

Energy

Commission kicks off work on 2050 road map

By Dafydd ab Iago | Wednesday 05 January 2011

The European Commission is consulting, until 7 March, on its so-called 'Energy road map 2050'. Initially, a report will summarise contributions in April. On the basis of this document, the Commission should work towards an 'Energy road map 2050', to be proposed in the second half of 2011. This latter document will follow the lines of the 'Road map for a low-carbon economy by 2050', itself due in the first half of this year and set to focus on reductions in greenhouse gas emissions across the EU economy. Both strategies, however, adhere to the October 2009 European Council's target of an 80-95% reduction in EU greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels by 2050.

Broadly speaking, the Commission's 2050 road map will present different pathways to reach objectives already set or to be set for the energy sector. These notably include greater sustainability, energy security and competitiveness. The Commission talks of the need for a long-term EU approach beyond 2020. Here, the reasoning is that many investments, for instance in power plants and networks, are long term, certainly up to 40 years. Obtaining as much clarity as possible about EU and national policy after 2020 will help investment and also kick-start new technologies.

In its consultation document, the Commission points to EU policy and markets having to allow for a "cost-effective" transition to a low-carbon energy system. This means strategy and ensuing policy decisions having only a 'reasonable' impact on energy prices. The Commission is currently digesting various scenarios already circulating that generally underline the technical and economic feasibility of the transition. Clearly, though, the reference scenario, with business as usual and a continuation of existing policies, is insufficient. Still, the Commission will stop short of a single prescription on how the EU energy system should best develop between now and 2050.

REQUIRED POLICY

The Commission quizzes participants as to tools, models, projections and methods needed to boost the "credibility" of work on 2050 targets. Which global developments, with respect to energy supply and demand as well as climate initiatives, should be considered in the 2050 road map? Where should the EU take a stronger position? Officials also ponder the societal impact to come as a result of changes in the EU and global energy systems.

A further focus in the questionnaire is where additional policy development will be needed at EU level to reach the 2050 perspective. The multi-choice questionnaire lists options, such as policy on competition, innovation, energy efficiency and development of resources, including renewables, environment, energy security and solidarity as well as relations with external partners. A fifth question examines possible milestones that could be of use in a transition to a low-carbon energy system. Sixthly, what are the most likely key drivers for the future energy mix in the EU? Here, options listed include global fuel prices, security of supply, public subsidies, member state and EU policies, integration of the internal energy market, international climate cooperation as well as public acceptance of new energy technologies and related infrastructures.

ENERGY MINISTERS TOO

The Energy Council, too, is set, on 28 February, to adopt conclusions on the future energy strategy. Whilst mostly covering priorities till 2020, energy ministers are likely to examine priorities till 2050. These should include calling for step-wise progress towards 2050 with clear intermediary steps adequately reflecting the increased decarbonisation of energy systems. The Energy Council is also likely to call for an early release of the 2050 road map, illustrating, in a “technology-neutral” way, the consequences of possible future fuel mixes in Europe. Another point would be using tools, such as the ten-year network development plans (for gas and electricity) to improve long-term infrastructure planning within the EU and with external suppliers. Also important will be including in the strategy, and its initiatives, adequate, cost-efficient reporting and monitoring requirements as well as review mechanisms in order to facilitate policy adaptation.

FLURRY OF SCENARIOS

The year 2010 saw a flurry of energy studies from various corners aimed at influencing policy debate. The studies clearly point to a coming renewables wave. This will have a major influence on investments, given the 40-50-year lifetime of larger fossil fuel power stations. Greenpeace, for example, projects nearly full renewable electricity supply by 2050 with a 97% renewable energy share. Friends of the Earth opts for 90%. The European Climate Foundation talks of a 80% renewable share, with nuclear at 10%. Fossil fuels, with carbon capture and storage, provide the remaining 10%. Even the power industry itself committed, in 2010, to becoming ‘carbon neutral’ by 2050.

The consultation is at
ec.europa.eu/energy/strategies/consultations/20110307_roadmap_2050_en.htm

The road map is due in second half of 2011

Background

The idea behind EU energy strategies is simple: encourage take-up of new technologies and practices to aid in the transition to a low-carbon energy system. The predecessor strategy, adopted by the European Council in March 2007, set goals for 2020. These include achieving binding targets of reducing, by at least 20%, greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 compared to 1990 as well as obtaining a 20% share of renewable energies in overall EU energy consumption by 2020. A non-binding target of saving 20% of the EU's energy consumption compared to projections for 2020 was also set. The 2007 strategy is now being fine-tuned by a 2020 energy strategy, to be adopted by EU leaders in March 2011, as well as by a series of legislative and non-legislative proposals, notably on energy efficiency, infrastructure, security of energy supply and the internal market.