

Energy Council

Offshore platforms: Oettinger willing to bend

By Marie-Martine Buckens | Friday 15 June 2012

Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger is willing to revise the legislative form of the European Commission's proposal on the safety of offshore oil and gas platforms in European waters. «The Commission will be flexible on the choice of the legal form,» he told the 27 energy ministers, meeting on 15 June in Luxembourg.

His statement was welcomed by the United Kingdom, which ever since the proposal was presented has objected to the fact that it is a regulation, preferring the flexibility of a directive. After another airing of views on the issue, the ministers also took note of the progress of work on the regulation on guidelines for trans-European energy infrastructures.

The Danish Council Presidency, backed by 26 member states, also published its conclusions on the 'Energy road map 2050'. The Council and European Parliament also informally marked their agreement on the Energy Efficiency Directive, adopted the previous day in three-way talks by Commission, Council and Parliament.

DIRECTIVE INSTEAD OF REGULATION?

Several delegations expressed their satisfaction, during the public session, with the Commission's obvious willingness to review its draft regulation on the safety of offshore oil and gas prospecting, exploration and production activities.

The British, Dutch, Italian and Spanish delegations, supported by Romania and to some extent Cyprus, reiterated their requests to see the regulation transformed into a directive. Britain's Energy Secretary Charles Hendry thanked Commissioner Oettinger for recognising in his introductory remarks the high quality of the standards adopted by the United Kingdom and Norway in this sector. «A directive or a regulation? The question is essential,» noted the British minister, who added that a regulation would require the dismantling of legislation in force in the UK.

The same delegations argued for limiting the extent of the powers of the relevant authority proposed by the Commission.

Nicole Bricq, French minister for ecology, energy and sustainable development, stressed the need to advance on substance, including the proposal to extend the scope of environmental liability. «We need to advance because France may be concerned by offshore operations,» she said.

The Cypriot delegation placed emphasis on the international dimension of safety. «It is important to take account of our neighbours, especially when we set up an authority,» stated Neoklis Sylikiotis, Cypriot's home affairs minister. Cyprus – which intends over the medium term to launch exploitation of its offshore gas deposits – plans to promote this dimension during its EU Presidency, which begins on 1 July.

Parliament is set to vote on the proposal at its October 2012 session.

CROSS-BORDER COSTS

The ministers also took note of the latest work by the Council's energy working party on energy infrastructures, a review that chiefly concerned projects of common interest (Chapter II of the draft regulation) and regulatory treatment (Chapter IV).

The draft gives priority to 12 corridors and strategic areas for which the Commission proposes funding of €9.1 billion for 2014-2020, out of a total of €40 billion allocated to energy, transport and ICT infrastructures. At its 7 June meeting, the Council adopted a partial general approach on the proposal, which defines conditions for the Union's financial contribution, while the ministers concerned will adopt development strategies for their sectors.

Germany and Italy stressed the need to strengthen the work of regional groups and to harmonise project selection criteria. Slovenia insisted on the need to protect small-scale operators, who are less equipped for major cross-border exchanges.

OBJECTIVE 2050: POLAND PERSISTS

Due to Warsaw's persistent obstruction, the energy ministers failed to build the consensus needed to adopt conclusions on the 'Energy road map 2050'. The road map outlines the ways forward towards a low-carbon European energy system by 2050, the goal being to achieve an 80% to 95% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels. Twenty-six ministers voiced support for the three 'no regrets' options proposed: flexible and smart energy infrastructure, enhanced energy efficiency and a significantly higher share of renewable sources in the energy mix. Poland once again vetoed a text that explicitly mentions the term 'low-carbon'. With the aim of working out a compromise, the Danish Presidency added a footnote stating that the reference to 'low-carbon' should be understood as «not excluding energy technologies that, while using carbon-origin fuel, produce low CO₂ emissions». Poland – which is counting on exploiting shale gas and clean coal-fired power plants – considered the compromise insufficient.

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