



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Janez Potočnik

European Commissioner for Environment

Developing energy grids which are economically profitable, socially accepted and environmentally sound

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

2nd European Grid Conference: Towards socially accepted and environmentally sound grids – Practical experiences across Europe
Brussels, 5 December 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen, Honourable Members,
Commissioner Oettinger,

It is a pleasure to be here with you today. I would like to thank the Smart Energy for Europe Platform and Renewables Grid Initiative for providing this opportunity to reflect on how we can develop grids which are economically profitable, socially accepted and environmentally sound. This is a real challenge. It is also clear that this cannot be done by a group of stakeholders alone, and I find your initiative to bring together environmental groups and energy infrastructure operators not only sensible but also highly innovative.

Experience shows that, most often, obstacles to infrastructure expansion do not come from environmental legislation – which allows for a good margin of flexibility – but rather from lack of dialogue and efforts to build a common understanding. Early efforts in communication and in understanding environmental considerations can help reduce acceptance problems further down the line. Open, transparent and early involvement of the local communities affected by grid development is extremely important.

In this respect I find the hierarchy of priorities in the Grid Declaration particularly useful. In a resource-constraint world, where future growth and prosperity will be determined by the planet's finite resources, preserving our natural capital must become a priority in all sectors. This is why the Commission has placed the efficient use of resources at the centre of its economic growth strategy. Environmental considerations need to be integrated in policy areas. And I'm pleased to see that you are moving exactly in this direction. In this respect, I see no reason why environmental concerns, in particular safeguarding Europe's biodiversity and natural environment, cannot go hand-in-hand with Grid's improvement.

As my colleague Günter Oettinger has already stressed, improving the European grid is very important, and it is also very important, if we want to meet agreed EU targets. As Environment Commissioner, it is my responsibility to ensure that Member States and local authorities are equipped with the tools to ensure that environmental considerations in the permit-granting process lead to sustainable projects, including all energy infrastructure projects.

And it is also with that in mind that on 26 October of this year, the Commission adopted a proposal for a revised Environment Impact Assessment Directive. It was based on the conclusion of a detailed analyses carried out by the Commission on the application and effectiveness of the EIA legislation across the EU done on the basis of a two year process of data collection and extensive consultation of stakeholders and public. Three shortcomings were in particular identified and addressed: Insufficient operation of the screening process, mechanism which determines whether an EIA is required, where large differences across member states exist; insufficient quality and analyses of the assessments; and risks of inconsistencies within the EIA process itself and in relation to other legislation. The overarching objective is to ensure a more consistent, effective and harmonised application of the principles of environmental assessment. This will improve environmental protection and create a level playing field. The proposed changes include:

- Adjusting the procedure that determines whether an Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) is needed, to ensure that only projects, but all the projects, with significant environmental impacts are subject to such an assessment.

- Strengthening rules to ensure a more informed and knowledge based decision-making process, so that environmental damage is avoided, to the extent possible. Amendments like mandatory scoping, assessment of alternatives, monitoring and quality control of EIA information will improve the quality of EIA reports, reduce the gaps in the environmental information and provide robust evidence for the final decisions on the projects.
- Streamlining the various stages of the EIA process, by introducing timeframes and a new mechanism to ease the process when several assessments are required and several authorities involved.

These changes will bring more legal certainty and accelerate the process, while improving the quality of the assessment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In addition to amending the EIA Directive, we have already published several useful **guidance documents** that should help you meet current needs. Guideline documents on "Wind energy developments and Natura 2000", for example, and on the "Water Framework Directive and Hydromorphological Pressures". These documents contain useful recommendations for better policy integration and good practices that will help reconcile environmental objectives with other policies such as energy. A key message in these guidance documents is the value for Member States to develop a strategic approach in their economic decisions, while giving environmental legislation full consideration at the earliest possible stage in planning.

In addition, the proposed **Energy Infrastructures Guidelines** foresee that Member States take action to streamline the environmental impact assessment requirements of all EU environmental Directives relevant for energy infrastructure permit granting. The Commission will issue Guidance for the Member States within three months of the entry into force of the new Energy Infrastructures Regulation by Council and Parliament. My services are already analysing the existing systems, problems and good practices across all EU Member States and Croatia. Once this work is completed - around March 2013 - we should be able to propose the Guidance on streamlining.

The proposed modification to the EIA Directive, the use by promoters and Member States of existing and future Guidance will be beneficial for the roll-out of much-needed European Energy infrastructure. My colleague Günter Oettinger and I will continue to work together towards a European electricity grid which is economically efficient, socially acceptable and environmentally sound. Not an easy task, but necessary, and worth of our full attention. Including yours.

Thank again for your efforts and thank you for listening to me.