Zielone Oko – Ada Okrasińska

ul. Armii Krajowej 25/7
58-100 Świdnica
@: biuro@zieloneoko.pl

Kancelaria Radców Prawnych
Otawski Dziura Jędrzejewski Troszyński Spółka Partnerska
al. Niepodległości 221 lok 2
02-087 Warszawa
@: kancelaria@kancelariaodj.pl

Environment, Energy and Climate Change Programme
European Economic Area Financial Mechanism 2014-2021

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) FORECAST
Abstract in non-specialised language
(English version)

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AUTHORS:

Team Leader

MSc Mirosława Rybczyńska-Szewczyk

Team Members

MSc Krzysztof Okrasiński
Legal Counsellor Dr Piotr Otawski
Legal Counsellor Andrzej Dziura
MSc Magdalena Kinga Skuza
MSc Jarosław Szewczyk
MA Katarzyna Poletajew

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1. Introduction

The environmental impact assessment forecast has been developed due to the need to carry out the strategic environmental impact assessment procedure. This obligation results from national regulations and the European Union law.

Within these proceedings the compliance of a draft strategic document with environmental policy, as well as its impact on the environment are assessed. If the assessment results confirm that the subject of the assessment may have a negative impact on the environment, proposals of solutions minimising this impact are specified. A similar step is also performed when the assessed document does not generate adverse effects by itself, but does not use its potential to improve the level of environmental protection.

In this case, the subject of the strategic environmental impact assessment is the Programme Environment, Energy and Climate Change financed by the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area 2014-2021.

2. Information on the content of the assessed Programme

The core of the assessed Program is to create a framework for financial support for projects undertaking activities in the field of energy saving, use of renewable energy (including geothermal energy), nature protection, adaptation to climate change and ecosystem services. The Programme provides co-financing for the best (in terms of achieving goals and results) undertakings. The implementation of the Programme also contributes to the improvement of the comfort of use of renewed buildings and to the increase of environmental awareness of inhabitants.

3. Environmental protection objectives at the EU, national and regional level

The EIA predictions include an analysis of many strategic documents in which the objectives of the environmental protection policy are set. Due to the fact that the above-mentioned documents contain many different arrangements for the protection of individual components of the environment, an attempt to list the most important strategic environmental protection objectives resulting from these documents has been made for the purposes of this EIA forecast.

As a result of this analysis, the following aggregated environmental goals were formulated:

1. Preventing the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystems and restoring them as much as possible.
2. Preventing the deterioration of water status achieving good status.
3. Maintaining and improving the comfort and quality of people's lives.

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4. Counteracting soil degradation.
5. Limiting emissions of pollutants and improving or maintaining air quality levels that do not pose threat to human health and the environment.
6. Counteracting climate change and limiting its negative effects, as well as adapting to climate change.
7. Protecting acoustic conditions and reducing noise emissions.
8. Managing natural resources in a sustainable way.
9. Protecting and restoring landscape values.
10. Protecting and limiting the negative impact on monuments and material goods.
11. Developing a resource-efficient, low-emission and low-waste economy.

4. Analysis of the compliance of the assessed Programme with the environmental protection policy

As a result of the conducted studies, it was found that the assessed Programme complies with the policy of environmental protection and sustainable development. Its strategic goals will support the achievement of environmental protection goals, in particular with regard to the reduction of pollutant emissions into the atmosphere (including greenhouse gases) and the development of renewable energy. The assessed Programme takes adequately into account aspects related to the reduction of pollutant emissions to the atmosphere, protection of energy resources, development of a low-emission and resource-efficient economy, reduction of energy consumption in various sectors of human activity and improvement of the quality of life of people.

5. Analysis of environmental conditions

The EIA predictions include the most important (from the point of view of the Programme) environmental conditions. The following main problematic aspects related to environmental protection have been identified:

1. Insufficient quality of air (especially in cities) due to significant anthropogenic pollution with atmospheric particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), tropospheric ozone, nitrogen oxides and benzo(a)pyrene.
2. Insufficient share of renewable energy sources in the overall energy generation balance.
3. Too high energy consumption of the economy.
4. Increase of the effects of extreme weather events (due to climate change), thus adaptation to climate change being too slow.
5. Growing investment pressure related to the progressive increase of housing, industrial and communication buildings.

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6. Unsatisfactory condition of surface waters.

The identification of the above-mentioned problems has become the basis for the development (at the European Union, national and regional level) of a number of strategic actions to improve the condition of the environment. They were followed by financial support mechanisms. The Programme under review is one of these mechanisms and it can significantly contribute to the reduction of environmental problems related to air protection and renewable energy.

6. Analysis and assessment of significant environmental impacts

The impact forecast and its details are adequate to the findings of the evaluated Programme: if they are general, it is not possible to perform a detailed impact assessment. Such an assessment can only generally consider the benefits and threats resulting from the implementation of the strategic document or the withdrawal from its implementation. These considerations should allow for the formulation of recommendations on the possibility of reducing the possible negative impact on the environment and in terms of possible support for the implementation of strategic environmental protection goals. The Programme does not determine the types and locations of investments that will arise as a result of its implementation, thus the assessment of environmental impacts and the resulting recommendations cannot be complete and precise.

Taking into account the above-mentioned conditions, an environmental impact analysis of the Programme was carried out. No significant negative impacts on the environment were considered likely. On the other hand, the possibility of positive impacts was identified, in particular on such components as: climate and atmospheric air, surface and underground waters, nature and raw materials. A positive impact on the landscape and cultural assets is also possible. The only possible negative impact that could occur at the operational stage of the project financed under the Programme is the detrimental effect of hydropower plants on the river ecosystem. However, the risk of this happening will be eliminated if conditions and mitigation measures described in the forecast are applied. A possible additional negative impact may also occur at the stage of direct implementation of the project (due to noise, dust and land occupation). Such effects can be eliminated or effectively minimised (through the typical best practices for renovation, construction, and geological works). The above-mentioned impacts are short-term (limited to the period of main construction works) and reversible, as well as possible to eliminate or limit significantly (through proper planning and the organisation of construction works).

7. Environmental impact in the case of a withdrawal from the implementation of the assessed Programme

As already stated, the Programme can significantly contribute to the implementation of the environmental policy. A withdrawal from the implementation of the Programme will be a waste of the opportunity to strengthen and improve the environmental protection policy. Thus, the implementation of the analysed Programme will determine the actual will of the Programme's Operator to achieve environmental goals.

8. Proposal of alternative solutions

An analysis of the alternatives for the Programme's implementation is in fact carried out only at the stage of examining applications for co-financing under the competition procedure, where the best projects are selected in terms of effectiveness, technology, finance and organisation.

The issue of setting strategic goals is the responsibility of public authorities operating on the basis of democratic principles. The environmental impact predictions can only perform the function of identifying the environmental effects of such formulated objectives and indicating those areas where these effects seem unacceptable from the point of view of environmental protection objectives.

Due to the fact that the evaluated Programme does not indicate specific investment projects, but only strategic areas of activities, a detailed and rational environmental analysis of alternative options is virtually impossible. These variants may be analysed only at the stage of implementation of specific projects being the physical effects of the Programme's implementation.

It should be reiterated that the proposed findings of the document under evaluation will not lead to a negative environmental impact, because the Programme does not create a policy that could generate such impacts. Therefore, there is no justification for proposing alternative ways to achieve strategic goals from a formal and ecological point of view. In the discussed case, the worst option would be the option of withdrawal from actions provided for in the Programme.

9. Measures to prevent and reduce the negative impact on the environment

Additional solutions related to the implementation of the Programme provisions, which may contribute to strengthening its positive effects may be applied.
The following measures are proposed:
1) Introducing a declaration indicating that the projects implemented under the Programme must comply with the environmental protection regulations;
2) Introducing an obligation to conduct environmental audits in facilities that are to be subject to thermal modernisation consisting of a reconstruction of a facade or structure of buildings;

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3) Demonstrating the assumed and achieved environmental and energy effects by all beneficiaries of investment projects;
4) Broader description (demonstration) of the environmental effects of individual projects;
5) For projects in the field of small hydropower plants modernisation: introducing the obligation to declare (by the beneficiary) the compliance of the co-financed activities with the provisions of Art. 187 of the Water Law Act. An administrative form of a confirmation (authentication) of this fact could be a water-law consent (in particular: a water-law permit or a water-law assessment) or a decision on environmental conditions.

A failure to apply the above recommendations will not mean that the implementation of the evaluated Programme will collide with the environmental protection policy, because its most important principles are included in the applicable regulations.

In addition, at the stage of implementation of individual projects co-financed under the Programme, solutions reducing the impact of both construction works and operating facilities on the components of the environment will be necessary to apply. Such solutions should in particular include:

1) performing construction works in the periods when the activity of flora and fauna is the lowest (i.e. in the autumn and winter periods as a rule),

2) the use of efficient and regularly maintained construction equipment and measures to reduce dusting on the construction site,

3) recreating conditions as close as possible to natural ones in the riverbed and on the banks of the watercourse,

4) the obligation of hydropower plants to fulfil the requirements for ensuring biological (environmental) flow and conditions enabling ichthyofauna migration,

5) sealing the surface of parking spaces for machines, means of transport, and employees,

6) equipping the construction site facilities with technical solutions preventing the contamination of the soil and water environment from possible leakages of operating fluids,

7) providing a place for waste collection that will protect the environment against lightweight fractions being blown away and against the leakages of hazardous components as a result of precipitation,

8) ensuring a high share of biologically active area in the project site,

9) the re-use of removed soil cover,

10) recreating damaged parts of nature,

11) prior to the commencement of planning and renovation works, the building in question should be inspected and the specific place bats use as a shelter in the building should be determined, as well as the time they occupy it for;

12) renovation works should be carried out outside the breeding season and hibernation, the period allowed for the works is from the beginning of September to the beginning of October, however, this time may vary depending on the species; in the case of objects inhabited and/or potentially inhabited by bats, all works should be performed in the period from August to September;

13) if it is necessary to continue construction works during the breeding season, the hiding place occupied by bats should be secured in the manner proposed by the chiropterologist and/or ornithologist;

14) carrying out construction and renovation works so as to maintain the functionality of the building for animals (i.e. to preserve the possibility of nesting of birds, preserve the colony

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of bats and the shelter inlets used by them); even in the absence of birds, their nesting places should not be eliminated if possible.

15) giving high importance to environmental protection issues at the stage of development and approval of the geological works plan and hydrogeological documentation,

16) the proper insulation of aquifers and sealing the space between the rock/soil and the well (except for captured aquifers),

17) the prior identification of the drilling site in terms of contamination and geological, hydrogeological, infrastructural and active environmental protection conditions,

18) balancing the intensity of exploitation of geothermal deposits and using only environmentally friendly heat transfer fluids.

10. Proposed methods of an analysis of the implementation of the Programme

Due to the fact that the Programme under discussion does not create an independent sectoral policy, but it is rather a specific tool of an already adopted policy (specified in other strategic documents), there is no need to create an additional extensive system for monitoring environmental aspects related to the implementation of the analysed Programme. Activities in the field of monitoring the environmental aspects of the Programme's implementation are supported through obtaining information from the beneficiaries on the assumed and achieved environmental and energy effects. On the other hand, the need of the development of the evaluation report summarising the implemented Programme, which will present the most important material, financial, energy and environmental effects achieved, is indicated.