

In order to ensure transparency and openness of public authorities, involvement of citizens and civil society and the fight against corruption, and in accordance with the multilateral initiative Open Government Partnership, to which Croatia is a signatory, environmental organizations call on the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development to make publicly available on its website, all documentation from environmental procedures, including all updates to the documentation and final versions, which are generally not available through the Ministry's website. Environmental organizations pay special attention to the fact that no documentation is available for environmental procedures related to strategies, plans and programs (unlike interventions), just as information on the initiation of procedures is not available (while the same is available for interventions). They also point out that the initial changes from two years ago should not have taken place because it was already clear that harmful projects of sand and gravel exploitation would be allowed in a short period of time, which would lead to further degradation of multiple protected ecosystems.

After almost two years, amendments to the Water Act were included in the public consultation, in which an amendment by members of parliament from the ruling majority in 2019 incorporated an article which, all under the guise of flood protection and waterway maintenance, allows sand exploitation and gravel without respecting the necessary environmental procedures and making environmental impact assessments.

Environmental organizations - WWF Adria, Green Action, BIOM Association and the Croatian Society for the Protection of Birds and Nature - welcome the amendments to the Water Act, but also warn that the new bill again seeks to circumvent European directives and leaves room for circumvention of environmental procedures. Namely, in their joint statement, they remind that the European Commission reacted to these changes to the Water Act through an official warning because they ignored European legislation and existing directives on nature and water protection.

"The new proposal to amend the Water Act is still not in line with the Directives and legislation of the European Union because it again provides for a general exemption from the preparation of appropriate impact assessment studies - this time under the pretext of 'floods'. Also, the Environmental Protection Act and the Nature Protection Act already prescribe in detail the cases when it is possible to deviate from the obligation of appropriate environmental impact assessment, ie assessment of acceptability for the ecological network, therefore additional deviations should not be prescribed by the said law. with two laws which increases legal uncertainty in application. Furthermore, the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive clearly states that the exemption from environmental procedures must

be decided at the level of individual cases and it must be determined whether there will be negative consequences, “said Željka Lejnak Gracin from the Green Action.

“We remind you that in the past two years, several projects of excavation of sand and gravel were approved, which caused irreversible damage to rivers, most notably the ‘Petrijevci case’ when the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development issued a decision to Croatian Waters to excavate about 460,000 m³. sediment from the Drava River, for which we ultimately filed a lawsuit against the line ministry. We consider it inadmissible that regulations and laws are used for particular interests to the detriment of the public and that the well-being of all of us is endangered, “said Tibor Mikuška from the Croatian Society for the Protection of Birds and Nature.

“Strategic documents, such as the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030, are not ambitious and full of phrases, while there are no concrete implementation measures that would truly transform our society into a low-carbon and successfully mitigate the consequences of climate policies. Once again, we make it clear that this is not possible without strengthening protection mechanisms, consistent law enforcement and investment in habitat and ecosystem restoration projects, with the participation of all stakeholders. Decision-makers must finally understand that without the preserved nature, which is managed sustainably and strategically, we will not have a future either “, concluded Branka Španiček from WWF Adria.

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