

Mixed reactions to Commission's new strategy

By Dafydd ab Iago | Wednesday 10 November 2010

There were mixed reactions to the European Commission's long awaited communication on a new energy strategy for Europe 2011-2020. Presented by Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger, on 10 November, it will form the centrepiece to discussions by EU leaders at their special summit on energy to be held on 4 February 2011. Initial reactions, though, indicate a range of criticisms. Presenting the strategy paper, Oettinger underlined a focus on two sectors with the largest energy saving potential: transport and buildings. The Commission is even promising investment incentives and innovative financial instruments by mid-2011 to help house owners and local entities to finance renovation and energy-saving measures.

Other priorities outlined on 10 November include the pan-European integrated energy market with infrastructures. The Commission is setting a target date for completing the internal energy market. By 2015, no member state should be isolated in terms of energy. The Commission is also to propose – notably in its infrastructure proposals, on 17 November, to speed up essential strategic EU projects with simplified and shorter building permits. This could include setting a maximum timeframe until final authorisation and EU funding. A 'one-stop shop' should coordinate all the permit requests needed to realise a project. Other key elements include coordinated EU energy policy vis-à-vis third countries as well as guaranteeing Europe's leadership in energy technology and innovation. As for consumers, the Commission will propose new measures on price comparison, switching suppliers and clear and transparent billing.

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Never short for a comment, Claude Turmes (Greens-EFA, Luxembourg) dubbed the Commission's paper "scandalously biased" and disappointing. "Oettinger's first major strategy initiative is deceiving and has a shocking pro-nuclear bias," said Turmes. He believes the Commission's proposals on energy efficiency - lacking any binding target - are vague and delayed. "As for renewable energy, despite being set to account for 65% of all power investments in the EU of the next ten years, this crucial power source is largely dismissed." Turmes adds that consumers and the environment are set to lose out under Oettinger's traditional approach. "This is Europe at its worst," concludes the MEP.

Jason Anderson, head of European climate change and energy policy at WWF, sees some improvements over previous drafts. "The original DG Energy plan to expand fossil and nuclear energy and largely ignore renewables and climate change has been improved by other services, taking out the most contentious language and shifting emphasis in important areas," he said. Like Turmes, Anderson faults the plan on specifics for efficiency: "The Commission knows Europe is on track to miss its 20% energy savings target by half – equivalent to the energy of seven Nabucco pipelines or the final energy consumption of Germany," said Anderson.

Christian Kjaer from the European Wind Energy Association (EWEA) noted that the real test to the Commission's strategy paper will be the strength of forthcoming proposals and the willingness of national governments to support it. Oettinger is planning to present legislative proposals to achieve goals outlined in the strategy over the next 18 months. "We urge him to be bold in the legislative proposals that should follow," said Kjaer.

In its reaction, the European Consumers' Organisation BEUC stressed how crucial it is that a ten-year energy strategy focuses on delivering for energy consumers. "Consumers are still waiting to reap the benefits of the liberalisation of the energy markets," noted BEUC. The organisation is further calling for stricter implementation of regulations and guidelines on the comparability of prices, access to information, billing practices and switching of energy suppliers. As for infrastructure and innovation, they must benefit consumers. Smart meters must be designed and installed in a consumer-friendly way. Privacy should be designed into smart meter systems right from the start, say consumers.

The European Renewable Energy Council (EREC) welcomed the Commission's commitment to the Strategic Energy Technology (SET) plan in its paper as well as proposed actions relevant to renewable energy, such as grid infrastructure, energy markets and smart cities. "However, instead of an undefined low-carbon rhetoric the EU needs a stable framework for renewable energy leading up to 2030 and a clear vision for achieving 100% renewable energy by 2050," said Arthouros Zervos, EREC's president.