

Energy Policy in the Alps



Initial Situation

In light of global climate change, the effects of which on the Alps are becoming increasingly clear, the unrestricted consumption of fossil fuels is not acceptable. In addition to greenhouse gas emissions, the exploitation of raw material deposits is leading to increasingly large projects which affect nature and landscape. The use of nuclear energy carries incalculable risks. That is why further large-scale expansion of renewable energies is inevitable. Given this situation, the potential for renewable energies in the Alps needs to be taken into consideration. The possible contribution of the Alpine region to a European-wide approach is hindered by the scarcity of natural areas and available landscape, the Alps' role as a major eco-system, and the fact that the Alps are a popular tourist destination.

1. The CAA's underlying position

The CAA is committed to a sustainable energy policy and moving towards energy provision from sustainable energy sources as quickly as possible. The CAA believes that the sustainability of natural areas and landscape, as well as the requisite public support for the further development of renewable energies and the grids that these would require, can only be implemented through transparent planning processes. Locations must be chosen according to sustainable development criteria and the Alpine's region's vital role as a unique, largely intact major ecosystem taken into account. The region is not only a cultural centre where the local population lives and works, but also a recreation area for the whole of Europe. To ensure this, areas excluded from further projects in order to protect natural areas and landscape must be legally defined and secured through regional planning. The existing protected areas must be taken into account. It is equally important to consider the issue of integrating electricity generation into existing regional programmes in the Alps. All projects which are regionally significant must undergo an environmental impact assessment and all necessary steps must be taken in consultation with local residents and relevant social groups. Consistent measures to reduce general energy consumption and to increase energy efficiency are significant requirements which must be met to minimise the need to build new energy facilities. A comprehensive plan, which integrates all relevant aspects of sustainable energy using renewable sources, must be developed by the responsible political institutions as rapidly as possible. To ensure that the Alps' special role in Europe is dealt with adequately, this master plan must not be country-specific, but rather agreed at a European level and as part of the Alpine Convention.

2. The CAA's recommendations for action

2.1 Wind power¹

Because of their topographical and wind conditions, as well as the particular importance of natural areas and landscapes, the Alps are only conditionally suited to the generation of wind energy. Generating electricity from wind power has both positive and negative consequences, such as the disturbance of wildlife, degradation of the landscape, noise pollution, casting shadows and making ice fall. In mountain regions with little infrastructure, the damaging effects of wind power stations are particularly noticeable. When decisions about the planning and the building of these are made, they must therefore take all these issues into careful consideration. Wind power plants cannot be built in protected areas, areas which are of particular importance to the bird population, areas of outstanding natural beauty or cultural importance, or in regions which are Alpine tourist hubs. Exemptions can be made for small wind power stations that only supply isolated areas (e.g. hamlets, ski huts) with electricity. When erecting these plants, the greatest possible care needs to be taken not to disrupt the landscape. Evidence must be produced that wind power is the best option for the site.

3.2 Hydropower

In the Alps, generating electricity from hydropower and storing energy with the help of pump storage stations is of considerable importance because of the relatively large height differences. Pumped storage is currently the most economical form of storage technology available. To reduce pressure for the need to build new pump storage stations or to expand existing stations in the Alpine region, a Europe-wide strategy must include integrated management and impact assessment, while sites outside the Alps need to be explored. Additionally, research needs to be carried out quickly and there must be further development of new technologies and alternative storage methods. When expanding the use of hydropower, the CAA first of all requires that the energy efficiency of existing plants be improved. Residual water required by law must be respected and ecological enhancement measures implemented for any alpine rivers used. There should be no construction of major new plants which affect untouched terrain and previously untapped bodies of water. Very small hydro power plants may be used in isolated areas, for instance to provide energy for isolated huts which belong to Alpine associations. When doing so, the highest environmental water standards and standards on landscape preservation must be set. However, general energy provision using electricity generated by small hydro power plants should be rejected because the effects on natural areas and the landscape are disproportionately large in comparison to the energy yielded.²

2.3 Solar Energy

The CAA welcomes the use of solar energy and considers it a particularly environmentally friendly form of energy production. Photovoltaics and solar panels use the sun's energy directly and are particularly suitable for providing energy to peripheral inhabited areas and use in isolated huts which belong to Alpine associations. However, open air solar parks require the long-term use of large areas of land. This may conflict with the interests of protecting natural areas and landscape. Such parks should only be set up in areas where infrastructure is already highly developed.

Resolved at the general assembly in September 2012, in Poschiavo, Switzerland.

¹ Compare the CAA's underlying position "Wind power plants in mountain areas", 2006

² Compare "Common guidelines for the use of small hydropower in the Alpine region"; Alpine Convention's Water Management Platform 2011.

