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Policy Brief #2: The New Balearic Law on Climate Change and the Opportunities for the Integration of Wind Energy in Protected Areas



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This **policy brief** is based on the conclusions of the Thematic Workshop organised by Ecorys Spain in Mahón (Menorca) on 8 November 2018. About 30 people, including six guest speakers, participated in the event, from local and regional government representatives, to civil society groups, scholars and engineers. The interdisciplinary composition of the group provided for a number of highly informative presentations, followed by a lively debate about how it may be possible to integrate more wind energy in Menorca in a socially acceptable and sustainable way.

Introduction

Scientific research has established that of all four of the Balearic Islands, Menorca has the most promising and significant wind energy potential. Consultations of the WinWind project held on the island found that the main barrier for developing wind energy in Menorca is not the lack of social acceptance, but rather the absence of political, administrative and economic capacity to establish the technology in a sustainable way.

It is important to keep in mind that Menorca is a Biosphere Reserve, as declared by UNESCO in 1993, where a series of protected birds reside, and special environmental protection protocols apply. This circumstance has historically created serious obstacles for the installation of wind farms.

However, the recently approved Balearic Law on Climate Change and Energy Transition appears to offer significant opportunities for wind energy initiatives in the Islands. With the core objective of achieving energy self-sufficiency from renewable sources by 2050, it is widely acknowledged that wind energy will inevitably have to play a vital role in speeding up the necessary energy transition.

It is therefore necessary to investigate, how the competing objectives of nature conservation and sustainable energy production can be reconciled to surpass the current political, economic and administrative burdens.

The Balearic Law on Climate Change and Energy Transition

The new Balearic Law on Climate Change and Energy Transition, or '*Proyecto de Ley de Cambio Climático y Transición Energética*' (RGE núm. 9932/18) seeks to mitigate the causes of climate change. Although not yet officially passed as a law (its draft version was approved in August 2018), it is a pioneer example in Spain of public commitment towards a more environmentally sustainable energy situation.



Menorca`s energy situation

Since 2017 Menorca´s energy is no longer supplied through the submarine cable that linked it with Mallorca, after the cable suffered irreparable damage. Menorca now depends almost exclusively on the Mahón thermal power station. The situation was recently worsened with a power cut caused by a severe storm, that left many municipalities in Menorca without electricity for several days, sensitising the population to their fragile energy situation.

At the moment Menorca hosts only one wind farm – Es Milà. Other projects that were processed (but not carried out) by the Government of the Balearic Islands complied with the existing regulation on protected areas, but were not approved, mainly because of the potential impact that the wind turbines would have on the local fauna.

The new Law on Climate Change addresses each of these issues.

The law aims to reduce 40% of emissions by 2030, and 90% of emissions by 2050. In the same line, it expects to increase the proportion of energy coming from renewable sources to 35% by 2030, and to 100% by 2050. To meet these ambitious objectives, the regional government acknowledges that it will be necessary to adapt the economy, society and the ecosystems to tackle the effect of climate change.

The Balearic Government is taking these commitments very seriously. Consequently, they are exploring concrete, innovative measures to deliver on their targets. This means that previously 'radical', 'unconceivable' initiatives for promoting sustainable energy production in the islands will likely be faced with favourable conditions in the near future.

The law envisages measures such as:

- the creation of institutions that monitor the implementation of renewable energies;
- the acceleration of the administrative procedures to approve new projects;
- the promotion of projects with civil society ownership, i.e. which leave a part of the investment going to the population where the wind farm would be installed;
- the promotion of renewable energy projects
- the progressive dismantling of polluting power plants; and
- the active encouragement of the use of electric vehicles.

With regards to the promotion of renewable energy, the law encourages investment by the local population, lets local authorities decide which areas are suitable for the development of renewable energies, and foresees the installation of more solar panels and mechanisms to support energy efficiency and self-consumption.



The Balearic Government, as the promoter of this new law, wants to lead by example. Therefore, public buildings will have to minimize emissions during the construction phase and will be supplied by certified energy of renewable origin, information campaigns will be launched to raise awareness of the importance of moving towards a more sustainable energy system, and all public procurement will have to meet the requirements of energy sustainability.



Es Milà wind farm in Menorca, operating since 2004. Image copyright: Menorca.info

Repowering the existing wind farm

The local government in Menorca is considering an innovative proposal for repowering the wind farm of Es Milà in Menorca (the only one in the Balearic Islands). This project suggests removing the four existing mills and replacing them with two of greater height and performance. It is also recommended to establish a photovoltaic park in the vicinity of the farm.

There are mixed reactions to this proposal. On the one hand, it seems to offer a highly practical and streamlined solution for promoting the generation of wind energy on the islands, due to the fact that the existing site provides a good planning and conservational basis for the installation of the new wind turbines. On the other hand, there has been considerable opposition by prominent environmental groups because the present location of Es Milà is near a municipal dumping site serving as a feeding area for many birds.



Environmental impact of wind energy: Effects on fauna

The opposition by nature conservation groups has historically represented a key obstacle for the installation of new energy farms in Menorca. Their main concern is the potential damage inflicted by wind turbines upon endangered bird species.

The Balearic Ornithological Group (*GOB*) has stated that they are willing to support the development of wind energy as long as it guarantees the protection of ecosystems. The Ornithological Society of Menorca (*SOM*) is also favourable to wind energy but insists on the importance of ensuring the safety of birds, as they face a very delicate situation in spaces where wind farms might be introduced.

Environmental groups declared that they have identified geographical areas where they strongly oppose the installation of wind farms in order to protect endangered birds. However, they would be willing to give green light to wind farms elsewhere.

In this context, there are private companies producing innovative measures to mitigate the environmental impact of wind turbines. For example, *DTBird* offers a video and radar-based system which uses special noise and turbine-stop elements to avoid bird collisions.

Conclusions

Recent events and the new Balearic Law on Climate Change and Energy Transition have certainly provided fresh impetus for discussing and finding solutions for the barriers for the promotion of wind energy in the Balearic Islands.

The new Law's overriding objective of ensuring that the island of Menorca is energetically self-sufficient by 2050 requires innovative measures. The promotion of wind energy, along with photovoltaic energy, represents a clear example of this.

The repowering of the wind farm of Es Milà constitutes a promising first step to increase wind energy generation. It is a key project as it could contribute to reinforce public support for renewable energies in the territory. Nonetheless, proposals such as a wider socialization and democratization of wind farms should be implemented in parallel to the engineering work.

Furthermore, environmental groups, traditional key opponents to wind energy in Menorca, have conceded that they would agree with wind energy initiatives as long as their concerns are addressed. This has immensely positive implications, particularly in light of the introduction of novel technologies to minimise the damage caused by wind turbines on birds.



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