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Screening decisions in Appropriate Assessment in Estonia

Abstract

Screening decisions in the proceedings of projects (EIA) and strategic documents (SEA) in 2014-2016 were analysed. 100 decisions by national and local authorities demonstrated progress in taking impact on Natura 2000 sites into account compared to previous periods, but several challenges still remain. Most of the deficiencies were related to the impact range, i.e. whether the spatial extension of potential adverse impacts could affect Natura 2000 sites and how. The screening decisions were usually short and unspecific on the impacts of projects or spatial plans close to Natura 2000 sites. Also, the habitats and species possibly affected by the development and how were not sufficiently described. It was rather common that the reference for threshold of adverse impacts was regulations than real impacts on the functioning of specific species and habitats. The decision makers also preferred to consider mitigation measures of adverse effects already in screening phase, an action that conflicts with the Habitat Directive. The latter anticipates that if adverse effects are likely, Appropriate Assessment is initiated, and mitigation measures are developed during the assessment. The study also analysed the differences applied in screening process between authorities. The study concludes with recommendations for improvement of the screening decisions in Appropriate Assessment.