

HYDROPOWER: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PORTUGAL - PBBR

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Nowadays, electricity generated using hydropower contributes in a substantial way to meeting the world's increasing electricity demands. The role of hydropower, along with other renewable energy sources, is expected to become increasingly relevant in future.

In Portugal, over the past few years, there has been a clear focus on enhancing the use of hydropower, since it is one of the most important endogenous clean and renewable resources that can help to reduce climate change. Moreover, it allows energy storage and is widely available in the country, however it is still not used to its full potential.

This concern has been addressed through the installation of large hydroelectric (dams), in accordance with the National Plan of Dams with Huge Hydropower Potential, and also by the installation of the small hydro, as set out in Decree-Law No. 126/2010 of November 23th, 2012.

Recently, Parliament approved Resolution No. 136/2012 of October 12th, 2012 recommending that the Government regulates hydropower production using a non-subsidised regime. This would involve exploitation and transformation of mills, water mills, dams or other existing water mills, with connection to the electrical network of public service at low voltage, applicable to both the public water and private water domains, as well as the adoption of simplified solutions for obtaining the title of use of water resources, when legally required.

This Resolution also provides for the exemption of these existing units from environmental impact assessment procedures, by establishing in its place (where there is any change in the features of the existing infrastructures) a study of the environmental impact focused on the analysis of the ecological quality descriptors of the water mass, in order to ensure compliance with the river basin management plans and the Water Act. At the same time, the Government shall proceed with a survey on the national water potential for the use of such hydraulic machinery.

In general terms, the main scope of this Resolution relates to the development of an effective network of small hydroelectric facilities, as a form of decentralised production of electric energy, through the use of facilities whose environmental impacts have already been assimilated by their respective ecosystem, thus maintaining the original sections of the rivers.

Notwithstanding that the production of electricity could prove to be less significant than those generated by the small hydroelectric, it should be noted that from a technical and environmental point of view, this type of equipment does not need big energy transportation infrastructures. Furthermore, the proposed measure has the advantage of seeking the recovery of the degraded heritage and of the existing water mills, promoting a greater financial and energy sustainability to rural populations, where the income from electricity produced has a relevant impact, therefore generating a positive impact on the local economy.

Moreover, given that the licensing procedure is understood as disproportionate and complex compared to the matter in question, it is also envisaged that a simplification concerning the licensing and of the environmental assessment to be required. In this respect, the Government will have to specify the situations that will be qualified as "a change in the features of the existing infrastructures", because from that will depend the need of a Study of Environmental Impact, as above stated.

As a conclusion, hydropower potential is also intended to be implemented through the rehabilitation and refurbishment of existing mills and water mills. This will extend production to other ecologically sustainable ways, allow the integrated use of river basins and respecting ancestral uses, conciliate the various aspects of the use of the public water domain as well as the use of private waters, without forgetting the need for a licensing simplification, which, in the context of the energy strategy in force, were not previously regulated.

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