

Name of Exercise: Public hearing for the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report of the "Pilot Installation For Galvanic Slime Treatment"

Location: Municipality of Gorna Oriahovitza

Participation Exercise under which Article? *Article 6*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

To obtain the participation and opinion of the public in the decision making process concerning plans to install Galvanic Slime Treatment works.

Background

This project is related to the construction and installation of a galvanic slime treatment and waste water treatment facilities. The slime treatment process would extract precious metals and other valuable compounds from the waste for recycling within the production processes. The project proposal would provide, for the first time in Bulgaria, a practical alternative to the treatment of the slime as hazardous waste and one which met all the legal requirements.

Participation Techniques Used:

Two public hearings were held. The second meeting followed up the results of the first and discussed amendments to the proposed plans. Wide coverage of the events within the local media, including TV, radio and newspapers, helped raise the profile of the EIA report and interest in the proposal. The representatives of the media were officially invited to take part in both public hearings.

Who participated?

In the first hearing, 50 people participated. Increased interest due to wide coverage of the proposal in the local media meant that for the second hearing, around 80 people participated.

Stage(s) at which public participated in the process:

The first stage was a public hearing for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report for the "Pilot Installation For Galvanic Slime Treatment." This was organised by the head of the Environment Protection Department in the municipality of Gorna Oriahovitza. The public hearing was held in the conference room of the City Hall. After the EIA expert team presented the project report, public representatives asked questions. Some of the questions were submitted in writing and the rest were presented orally.

The main concern for the local population was the proximity of residential buildings to the slime treatment facility. At the nearest point, residential buildings would be only 120 metres from the plant. A group from the local population presented written objections against the construction of the treatment installation. They were concerned about the storage of large amounts of galvanic slag and slime in the area. Questions were also raised about the methods for treatment of production wastes.

The EIA report was not adopted by the Supreme Environmental Expert Council (SEEC) at the Ministry of Environment and Water (MOEW) since the EIA experts could not answer all the questions asked and the results of the laboratory analysis were not ready in time for the hearing. The project failed to move on to the subsequent design stage.

The second and final EIA report eliminated the flaws of the preliminary version. The proposal underwent some modifications during the revision of the report.

The second public EIA hearing on the project was held three months later and was attended by 80 people. During the course of the discussion, the EIA expert team began by answering the questions left over from the first hearing. After that, other participants presented new opinions about the proposal.

The EIA hearing ended with public approval of the efforts made by the expert team to present the laboratory analysis results and other materials. Lots of evidence was provided to demonstrate that the project, if it complied with the appropriate legal requirements, would not cause damage to the environment and human health.

What information was made available?

Full documentation was available and at the disposal of interested citizens. The minutes for both hearings were presented to the Regional Inspectorate and MOEW, and are also part of the official documentation. Even now many public representatives visit the local authorities to receive information. The interest is maintained due to the official announcement of the results of the public hearings in local newspapers and the local radio. Posters were prepared and disseminated at public information boards. Announcements about the event were released in the local radio, TV and placed in local newspapers.

For the second hearing, local radio stations and TV broadcast information about the first public hearing and the major concerns of the population demonstrated during those discussions.

What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?

Public approval of the proposed plans.

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REC view on participation exercise:

The level of participation appears to have been quite high. In the first public hearing, the public's comments could not be addressed by the proponent. Consequently, the process was extended to include another public hearing. This is a sign that the public participation was working in this case, and indicates the use of a good practice in applying a flexible and responsive public participation exercise.

The public did not lose interest after making comments since an even larger number of people attended the second hearing. It appears that an effort was made to conduct real and fruitful public participation, as public comments received in the first hearing were addressed.

Significant omissions from requirements of Article 6:

It is not clear from the information presented how the public's comments were taken into account. The statement that the project would cause no threat to human health and the environment is perhaps a bit too strong. However, it appears that the proposal met the legal requirements and standards.