

Balancing economic and environmental demands

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National Renewable Energy Action Plans are good and fair instrument to ensure that the promised percentages of RES in final energy consumption of each member state are reached. These plans will show not only the member state's energy capacities, but foremost the reality of their energy policy. And energy was always evenly technical and political economic activity.

The developed world has found itself in the unknown position with, historically speaking, sudden environmental demands coming in front of each energy agenda. Even comfortably self-conscious hydropower was not immune to the change to which it didn't react as and when it should. Technical maturity and big industry background were the reason that many were rightly surprised about the sudden lack of trust that the hydropower is in fact environmentally beneficial and that both economic and energy value was also forgotten. What lack of trust was actually showing was lack of environmental standards, but environment suddenly played such a big role, that the uncritical cautious approach principle was introduced and majority of projects came to a halt. Some of the hydropower equipment industry managed to redirect to developing countries, because of severely handicapped domestic market.

Of course, a proper use of energy resources was always a trademark of wise and successful nations. To use a domestic, cheap, reliable and most efficient energy source is of the highest national interest. If such energy source is also renewable and provides jobs and economic growth through industrial development, it should be commonly recognized as national treasure. Hydropower is surely such treasure and in present economic situation it should be eagerly developed and used.

However, no energy source can nowadays be used without complying with environmental restrictions. In many countries hydropower was hampered by the implementation of Water Framework Directive (WFD), which, although extremely needed and positively intended, was misused by some to perform a kind of witch hunt against many hydropower investments. True, the environment and nature need our attention and correct approach probably more than ever as it is endangered by our careless and short-sighted way of life that needs growing amounts of energy to sustain itself. This puts the environmental issues also on top of national interests where they clash against energy policy, as this is easily visible with the conflict between the WFD and RES-E directives.

The policy of transition to a low carbon society equals environmental interest. The transition can happen only by the economic activity and this is in turn driven by the economic interests. The paradox lies in the fact that those interests are usually blocked by the environmental restrictions, hence impeding the very same environmental interest they are protecting. Because the priority is not clear, neither is then the responsibility for not reaching the targets on both sides.

One of the conclusions from the recent small hydropower conference Hidroenergia 2010 in Swiss Lausanne was that the sector has to keep the scientific and technological development directed towards larger environmental acceptability, while reaching the legalization of the principles of balanced approach – we should always balance the economic value of energy use with the minimum environmental demands – both based on scientific standards.

A big potential of 10.000 MW (38.000 GWh) of small hydropower still lies untapped in the EU (68.400 GWh in EU-27). All that potential will have multiplying positive effects on local energy supply, SME economy, employment, exports, (smart) grid development and environment itself. It will also be the only way to help the member states prepare and fulfil their National Renewable Energy Action Plans and reach RES targets to 2020, as we have to understand something – the goal is not final. It's not going to stop in 2020, the RES share will have to grow and reach 100 % in the near future.

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