of a hotel, transport option or package.

- **Making generic environmental claims without recognised excellent environmental performance**

  Using terms such as "eco-friendly", "green" or "sustainable" where recognised excellent environmental performance relevant to the claim cannot be demonstrated in line with EMPCO.

- **Exaggerating the scope of a claim or certification**

  Suggesting that an entire holiday, brand or business is environmentally superior where only one element (for example, the accommodation) is certified or where the certification covers only certain aspects of the service.

- **Using non-compliant sustainability labels**

  Displaying logos, trust marks or "green badges" that resemble certification labels but are not established by a public authority and are not based on a qualifying certification scheme with independent verification.

- **Climate-neutral or similar claims based on offsetting**

  Claiming that a travel product or service is "carbon neutral", "climate neutral", "net zero" or "climate positive" where this is based wholly or partly on greenhouse gas offsetting rather than actual emission reductions.

Travel intermediaries should treat these practices as **strict "no-go" areas** when designing marketing materials, websites and sales communications and should focus instead on factual, specific and verifiable information about the sustainability characteristics of the services they offer.

5. Penalties for non-compliance

The EMPCO Directive requires Member States to lay down rules on **penalties** applicable to infringements of the national provisions implementing the Directive and to ensure that those penalties are **effective, proportionate and dissuasive**.

The nature of the penalties will therefore depend on the national legislation implementing the Directive. They may include, for example, orders requiring traders to cease or amend non-compliant commercial practices, as well as financial penalties where provided for under national law.

Travel intermediaries should therefore integrate EMPCO compliance into their wider consumer law compliance programmes and ensure that sustainability-related communications are reviewed before publication.

6. Key recommendations for travel intermediaries

Before making any sustainability-related communication, travel intermediaries should ask themselves the following questions:

Step 1 – Does the communication constitute an environmental claim?

Consider not only the wording used, but also images, colours, symbols, certification logos, sustainability labels, brand names and the overall presentation of the communication. This applies for all communications, including information that you pass on from your suppliers to the customers.

Step 2 – What type of environmental claim is being made?

Determine whether the communication contains:

- a **generic environmental claim** (e.g. "green", "eco-friendly" or "sustainable"); or

- a **specific environmental claim** describing a particular environmental characteristic or improvement.

Step 3 – Can the claim be substantiated?

- If it is a **generic environmental claim**, ensure that recognised excellent environmental performance can be demonstrated.
- If it is a **specific environmental claim**, ensure that it is accurate, specific, supported by appropriate evidence and not misleading.

Step 4 - Does the communication also make claims about social characteristics?

If the communication refers to fair working conditions, local communities, animal welfare or other social characteristics, ensure that these statements are accurate, appropriately substantiated and not misleading under the UCPD.

Step 5 – Does the overall communication create a misleading impression?

Assess the communication from the perspective of the average consumer. Consider whether the overall presentation—including images, labels and other visual elements—could lead consumers to believe that a product, service or package has broader environmental characteristics than can be substantiated.

Practical recommendations for travel intermediaries

When communicating about sustainability, travel intermediaries should:

✓ **Describe sustainability certifications factually**, rather than replacing them with broad environmental claims.

✓ **Clearly explain what has been certified**, for example whether the certification relates only to the hotel, a specific service or the entire travel product.

✓ Use **broad terms** such as "green", "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" only where the conditions laid down in the Directive are met.

✓ Ensure that claims about package holidays **accurately reflect the environmental performance** of the package as a whole. Do not suggest that the entire package is sustainable where only one component, such as the accommodation, has been certified.

✓ Use only **sustainability labels** established by a public authority or based on a qualifying certification scheme. Do not create or display self-designed environmental labels or badges.

✓ Exercise **due diligence** when relying on supplier information. Obtain and retain evidence supporting environmental claims and review supplier information regularly to ensure that it remains accurate and up to date.

✓ **Review existing marketing materials**, websites and social media content to ensure that sustainability-related communications remain compliant with the EMPCO Directive.

✓ When in doubt, **prefer factual, specific and verifiable information over broad environmental statements.**

7. References

- Directive (EU) 2024/825 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 February 2024 empowering consumers for the green transition through better protection against unfair practices and better information (all EU language versions) - link
- European Commission, Questions & Answers – Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition (available in EN – DE – FR) - link
- EUR-Lex – National transposition measures for Directive (EU) 2024/825- link