

As the European Commission unveiled its long-term vision for greenhouse gas reduction on Wednesday (28 November), a yellow cloud hung over the grand pronouncements.

The "yellow vests" protests in France the week before, opposing new environmental taxes on fuel, showed that the public is perhaps not ready to make the kind of short-term sacrifices envisioned by the Commission's plan to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

The French taxes were enacted by the government as a way to discourage driving and increase the use of public transport, with funds going to climate change mitigation efforts. The yellow vests are taking their protests to Brussels today, expected to snarl traffic cause general disruption in the city's EU quarter.

As the Commission strategy was being presented, some of Europe's local utilities were presenting their own long-term vision nearby. And the same yellow cloud hung over the discussion.

Vienna's energy provider, Wien Energie, was presenting a study they conducted looking at the city's energy future, concluding that a low-carbon future is both feasible and cost-effective in the long term.

Sceptical public

Michael Strebl, general manager of energy provider Wien Energie, was peppered with questions about the yellow vests and consumer acceptance after he presented the study. "We are focusing very much right now on public acceptance," he said. "We are a utility, we have to convince our customers to go on this journey with us. But you have to transform the utility, because otherwise the customers will not follow you."

During a panel discussion, Henning Häder from electricity utility association Eurelectric said this is an issue that local utilities are struggling with across Europe - how do you move at the right speed that ensures consumer acceptance?

"I think you can see with what's going on in France now how public acceptance is affected when you mess with energy costs for people," he said. "Public acceptance is probably going to be a bigger factor going forward than costs. That's something we really need to start thinking about right now."

But he pointed to a study unveiled by the association on Tuesday in Brussels showing that the power sector has to completely transform, and it needs to do it faster than originally predicted. "The study is completely unanimously supported by the entire European power sector," he noted.

This should show consumers that utilities are committed to this as a long-term project that will save them money in the end, even if it might result in higher costs in the short term.

Involving consumers

Christian Holzleitner from the European Commission's climate and energy division sounded a more positive note.

"As soon as renewable technologies get cost competitive, people like them and they choose them," he said. "For instance we know that e-mobility will be the most cost-competitive solution, and it comes with a lot of benefits for your well-being."

Peter Weinelt, vice-CEO of infrastructure provider Wiener Stadtwerke, said that the key is educating consumers about the benefits of switching to cleaner energy, and involving them in making the choice. This is essential from a business perspective, he said, otherwise other companies are going to come in and offer them these solutions.

"For a company like Wiener Stadtwerke public acceptance is essential to survive competition on the market," he said. "There will be new competitors, something like Google or something else. It's essential, and we can reach this goal if we can explain to our customers why this change is necessary and what are the advantages."

Not everyone was convinced. One audience member noted that his daughter had demonstrated for action on climate change in the EU Quarter last week, but also supported the yellow vest protesters. "At the same time the French guys were blocking the highways because Macron wanted to increase the energy price," he said. "It's all good what you're saying, but to invest costs a lot of money, and there are conflicts of interest everywhere." Holzleitner said this is the purpose of the Commission's 2050 strategy - to provide a long-term framework to show both businesses and consumers that there will be benefits in the long term. The Commission wants to show them that any short-term sacrifice will be worth it.

"For me what's important is that this is a vision document, this is where we want to go," he said. "But there will be a lot of changes to how we live if we follow it. We as a society need to have a conversation about it."

As Brussels braces for the arrival of the yellow vests today, EU policy-makers and businesses will still be thinking of ways to convince them to make some sacrifices for the energy transition, in exchange for a brighter long-term future.

Source: euractiv