

Wednesday, 2nd June 2010

The end-of-June deadline

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Like all other EU member states, by the end of this month Malta must submit to the European Commission its national renewable energy action plan to 2020.

Under the European Renewable Energies Directive (Directive 2009/28/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of April 23, 2009) Malta has committed to achieving the target of obtaining 10 per cent of its energy supplies from renewable sources by 2020.

To be fair, while recent private research has indicated that Malta can or might reach or even surpass the assigned target, in a national forecast document issued on February 12 the Malta Resources Authority stated that Malta could not reach its legally binding 2020 target.

While one sincerely hopes that these private researchers will be proved "right", it is interesting to note that on May 12 a renewable energy policy action paving the way towards 2020 was drawn up, setting out in a final version a renewable energy industry roadmap for Malta with inputs from a leading Karlsruhe Institute and a Viennese University of Technology Energy Economics Group.

What has been causing concern in recent months is the following:

The stop/go approach to renewable energy support schemes - The recent MRA decision to abruptly suspend grants for installation of photovoltaic electricity generating systems, which, according to trade sources, "has dealt a harsh blow to the industry".

The fact that the solar water heater market is already showing a total collapse, following the means test restriction imposed on solar heating grants for the period 2010-2012. Even though Gozitan residents have been excluded from this restriction, it is clear that the take-up of solar heating systems in Gozo has remained extremely low and this, according to field experts, "jeopardises the eco-Gozo concept".

The recent call by the Malta Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energies Association rises above any levels of partisan politics. And yet, in a very strongly-worded statement it called on the government to provide wider consultations with stakeholders to plan future support schemes for the public; set up programmes to educate consumers as to the use, limitations and legal responsibilities when using grants; develop bestpractice guidelines of renewable energy systems and make them available to all on the MRA website; prepare and carry out training courses for the certification of installers as required by the European Renewable Energy Directive; and involve all stakeholders, including legal and commercial entities, NGOs, researcher institutes and any other interested parties, to ensure widest possible dissemination of RES in the local market.

The study in question emphasises certain observations which have been made by third parties, including the Auditor General, but which have so far been either ignored or glossed over. Primarily that the penetration of renewable energy in Malta is still very low.

In 2010, the market for solar water heating systems has almost come to a standstill, because the government's grant for the period 2010-2012 has been restricted to low-income families, first-time home buyers and residents of Gozo.

Notwithstanding the fact that, since 2004, Malta has promoted the generation of electricity by domestic PV systems through a net metering system, although at the time, when the spill-off tariff was introduced, its value was equivalent to the average electricity rate at the time, today's rates are at least three times higher but, so far, no efforts have been made to upgrade the spill-off tariff.

The uptake of the capital grant for electric cars is very low, probably due to the high price of such vehicles when compared with the relatively cheaper second-hand cars that are being extensively imported into the island and cover more than 50 per cent of the car sales.

Although the Malta Environment and Planning Authority is revising the Gozo local plan, it is clear that this exercise does not give any importance to the inclusion of renewable energy applications in spatial planning.

Energy performance in buildings is still at its infancy and is moving very slowly.

Policy instruments should be introduced that provide incentives for integrating a RES-H/C device into the heating/cooling system.

There should be a policy instrument that should motivate the use of high efficiency equipment.

To date there are no planned programmes for the introduction of mandatory renewable energy systems in Maltese buildings.

It is strongly believed that the introduction of feed-in tariffs could greatly enhance the take-up of renewable electricity systems, especially photovoltaics, by households.

But, perhaps, before going into these micro details one should focus primarily on the following:

The need for general information about subsidies for renewable technologies that must be broadcast to all stakeholders.

The need to focus beyond specific types of audiences that are normally concentrated on those with a tertiary education level and professionals on the subject.

What I find indeed worrying is that the REPAP 2020 road map I have drawn on extensively makes two other negative observations: that

a more citizen-oriented approach is greatly needed and that, unfortunately, not only do very few multi-media programmes target the energy topics but beyond that, although up to a few months ago the Institute for Sustainable Energy at the University of Malta also had a very valid half-day programme specifically targeting schools and educational visit, this was stopped this year.

Meanwhile the end-of-June deadline fast approaches.

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