

Name of Exercise: Hazardous Waste Management System – Investigations at pre-design level for the construction of Depot for Waste Pesticides.

Location: 3km from Stara Zagora, approx. 1km from Hrishteni village

Participation Exercise under which Article? *Article 7*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

To obtain the public's opinions on the proposed waste management plan.

Background:

The main industries in the town of Stara Zagora are metal processing, electronics and agriculture. Pesticides are also produced for industry and agriculture but this results in the production of hazardous waste. According to the Environment Protection Act Article 26, Letter B, it is the responsibility of the municipalities to perform hazardous waste management programs in their area.

In 1994, the municipality of Stara Zagora contracted the Bulgarian Joint Stock Company "Balbokengineering" in Sofia to develop a "Hazardous Waste Management System". The plan was developed in conjunction with the Regional Inspectorate for Environment and Waters (RIEW), the Hygiene Environmental Inspectorate (HEI), the Regional Directorate of Interiors, the Department Protection of Population from Natural Catastrophes and Industrial Accidents, and the Regional Inspectorate for Protection of Labour.

The chairman of the Managing Committee of the Municipal Environmental Protection Fund (MEPF), who is also the mayor of the town, introduced the proposed management plan at a session of the Municipal Council. The plan approved at the session held on 12 December 1996 and took into consideration the opinions of the above institutions.

The "Hazardous Waste Management System" was reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Environment and Waters (MOEW) in December 1998, shortly before the adoption of the national strategy for management of hazardous wastes. The MOEW decided that investigations of the site should be conducted at pre-design level, that a preliminary Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the project should be prepared and that a public hearing on the EIA report should be held before construction work on the depot site began.

This is the way the problem of safe storage of waste pesticides and other hazardous wastes near Stara Zagora town was solved in a very democratic way, whilst also complying with the European standard ISO 14011. The Municipal Council as well as the mass media were informed about our plans in 1996.

Participation Techniques Used:

Three meetings were held. These reviewed the EIA report and plans, and discussed the options available to store the hazardous waste in the best way. The participants were officially invited by the local authority: for the first meeting the mayor published an announcement; for the second meeting, official letters were sent and for the third meeting, an announcement was made in the media and official invitations were also sent. Minutes of the EIA discussion meetings were prepared and attached to the official EIA documents.

Who participated?

For the first public meeting, municipal experts and the local population of Hrishteni village participated – about 100 people. The meeting took place in the evening in a special hall for meetings and was absolutely full. The media however was not represented but were encouraged to attend a second public meeting on the EIA for the plan. The second meeting was organised with the support of NGOs and was attended by NGOs, the general public and the media. The NGOs, public and media were officially invited to take part by official letters. The meeting took place in rented hotel hall. There were 40 participants. The third meeting involved all sectors and representatives and was attended by NGOs, the general public and media – again about 40 participants. The meeting was organised in the Municipal Hall. The general public was invited and participated in all three meetings.

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

Public meetings are mandatory for all EIA reports. They are usually organised in the Regional Offices of the Ministry of Environment and Waters, RIEW, or in the Ministry itself. Each public meeting ends with a decision in support or against the proposed project. The results from the meetings are forwarded to the MoEW, where final decisions are made by the Supreme Environmental Expert Council (SEEC) taking into consideration public opinion. However, if the project is fully compliant with the legislation, it is very rare that the final decision is negative due only to public opinion.

The first opportunity for the public to get involved in the decision making process was the EIA report review and the presentation offered to the local population of Hrishteni village, prior to construction work on the depot site.

The Mayor of Hrishteni village introduced the EIA expert team who made the pre-design investigations for selection of the depot site. A great deal of information was made available (see section below). However, although the local population patiently listened to all of the presentations, there was neither discussion nor questions. It is believed that the public representatives were convinced by various organisations and other local inhabitants that the storage of chemicals is dangerous and poses a threat to public health.

The second meeting was organised with the support of the NGO "For the Earth" and all other NGOs in the region. Despite the early distribution of relevant information, no consensus could be reached as to the best option for hazardous waste storage.

A third EIA public meeting attended by all the citizens and NGO representatives agreed that the storage methods applied in the Nuclear Power Plant "Kozludui" to radioactive wastes was the most acceptable method for storing waste pesticides. The meeting agreed that the depot should be located well away from the village.

What information was made available?

The media was informed in advance about the plans to develop a waste management system and storage depot and disseminated information about the plans to build a waste management system and storage depot. Information on the public meetings and about the project were provided in the Municipality. The Internet was not used to provide information.

During the first meeting, a film was shown indicating the location of the site, the storage facilities for waste pesticides and the tests conducted under the auspices of the International Agency for Atomic Energy. The project managers also shared their experiences in transferring waste pesticides from the previous storage facilities (now old and ruined) into new safer, packing facilities. It was shown these facilities can be used to prevent any impact of the stored chemicals on the environment and public health.

Furthermore, the experience of locals from another village called Elenovo, within Nova Zagora Municipality, was also shared. They indicated that to begin with, they were not very accommodating to the expert team, and even some arguments were raised. However, after the pesticides were transferred into safer packaging, the village residents concluded the chemicals are properly stored and that they do not represent a threat to the environment and human health.

Before the second meeting, information was circulated to the general public by Stara Zagora municipality regarding the proposed hazardous waste management plan.

What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?

Due to numerous objections from the public and complaints from the NGOs, the Supreme Environmental Expert Council of the Ministry of Environment and Waters revoked the final decision on the storage and location of the hazardous waste depot. The project was prevented from progressing to the design and implementation stage.

In this case, during the third public meeting on the EIA an agreement was reached amongst all the citizens and NGOs about the method that should be used for hazardous waste storage. However, there was no consensus about the location of the depot site. The public refused to accept any location for the depot in or near their village but agreed that it could be somewhere else.

The decision of the SEEC at the MOEW was to halt the project before it reached design and implementation stage. This was mainly due to the negative public opinion.

Comments of participants in the process:

The Senior Specialist in Environmental Sustainability, Stefan Popov (environmental engineer at Stara Zagora Municipality) welcomes the commencement of simultaneous studies for recycling the different chemical compounds within pesticide waste which requires special storage, with a view to assessing their possible impact on the environment.

He further welcomes the public's participation in the decision making process as an important step in resolving environmental challenges. He further comments a democratic decision making process is a good prerequisite for building an environment friendly social market economy in Bulgaria.

Contact: Stefan Popov, Eng., Environmental Expert
Address: 107 "Simeon Veliki" Blv.
Stara Zagora Municipality
6000 Stara Zagora
Bulgaria
Phone: ++ 359 42 289
Fax: ++ 359 42 601168

REC view on participation exercise:

The three public meetings and the overall public participation process have positive and negative aspects. A relatively wide consultation and the use of accepted standards as a goal led to the achievement of consensus on the storage method. A broad scope of the public (including the residents of Elenvo village, for example) was another positive aspect. However, it would seem that the various public meetings might have been conducted in a more organised and efficient manner. While the public seems to have participated with respect to the method of waste storage in a constructive way, they had negative opinion to the issue. This demonstrates a familiar limitation to public participation with respect to giving the local public a "veto" power over the siting of facilities in their localities.

Significant omissions from requirements of Article 7:

None, based on the information given.