

The Drava River is currently under several layers of protection - the Mura-Drava Regional Park, Mura-Drava-Danube Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, and it is part of the NATURA 2000 ecological network - which is why it is necessary to assess how any potential intervention will impact all target species, habitats and conservation goals in the area. The Ministry of Environment and Energy, which is supposed to enforce procedures and laws, did not do so; this is why environmental organizations WWF Adria, Friends of the Earth Croatia, Association BIOM, and Croatian Society for Birds and Nature Protection filed a lawsuit at the Administrative Court in Osijek against the Ministry of Environment and Energy which had issued a permit to Croatian Waters for the excavation of 460,000 m³ of sediment from the Drava River without an environmental impact assessment study.

Considering the fact that the entire process of issuing a permit for sand excavation was not carried out properly, and that sediment excavation has already begun, environmental organizations that filed the lawsuit asked for the court to revoke the permit issued by the Ministry of Environment and Energy and halt all sand mining activities.

“On several occasions, we have warned of inconsistent procedures and law violations, especially when it comes to the environmental impact assessment study and an appropriate assessment. The consequences of this intervention, which is based on flawed and outdated data from the study, will be severe and irreversible, both for nature and the local community”, said Branka Španiček from WWF Adria.

As previously stated, on March 26, the Ministry of Environment and Energy issued a permit to Croatian Waters for the excavation of sand from the Drava River near Petrijevci Municipality near Osijek in order to “reduce the risk of floods” without the condition to carry out an environmental impact assessment study or an appropriate assessment. On March 30, only a few days later, and in the midst of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, Croatian Waters already subcontracted the operation and started sand mining.

“In this case, the pre-assessment completely bypassed the profession’s arguments and under the auspices of the politics and harmful project for the environment was approved. Hence, we don’t have any choice but to sue the Ministry of Environment and Energy which approved this project. The environmental impact assessment system ensures that the consequences of the project, such as gravel and sand excavation, do not do more harm than good and, at the same time, contribute to the sustainable development of the economy while preserving the environment”, stated Željka Leljak Gracin from Friends of the Earth Croatia. Tibor Mikuška from the Croatian Society for Birds and Nature Protection pointed out that sediment excavation, especially in such large quantities, will result in further riverbed incision and the deterioration of surface and groundwater status, as well as all water-

dependent animals and plants.

“The Osijek-Baranja County press release stating that the excavated sand ‘can be used for the construction of the highway on Corridor Vc’ has confirmed our fears that the goal of this project is to actually meet the needs of construction, and not defence against floods,” Mikuška added.

“By approving sediment excavation on the Drava, the Ministry has violated three EU directives - Habitats Directive, Birds Directive and Water Framework Directive - which is why the European Commission has already issued an official complaint. We expect the reaction of the European Commission in this case as well, especially if we take into account the fact that the Commission is currently investing several millions in the revitalisation of the Drava River”, said Dunja Delić from the BIOM Association.

Given all these this information, we hope that the Administrative Court in Osijek will recognize that proper procedures were not followed and put the opinion of experts ahead of politics, concluded representatives of WWF Adria, Friends of the Earth Croatia, Association BIOM and the Croatian Society for Birds and Nature Protection.

Source: wwfadria.org