

Serbia has drafted a new law to ban the construction of small hydropower plants in protected areas, bowing to pressure from environmentalists aiming to preserve a network of waterways that see the Balkans dubbed the "blue heart" of Europe.

The law, drafted by the ministry of environmental protection, will be forwarded to the government and parliament at the beginning of 2019, Ivan Karic, the state secretary at the ministry, told Reuters on Tuesday.

Authorities and investors across the western Balkans view hydropower as a green alternative to other sources of energy and say it could help countries in the region hit the renewable energy targets they need to meet to join the European Union.

Under plans being considered by governments, a network of nearly 3,000 hydro plants could be built across the region, with about a third of them in protected areas.

Campaigners say the dams would drain rivers used by local communities for drinking, farming, fishing and tourism, while destroying the habitat of species unique to the region, such as the Danube salmon and the Balkan lynx.

"If this extreme non-ecological trend of diverting the streams into pipelines continues, we would soon have thousands of kilometres of Balkan streams and rivers forever lost," said Karic.

He also said that under the new legislation small hydro plants that have already been built could lose a right to subsidies for providing power if it is determined they do not respect environmental procedures.

Non-governmental organisations Riverwatch and EuroNatur on Tuesday published a document showing that three-quarters of the rivers in the Balkans are so ecologically valuable they should be completely off-limits for hydro power development.

They assessed a river network of over 80,000 kilometres between Slovenia and Greece.

"We call upon investors and decision-makers in the Balkans and in the EU to refrain from approving hydropower plants in these no-go areas in the future," they said.

Source: devdiscourse