

Sustainable Energy Week: Cause and effect

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Opinion

The EU must take into account the impact of climate change and adapt its energy policy accordingly, says Eva Jensen



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The climate crisis is affecting people, economic sectors and the environment in every corner of the world.

From increasing heatwaves and droughts to changing precipitation patterns and rising sea levels, the impacts of climate change can already be seen in Europe.

The European Union is dependent on a reliable energy supply.

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As part of our joint efforts to make the European energy system more sustainable and less carbon intensive, increasing amounts of the EU's energy supply comes from renewable sources.

However, many of these sources are also sensitive to weather and climate.

While the focus of European energy policy is rightly on decarbonising the energy system, we must ensure that the investments made into clean energy systems are viable and resilient in a changing climate.

Every part of Europe's energy system - from primary energy sources and production to transmission and consumption - is affected and potentially vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather events.

However, as the impacts of climate change vary across Europe and across different parts of the energy system, so does the need to adapt accordingly.

In southern Europe, for example, there is a clear risk of decreasing availability of water.

This will affect hydropower and the supply of cooling water needed for thermal power plants.

In Northern Europe, offshore energy production may become more difficult with storms and heatwaves becoming increasingly frequent.

This means current design standards for electricity grids could soon be insufficient and may have to be reconsidered.

Energy system actors are typically more familiar with managing short-term weather and climate variation, while policies on climate change adaptation focus more on long-term change.

Therefore, a resilient energy system is needed to address weather variability, climate variability and climate change across different time scales. There are both synergies and trade-offs between climate change mitigation and adaptation.

For example, better building insulation reduces energy demand and improves comfort of living during extreme heat episodes - a clear win-win solution. In contrast, increasing hydropower capacity in regions with declining water availability can increase the complexity of managing those scarce resources.

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plants”

Climate change is not the only sustainability challenge we face.

Natural ecosystems need land and water, as so do energy technologies.

As part of the energy transition, we need to bear in mind that different low-carbon energy technologies have different impacts on water and land use.

It is critical that we consider policy goals in an integrated way that allows us to maximise benefits and limit adverse side effects.

Many climate adaptation measures make strong business cases for energy companies and other market actors to invest in.

Yet sometimes the societal costs of interruptions in energy supply can be much higher than their direct costs to energy companies.

In these cases, adaptation measures clearly require policy interventions.

The EU and national governments have many options for enhancing the climate resilience of the energy system such as targeted risk assessments, sectoral adaptation plans, reporting obligations and weather and climate services.

The European Commission has developed several decarbonisation scenarios for a climate-neutral Europe by 2050 in its strategy proposal ‘A Clean Planet for All’.

Moreover, the future development of the EU involves a closer coordination of European and national energy policies.

It also includes reporting requirements that cover climate change mitigation and adaptation.

“Climate change is not the only sustainability challenge we are facing. Natural ecosystems need land and water and so do energy technologies”

The Commission evaluated the EU strategy on climate change adaptation in 2018, highlighting a need to further integrate climate change adaptation in sectoral policies.

It is essential that the development of European and national energy strategies consider the impacts of a changing climate from the beginning.

At the EUSEW Policy Conference, the European Environment Agency is presenting a new report on the adaptation challenges and opportunities for the European energy system.

The report aims to support the efforts of the Commission, national governments and non-state actors involved in energy and adaptation policies.

It also provides valuable information on the climate impacts and adaptation challenges associated with different energy technologies and presents good practice adaptation examples.

It is very encouraging to see that a wide range of stakeholders, from EU and national policymakers to

regulators and market actors, are already strengthening the climate resilience of Europe's energy system.

Businesses play a key role, and they have a clear interest in protecting their assets and minimising costs.

By ensuring that European and national energy strategies and plans are aligned and consider the impacts of a changing climate, we can seize the unique opportunity to build a low-carbon, climate-resilient energy system for Europe.

About the author

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