

Renewable acceleration areas: a tool to boost clean energy in Europe

The revised Renewable Energy Directive (Directive (EU) 2023/2413) requires Member States to designate renewables acceleration areas for one or more types of renewable energy sources by 21 February 2026. Such renewable acceleration areas are zones where renewable energy projects can be developed faster and easier, thanks to a prior strategic environmental assessment and a streamlined permitting process.

The EU has set the target of being climate neutral by 2050, and renewable energies will play a key role in achieving this goal. However, one of the main barriers to expanding renewable energy is the long and complex permitting procedures. This slows down the deployment of renewables and hampers the EU's decarbonisation efforts.

Renewable acceleration areas can help to overcome this challenge by identifying the most suitable locations for renewable energy development, considering the renewable potential from a technical and economical point of view, the existing and future grid infrastructure, the land use, the environmental impacts, and the local acceptance. By doing so, they can reduce the administrative burden, the legal uncertainty, and the social opposition that often hamper renewable energy projects. They can also provide more visibility and certainty for project developers, investors, and grid operators, and facilitate the planning and integration of renewables into the energy system. They should also facilitate their integration with other economic activities (e.g. agriPV) and co-location with other renewable energy sources and storage to create value locally and mutualize the use of land by creating Energy Hubs.

The design of renewable acceleration areas should be based on specific, accessible, and transparent criteria, and should involve local authorities and stakeholders from the very beginning. The local authorities should have the final say in decision making, but a good governance system should be established at a national or supra-national level to prevent any impasses, systematic veto situations and to make sure that the mapping of these go-to areas will be consistent with the European renewable ambitions and targets. It should also be noted that renewable projects should not be limited to Acceleration Areas. However, these Acceleration Areas should offer a backup option for projects that have been rejected elsewhere.

The aggregated areas should be large enough to accommodate the expected growth of renewable energy in each country and avoid ending up with too limited areas as they could lead to higher prices if there is not enough competition for land.

When designing renewables acceleration areas, one should consider the efficient use and share of existing data and information. Digital tools displaying the selected acceleration areas should be further developed and promoted. Such IT tools, based on the same geographical referencing system across various sectors, should allow to merge and centralize a large set of various data sources available: existing and future infrastructures, land use, existing and future energy networks with their capacity, buildings, protected and restricted areas, ornithological datas... Ultimately, this should help develop a multi-layer view to determine the best suitable areas that could thus be pre-investigated by public authorities.

Also, defining renewables acceleration areas should go together with accelerating grid development and facilitating flexible grid connections, and should be accompanied by other measures, such as increasing the staff and resources of permitting authorities.