

Phase of environmental requirements reform concluded – Saeima has approved amendments to the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment

On Thursday, 29 October, the Saeima approved amendments to the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The amendments are part of an environmental regulatory reform to improve the EIA procedure and environmental requirements, balancing economic development and environmental protection with the interests of residents and municipalities. The amendments concern not only to wind energy projects, but also other developments planned within municipalities.

“With these amendments, we are completing a phase of environmental regulatory reform to make it easier for businesses to implement their projects while protecting the environment and residents’ quality of life. For example, clearer rules will specify when an environmental impact assessment is required for industrial developments, allowing businesses to understand the requirements from the outset. Meanwhile, simpler project approval procedures for defence industry companies will help expand the manufacturing capacity needed for national defence,” **said Minister for Climate and Energy Jānis Vitenbergs.**

Transitional provisions for wind energy projects already under way

Amendments to the EIA Law adopted this summer allow the State Environmental Service (SES) to reject wind energy projects submitted after 1 July 2026 if they do not comply with the municipality’s territorial plan. The latest amendments establish equivalent powers for the SES in relation to previously submitted wind energy projects, if the transitional provisions are taken into account.

The transitional provision applies to wind energy projects for which a decision requiring an EIA was adopted by 1 July 2026, but the decision to approve or reject the proposed development has not yet been taken. Even where a municipality has issued a favourable opinion confirming compliance with its territorial plan, the SES will reject a project up to 31 December 2029 if both of the following conditions are met:

- combined capacity of wind energy projects already commissioned or granted building permits within the municipality is at least 150 MW,
- assessment of cumulative impact has determined that the implementation of the proposed projects will or may result in a significant overall impact on the environment, the landscape, or the quality of life of the residents.

The assessment of wind energy projects already under way will therefore take account of the municipality’s territorial plan and the proposed development’s cumulative impact together with other activities in the area. The aim is to promote balanced wind energy development with the needs of the energy sector and the interests of municipalities and their residents.

Population density as an additional criteria to assess the wind projects

The amendments also change the conditions referring to initial environmental assessment that are comply to wind energy projects that exceeds 35 MW and more. The aim is to develop wind energy projects where the population is less by allowing an initial assessment to be carried out first.

The initial assessment examines the proposed wind project location, technical characteristics and potential environmental impact. If it concludes that a significant environmental impact is possible, the project must undergo a full EIA. If no such impact is identified, technical conditions are issued, setting out environmental protection requirements.

The amendments provide the procedure – the initial environmental assessment is planning to apply to those wind energy projects, that exceeds 35 MW and more and are planned in a territory, where population density is below the Latvian average. According to Central Statistical Bureau data, the national average is 30 residents per square kilometre. Existing restrictions on the areas in which this procedure may be applied will remain in place.

Municipalities may establish buffer zones of up to 2 km around towns and villages

Contrary to the decision of the responsible Saeima committee, Parliament members supported Ministry's proposal allowing municipalities, with due justification, to set a minimum distance of up to 2 km between the boundary of a town or village and a wind turbine or wind project boundary.

Strengthening the independence of EIA practitioners

The amendments also reinforce the obligation of EIA report authors and participating specialists to provide independent and objective professional assessments. The Ministry considers this provision essential for improving the quality of EIAs and providing a clearer basis for action where doubts arise about assessors' objectivity or excessive vested interest in a project's implementation.

Strengthening public participation and access to information

The amendments strengthen public access to information about proposed developments and opportunities to review environmental impact assessment reports. Notices will be available on the websites of the competent institution and the relevant municipality, as well as in the municipality's informational publication, provided that the latter is issued within the timeframe prescribed by law. This provision applies to any proposed development within a municipality, such as a data centre or cattle farm. The amendments also require the developer, having agreed the specific location with the municipality, to install an information

board at the proposed development site announcing that the EIA process has begun.

Owners and lawful possessors of properties located wholly or partly within two kilometres of the boundary of the study where wind project is planning to be located, must also be notified individually during the initial public information stage.

The procedure for dispute technical conditions has also been clarified. Applicants will be able to dispute technical conditions issued by the SES, or a refusal to issue them, to the Director-General of the SES. The SES must notify the relevant building authority of the challenge within three days. This procedure applies to all types of proposed developments, not only wind projects.

A total amount of proposals (91) was submitted to the 3rd reading and considered by deputies at four committee meetings. The amendments will enter into force on 1 January 2027. As previously reported, the Saeima has been considering the amendments to the EIA Law since 2025, while the committee's examination of the law proposals in the second reading took more than a year.