

Rovinari is one of Romania's largest and most polluting power plants. Europe needs to clean up its act on climate change, and limiting the impact of plants like Rovinari is crucial. But Romanian authorities have granted it a lifetime permit to operate, without ever assessing its disastrous environmental impacts.

The Client Earth team is helping change that. They have supported their partners Greenpeace Romania to launch a legal challenge to force authorities to consider the huge negative environmental impacts of this notorious coal polluter.

Challenging Romania's dirtiest power plant - the legal background

Romanian authorities granted Rovinari a lifetime extension to its permit without fully assessing its impacts on the health of people and the environment. No such assessment has been carried out in the 43 years it has been operating.

Client Earth team argues that the permit allows the plant to emit illegal levels of harmful dust. They also show that failure to carry out a full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before giving the plant permission to pollute indefinitely disregards both EU and Romanian law.

They want the permit to be annulled and a full assessment carried out to ascertain the likely climate, nature and health impacts of the project.

Rovinari could mean irreversible harm for the environment

Dominique Doyle is one of our energy lawyers working on the case. She explains: "Rovinari is one of the biggest CO₂emitters in the EU and one of the deadliest power plants in terms of air pollution. But this open-ended permit gives it a free pass to pollute indefinitely despite none of these risks ever having been assessed.

"If its impacts are not assessed now, it may result in irreversible harm to people, nature and the climate."

Greenpeace has commissioned air quality modelling that shows, continued operation of the plant would lead to substantial harm to people's health. The data shows it would contribute to a projected 490 premature deaths in the next decade alone. The modelling results also indicate that more than 1,000 people living near the plant will be exposed to concentrations of harmful sulphur dioxide (SO₂) that exceed the World Health Organisation's guidelines.

Power plant's impact on threatened species

Pollution from Rovinari travels downstream into an EU nature protection site that contains

dozens of threatened aquatic habitats and species. The permit allows the power plant to discharge significant amounts of industrial waste, including hazardous substances, despite the protected area in its path. This risks further harm to already threatened species but this too has gone unassessed.

The authorities must also assess the climate impact of the project.

Client Earth team is working with Cosmin Plescan, a campaigner for Greenpeace in Romania. He says: "The devastating impacts of coal on our climate are undeniable. The recent UN IPCC report makes it clear that Europe needs a completely fossil-free energy system by 2030 to comply with the Paris Agreement.

"At this crucial point in history, and as one of Romania's and Europe's biggest CO₂ emitters, authorities cannot ignore Rovinari's climate impact. No plant should be given an indefinite permit to pollute without first assessing the risks."

Romania's preferential treatment of coal

In November last year, Client Earth submitted an administrative challenge against the permit. The Romanian authorities had one month to respond to our challenge. However, as no changes were made to the permit to rectify these breaches in the law, they challenged the permit through the courts.

A hearing is expected within the next six months.

Romania remains one of Europe's laggards when it comes to modernising its energy system. Despite the country's huge potential for renewables, the government insists coal is crucial for meeting energy needs. Client Earth infringement complaint to the European Commission in March highlights Romania's preferential treatment of the coal industry through its systemic failure to penalise coal power plants that operate illegally without a valid environmental permit.

Source: clientearth.org