

# Grids alliance aims to counter renewables 'NIMBY syndrome'

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EU energy ministers have teamed up with electricity grid operators and environmental groups to counter the NIMBY syndrome on new renewable energy infrastructure builds.

An unusually broad alliance of Transmissions System Operators (TSO's), EU leaders, and NGOs set the ball rolling at a launch on 5 December, with backing from 11 EU energy ministers in states such as Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Last month, the European Commission agreed a new streamlined process for approving new electricity pylons and transmission lines, infrastructure that is desperately needed to integrate wind and solar-powered renewable energies into Europe's grid networks.

"NIMBY syndrome has forced TSOs to this table and we need to have the courage to stare it in the eyes," said Ariel Brunner, the head of EU policy for Birdlife, referring to 'Not in my back yard' opposition to grid construction.

While real concerns over health and environmental damage were involved, less scientific issues such as people's perceptions, emotions and attachment to landscape also had to be addressed, he said.

British MEP Graham Watson (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe) said resistance from the fossil-fuel industry was also a factor.

"We know that the oil and gas industry are spending a lot of money lobbying against it - and in favour of shale gas - but I believe that the momentum we've built up to make this green energy switch will see it happen," he told EurActiv.

## **Renewable Grids Initiative**

The Renewable Grids Initiative (RGI) dovetails with a newly reduced maximum four-year appeals period against new grid developments in the EU's energy infrastructure package.

To help this along, the RGI proposes:

Enhanced transparency procedures for data and investments, providing stakeholders with access to all relevant information;

Mainstreaming dialogue and consultation with local communities whenever new builds are planned;

Offering such communities the opportunity to change and modify proposals, particularly in the early project stages;

A commitment to the EU's decarbonisation targets for 2050.

Critics say that in the past, new infrastructure has been proposed by utilities, moderated by regulators, planned by TSOs and then presented to often-suspicious local communities as a fait accompli.

But one in three planned investments are currently tied up by planning appeals, and these can last as long as 25 years.

## **Village oddballs**

On the fringes of the initiative's launch, executives of major European energy firms told EurActiv that while some public hostility to projects was legitimate, the industry had problems with unpredictable and idiosyncratic complaints often led by – or confined to – village oddballs.

“If you have to take into account irrational demands [sometimes] coming from one individual, the price you have to pay is two or three years of delay,” said Jacques Vandermeiren, chief executive of Belgium's Elia group. “Can we afford this?”

One oft-suggested way around aesthetic and health-related objections to new transmission lines, could be to bury them underground.

“Probably we will lay most of the cabling underground,” Watson said. “It has higher short-term costs but they are still less than fighting planning permission cases.”

The process of underground cabling may be less expensive than some think, but environmentalists say that it also poses its own threat to biodiversity.

## **Landscape aesthetics**

“In landscape aesthetics it’s often better to bury cables underground but environmentally, it should be assessed on a case by case basis,” said Ivan Scrase, senior climate change officer for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

“If you put a cable underground you have to keep a wide area of 100m [around it] mowed,” he told EurActiv.

Vandermeiren said burying lines only made sense in urban areas as in rural areas, line repairs would require digging up large tracts of countryside.

But other industry representatives wanted to keep their options open. “We have a different approach,” said Ben Voorhorst, operational director of the Dutch TSO TenneT, one of the five largest grid operators in Europe.

“If it comes to 110 kilovolts (kV) or lower we don’t care, cabling is fine and prices are comparable these days, but at 380 kV, prices are higher and we have technical concerns about the reliability of the system,” he told EurActiv. “But if it’s safe and society wants the higher prices, it’s not an issue for us.”

Last summer, an investigation into TenneT was launched by Germany's regulatory agency, the Bundesnetzagentur, over an alleged failure to link a North Sea wind farm to the grid. Insufficient funding and regulatory uncertainties over liability risks were blamed.

*Source Euractiv*