
OMBUDSMAN OPENS INQUIRY INTO EU COMMISSION'S GAS STANCE

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The EU Ombudsman announced on Thursday (13 February) it has opened an inquiry into the European Commissions catalogue of priority energy projects, after green activists lodged a complaint about the inclusion of new gas infrastructure on the list.

Emily O'Reilly, the EU Ombudsman, wrote to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen earlier this week requesting clarifications about the inclusion of gas projects in the so-called fourth EU list of Projects of Common Interests (PCI).

The inquiry follows a complaint lodged by Food & Water Europe, a civil society group, which claims that the EU executive did not adequately assess the sustainability of the 32 gas projects included on the list and as such has broken EU law.

Food & Water Europe are not the first ones to object to the list, a litany of NGOs have campaigned against it, as well as Hollywood actor Mark Ruffalo.

But the reply the Commission sent to the group actually appears to have forced the Ombudsmans hand. It is clear from the Commissions reply to the complainant that it has started work to improve the analytical tools and procedures it has in place to carry out a sustainability assessment of possible future gas projects, O'Reilly said in her letter.

However, [it] can be understood as an admission that there were shortcomings in relation to past sustainability assessments of PCI status, the Ombudsman explained, adding that her inquiry will focus on if and how the Commission took sustainability into account when drawing up the list in the first place.

To that end the EU watchdog asks the Commissions services to explain when they first realised the sustainability assessment needed a review and whether any gas projects had ever fulfilled the criteria included in the PCI lists dedicated regulation.

Under that piece of legislation, a project only has to satisfy one of four criteria to be eligible for a place on the list: market integration, security of supply, competition and sustainability.

This risks undermining public trust in the EUs ability to establish the PCI-list in a manner that is in line with the EUs energy policy and climate objectives, the Ombudsman warns in the letter.

O'Reilly also asks the Commission to explain whether it has assessed oil projects in a correct fashion, admitting in her letter that the extra clarification is of her own initiative because it is

implicit in the complaint.

The EU executive has until 31 March to provide a written reply to the three queries.

PCI promises

Members of the European Parliament on Wednesday (12 February) voted in large numbers to approve the fourth PCI list, striking down an objection tabled by the Greens and supported by the leftist GUE/NGL groups.

But a majority of lawmakers from other political groups combined forces to nix the resolution, citing the need to secure energy supplies and complete the blocs Energy Union. MEPs who voted against the Greens resolution ranged from a wide range of political groups, including the centre-right EPP, the socialist S&D, the centrist Renew Europe, the conservative ECR and the far-right ID groups.

Pascal Canfin, a French MEP who chairs the Parliaments environment committee, threw his weight behind the Commissions fourth PCI list, lauding a promise from EU climate chief Frans Timmermans to only fund projects that are in line with the EUs climate objectives. The Frenchman also highlighted the importance of renewable energy projects on the list, arguing those should not be delayed any longer.

But Green MEP Bas Eickhout retorted on Twitter that the European Green Deal championed by Timmermans does not suggest banning gas outright, and criticised Canfin for missing the opportunity to draw a line.

After the Green resolution was defeated, Eickhout applauded the Ombudsmans involvement on the issue, saying the Parliament failed to use its scrutiny powers.

The European Environmental Bureau (EEB), a green campaign group, told EURACTIV that the Parliaments vote seriously dented the EUs climate credentials but welcomed Timmermans pledge and OReillys inquiry as extra insurance.

Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson has also confirmed that she intends to oversee a review later this year of the TEN-E regulation on cross-border energy infrastructure, while the European Investment Bank will tighten up its gas-criteria as of 2021.

The European Parliament voted overwhelmingly on Wednesday (12 February) against a motion to reject a proposed list of priority energy projects, ignoring the demands of Greens and leftists who warned against funding new gas infrastructure that risks being stranded as Europe moves to a zero-carbon economy.