

Think Green: the EU and the environment



European union



The European Union (EU) has a wide range of rules and policies regulating environmental protection and has taken considerable steps in dealing with major environmental problems such as climate change. As part of its preparation to become a 'green' economy by 2050, the EU is regulating responsible resources management.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Research shows that rising sea levels could flood many low-lying countries, creating millions of environmental migrants; extreme weather events could become more frequent; and animal and plant species could become extinct. The EU is at the forefront in the fight against climate change. As a primary economic power, the EU has a duty to set an example and pave the way in this struggle – even though it accounts for only 14% of global pollution.

Member States consider it possible to reduce pollutant emission levels while simultaneously improving living standards, despite the wider global view that these two dimensions are incompatible. However, this goal can be met only by changing our lifestyle and the way in which energy is produced.

In March 2007, EU leaders defined an ambitious and far-reaching strategy related to energy and climate change, endeavouring to reduce emissions by 20%. They also asserted that emissions could be reduced by an additional 30% if other industrialised countries pledged to follow the EU's lead.

The EU has also developed a bold plan which envisages that, by 2020, renewable energy sources, such as wind turbines and solar power, will generate one-fifth of total energy consumed by the EU – double the existing levels. The EU plans to reduce energy consumption by 20% by implementing a wide range of measures aimed at better energy efficiency.

This approach has been devised in order for the European economy to have a more positive impact on the environment, but also to reduce dependence on imported oil, secure more stable energy sources and save money. Only two EU Member States (Malta and Cyprus) currently have no targets defined in the pan-European action plan to reduce global pollution in accordance with the Kyoto Protocol – an international agreement on climate change developed within the United Nations framework.

A cornerstone of the EU's climate change strategy is the Emissions Trading Scheme, which incentivises companies involved in industry-heavy activities to reduce their carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions and penalises those that exceed their appointed quota. The scheme covers approximately 12,000 factories and plants responsible for about half of the EU's CO₂ emissions. Should a business wish to exceed its carbon quota, it must buy spare credits from a more efficient company. Consequently, there has been a move towards greater corporate social responsibility in which companies are becoming more environmentally conscious. In the future, more industries will be subject to these conditions.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The vision of sustainable development is to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs; in other words, to ensure that creating a better quality of life today via economic growth does not jeopardise growth possibilities for future generations.

Sustainable development is a key objective of EU policy; ten years ago, the EU was the first to develop a strategy dealing with this issue, which was amended in 2006 to tackle new challenges. Sustainable development is closely linked to climate change and energy policy, and the revised plan stresses the importance of education to the process.

The European Commission states that, in 2009, renewable energy constituted 62% of energy generation investments in the EU. Member States' projections show that renewable energy will grow at a faster rate in the years up to 2020 than in the past. Member States expect to more than double their total renewable energy consumption from a combined 103 million tons of oil equivalent (Mtoe) in 2005 to 217 Mtoe in 2020. If these production forecasts are met, the EU's overall share of renewable energy in 2020 will exceed the 20% target. The Commission suggests that, while annual capital investment in renewable energy today averages €35 billion, this would need to double rapidly to €70 billion to ensure the EU achieves its goals.

RECYCLING

The EU aims to prevent the production of waste. EU citizens individually produce 524kg of waste per year – significantly less than the 740kg the average American creates, but considerably more than the Japanese (400kg).

Since 2005 the EU has taken huge steps towards its goal of becoming a society that uses resources efficiently through recycling. Recent reports show positive trends, specifically, reduced amounts of hazardous materials in discarded electrical and electronic equipment and less waste reaching landfills.

A well-organised recycling process represents a valuable source of secondary raw materials for European industry, but also holds economic potential due to the emergence of a new market sector on the wave of this endeavour in which a significant number of people are employed. The EU envisages approximately half a million new jobs could be created in its long-term quest to recycle 70% of total waste.

The EU currently recycles about 60% of its total waste, while Serbia recycles approximately 10%. It is estimated that the total annual damage caused by improper waste management in Serbia ranges between €98 and €276 million, or 0.4 to 1.1% of gross domestic product. Of the total number of Serbian households connected to the sewerage system, only 8% have been implemented with waste water treatment systems – considerably less than across the EU (40% in newer Member States such as Hungary, Poland and Estonia; 80% in older Member States). The National Programme of Environmental Protection, the Sustainable Development

Strategy and several local environmental plans for individual municipalities in Serbia (eg, Bor, Bečej, Kikinda, Niš, Pančevo, Subotica) were financed from various EU funds or by individual Member States.

BIODIVERSITY

The EU is committed to reducing the decline in the number of endangered species. A political and legal framework has been established for the EU to be able to manage this challenge, but its success will require more intensive efforts. The EU therefore wishes to expand the Natura 2000 plan – an ecological network of protected areas intended to preserve endangered habitats and species – by increasing the number of zones offering such protection. There are already 26,000 such sites across the region.

The European target of halting biodiversity loss by 2010 brought visibility to Europe's wealth of natural capital and the essential ecosystem services that biodiversity delivers: providing food, fibre, medicines and freshwater; pollinating crops; filtering pollutants; and protecting against natural disasters.

The EU has raised awareness of the need to prioritise biodiversity in all areas of decision making and in all economic sectors. Public understanding and appreciation of biodiversity and its role in sustaining our societies and economies must be broadened. This is crucial because popular recognition of the value of biodiversity and healthy ecosystems will create the political impetus for action.

SERBIA-EU ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONS

To date, Serbia has committed 0.9% of its gross domestic product to the environment sector. It is clear that this amount will have to be increased, however, the speed at which Serbia can enhance its commitment is limited. A further constraint is the cost recovery capacity from user charges.

Should Serbia be granted EU membership, this would provide increased access to European markets and EU funding. Additional funds could be used to improve environmental protection standards, which would have a positive impact on human health. In this regard, the Serbian government launched a project to develop a national Environmental Approximation Strategy (EAS). The EAS will prioritise what needs to be done, estimate the level of investment required and provide a clear idea of the benefits that will be accrued. The EAS will include significant funding requests for the following projects: landfills, water treatment plants and clean-up of toxic waste sites that threaten health and the local environment. The EU has suggested that it is prepared to provide grants to cover part of the investments that the national government cannot afford, that is, the cost of putting infrastructure into place, such as landfills and waste water treatment plants.



DID YOU KNOW?

A group of young students have won the prestigious Sustainable Energy Europe Award 2011 with their public solar-powered mobile charging point idea. The 'Strawberry Tree' is a public point that allows people to charge their mobile phones and other devices and raises awareness through generating debate about solar energy whilst people wait for their devices.

EU-SUPPORTED PROJECTS IN SERBIA

The EU currently funds several environment projects in Serbia, totaling over €20 million.

The Municipal Infrastructure Support Programme (€9.4 million) supports environmental and economic infrastructure projects in Serbian municipalities (e.g., drinking water, waste water treatment, solid waste management, industrial zones). Since 2005 more than 14 projects with a total value of over €65 million have been implemented.

The Technical Assistance for the Hazardous Waste Management Facility (€2.5 million) aims to improve the quality of the natural environment and population health through improved hazardous waste management. The project is involved with the planning and tendering stages of Serbia's first hazardous waste treatment facility

The EU is committed to fighting climate change and the depletion of our environment through cutting greenhouse gas emissions, encouraging recycling and funding sustainable energy projects across Europe.

Europe's energy and climate policy sets ambitious targets for a sustainable, secure and competitive energy system. These objectives have been translated into binding targets. By 2020, the EU has committed to:

- reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% (or up to 30% if other countries pledge to do the same);
- increase its share of renewable energies to 20% of total energy consumption;
- increase its share of renewable energies in the transportation sector to 10%; and
- improve energy efficiency by 20%.



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