

THE RENEWABLES GRID INITIATIVE IN EUROPE

FURTHER MAINSTREAMING
CHALLENGES IN THE
SECTOR

SUSTAINABLE
SOLUTIONS
IN EUROPE

BUILDING
MUTUAL
TRUST



MAINSTREAMING
BIODIVERSITY





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BIRDS AND POWER LINES: FRIENDS OR FOES?

The Renewables Grid Initiative is making its way to the sustainable energy production by having agreed to adopt measures to avoid impact of power lines on birds and other biodiversity.

There is increasing demand for renewable energy, and European countries are planning massive investments in electricity transmission lines to transport and trade the energy produced. This infrastructure is essential for reducing carbon emissions and thus the threat of climate change for people and biodiversity. However, without careful planning, these investments can create new risks for birds and wildlife.

Power line development can create collision and electrocution risks for birds, and cause habitat changes. Birds can also have significant and costly effects on power lines. Power line infrastructure can be damaged by collisions and electrocution incidents, and by birds roosting and nesting. These can require repairs to a section or length of power line, causing disruption of service.

The good news is that many risks and conflicts are already being addressed and dealt with, and mutually agreed alternatives are being pursued.

BUILDING MUTUAL TRUST

The Renewables Grid Initiative¹ (RGI) was created in 2009 as a neutral and independent platform for grid operators and NGOs to come together as equal partners. This enables a constructive dialogue on ways to reduce impacts and improve public engagement. Well-planned infrastructure is needed to tackle climate change, and better practice in these areas will reduce opposition.

The RGI consists of eight electricity grid operators and five environmental NGOs, including BirdLife Europe and the RSPB (BirdLife Partner in the UK). The organisation “promotes efficient, sustainable and socially acceptable development of the European grid”, for both decentralised and large scale renewable energies.

It's not unusual in setting up partnerships to face challenges in building trust among partners. In this case, grid operators sometimes fear that being too open and transparent too early might raise opposition to their projects, or disclose sensitive information about how networks operate. NGOs can be reluctant to partner-up with industries, for fear of losing their independence.

The RGI focuses on dialogue and building trust, by development of agreements, good practice implementation, workshops and conferences. By learning about each other's priorities, the RGI members have been finding ways to develop better plans and projects, and ultimately reduce conflict and delays on the ground.

SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS IN EUROPE

In 2011, under the guidance of the RGI, 24 organisations signed the European Grid Declaration on Electricity Network Development and Nature Conservation in Europe². This document is a detailed agreement on how to plan this region's grid needs in compatibility with nature protection. It includes calls for development of good practices and finding ways to reduce bird collisions.

An important move in building trust was finding common ground, and taking time to listen and build from what works and what doesn't. The RGI has now moved on to implementing innovative solutions on the ground, for example through the EU-funded BESTGRID³ project.

FURTHER MAINSTREAMING CHALLENGES IN THE SECTOR

Significant progress has been achieved in making biodiversity protection a mainstream part of grid development. NGOs and industry partners have sent a clear message that Europe can, and must, get the grid infrastructure it needs in harmony with nature, in full compliance with EU nature protection requirements. Agreement has been reached on how to do this, and implementation has started.

Many European grid operators are aware of, and support, biodiversity protection objectives and legislation. Still, more work is needed to share and spread good practices of sustainable energy production to smaller operators across the region and beyond. Equally important will be working with policy makers, to help them to understand that cutting corners in protecting nature is not necessary, and is neither economically nor socially beneficial in the long run.

References:

1. www.renewables-grid.eu/
2. <http://renewables-grid.eu/documents/eu-grid-declaration.html>
3. www.bestgrid.eu

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