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Praxis – international

Austria on the way to a European «Shared Environmental Information System»

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«Information is the currency of democracy» (Thomas Jefferson).
With the amendment to the Environmental Information Act (EIA) 2004, Austria transposed Directive 2003/4/EC on Public Access to Environmental Information into national law at the federal level. The amended Environmental Information Act sets high requirements for access to and dissemination of environmental information; these must be implemented by the federal government and the federal provinces, as well as towns, cities and municipalities. A new level of cooperation between these entities must be reached, thereby providing an important contribution to greater transparency and bringing environmental administration closer to Austrian citizens.
In order to ensure the coordinated implementation of the required operative measures by all targeted information providing bodies, an eGovernment working group on environmental information has been set up within the framework of the platform «digital Austria».
One of the major objectives of the eGovernment working group on environmental information is the development of a central environmental information portal (one-stop shop) which is in line with the intentions of the European Commission for a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS).

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Timely and innovative environmental information

Timely and innovative environmental information is the basis for the creation of awareness of environmental issues and environmental protection, as well as for active participation by citizens in environmental measures, and thus a factor of political democracy.

The eGovernment working group was formed in 2007; the main task of this working group is to assure free and easy access to environmental information for everyone within the definition of the amended Environmental Information Act. The amended Environmental Information Act requires the promotion, to the widest extent possible, of the systematic availability of environmental information and its dissemination by information providing bodies through electronic communication (active environmental information). Information providing bodies are furthermore required to make available environmental information held by them to any natural or legal person at his or her request and without them having to state a legal claim or interest (passive environmental information).

The obligation of providing information and its impact on political democracy

The basic idea that access to environmental information improves the environmental standard is based on considerations relating to five subject areas that have been identified as relevant to environmental policy and political democracy (according to Büchele/Ennöckl 2005):
1. «Checks and balances» effect: Effective legal protection for citizens requires that crucial information for decision-making is available to them. Granting access to environmental data enables the individual to check compliance with environmental regulations and identify deficits in law enforcement. The right of access to environmental information thus leads to decentralised and effective checks performed by the public on public authority activities.
2. Participation effect: The right to the disclosure of relevant data increases transparency and encourages public partici-

pation in the decision-making process of public authorities. Access to environmental information is thus a step towards participation and democratisation of environmental regulations.
3. Awareness-raising function: As the knowledge about the state of the environment does not remain confined to administrative authorities, the acceptance of measures for the protection of the environment increases among the population. In this way, access to environmental information contributes to a heightened public awareness of environmental issues.
4. Prevention effect: The general right to the disclosure of environmental information should act as a precautionary deterrent for potential polluters, since they run the risk of their activities being disclosed.
5. Standardisation effect: Directive 2003/4/EC on public access to environmental information ensures a «right to be informed» which is based on the same

Barriers to Environmental Information
The amended Environmental Information Act is necessary for the facilitation of access to environmental information for citizens. In particular, the following problems limit the access to environmental information:
– The available environmental information is widely spread across different public authorities.
– Information and data is managed very heterogeneously in different systems, especially on a technical level.
– The presentation of the information varies widely – e.g. on static web pages, via user interfaces of database systems etc.
– A standard internet search that includes all information sources is not possible.
– Often it is difficult for the citizen to find out which public authority holds what environmental information, especially if such information is not accessible via the internet.
– The average citizen does not always know which public authority is responsible for the environmental information in which he/she is interested.
– Although users of the relevant web portals of the public authorities are sometimes provided with complex information (e.g. geographic data), it is often not possible to combine this information to create a significant whole.
– A lot of data which exists in databases of the public authorities is not made available on the internet for financial or technical reasons.

principles across Europe. This facilitates transboundary environmental pollution control while at the same time preventing distortion of competition within the EU.

Online services facilitate access to environmental information

The domain of environmental information is subject to a dynamic development process. The determining factors in this dynamic process are the varying national environmental policy requirements of environmental administrations on the one hand and international requirements under European directives, conventions and other regulations on the other hand.

Directive 2003/4/EC on public access to environmental information explicitly stipulates the use of electronic media for complying with information disclosure obligations. The relevant services offered online by the federal government and the provinces, as well as towns, cities and municipalities – which mainly include their web presence, specific information systems and meta information systems – have thus a key role. However, in order to comply with the requirements specified in the EIA 2004, these systems must be equipped with extended functions for documentation of and access to data and information, and integrated into an extended information infrastructure.

Establishing publicly accessible databases

The UNECE Århus Convention, to which Austria acceded in 2005, stipulates the obligation of the Member States to actively collect environmental information and make it available to the public (UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters). It contains the obligation of the Contracting Parties to progressively establish a coherent, nationwide system of pollution inventories or registers in a structured, computerised and publicly accessible database.

Improve inter-linkages between information flows

An information system is required that permits the citizens to find the information available at an information providing body without making data duplication necessary (see the 7 principles of the Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS), the EU Commission's proposal for improving and streamlining the European system for the collection, analysis and reporting of environmental data). One of the main objectives of SEIS is to improve inter-linkages between current data and information flows through use of modern tools such as internet and satellite technology.

The objective: a central environmental information portal

To achieve this objective, a modern IT solution needs to be defined which takes into account historically evolved, existing structures without changing these structures per se while providing incentives for optimisation. In the midterm perspective, structural harmonisation of existing data sources will be necessary.

An important objective of the eGovernment working group on environmental information is the establishment of a central environmental information portal (one-stop shop) in Austria. This approach is in line with the intentions of the Austrian government programme for the current legislation period, as well as with the initiatives of the EU Commission within the SEIS framework. Through the establishment of a central electronic environmental information service, it will be possible to relieve the information providing bodies from the burden of having to deal with individual requests for information.

Closer cooperation between federal and provincial authorities

For the retrieval of environmental information on specific topics across Austria, the most cost-efficient option is the introduction of a central system which offers access to and retrieval of environmental information published by federal and provincial authorities and held available on their servers. This means that additional maintenance for environmental information will not be required in individual areas, but will be limited only to the functionality of the system.

By way of example, reference can be made to the German environment portal «PortalU» which fulfils this function in an exemplary way which meets with the full satisfaction of all cooperation partners (federal government and the Länder). The European eGovernment award (Good Practice Label 2007) was granted to «PortalU» in 2007; this system has also been recognised by the EU Commission and the European Environment Agency as a successful example of national SEIS implementation.

A pan-European environmental information network

SEIS is the new concept of a common European environmental information network as described in the Communication COM (2008) 46 of the EU Commission of 1 February 2008 «Towards a Shared Environmental Information System» (SEIS). It is

Guiding Principles for «Umweltportal Austria»

In line with the German environment portal (PortalU), the Austrian portal focuses especially on the following 10 guiding principles and requirements:

1. Via Umweltportal Austria it shall be possible to search for all the latest environmental information available on the internet from the federal government, the provinces, towns and cities and municipalities.
2. In order to comply with the requirements of the EIA 2004, comparable environmental information from all information providing bodies of the federal government and the provinces, towns, cities and municipalities must be presented at Umweltportal Austria in a standardised form.
3. Within the framework of the implementation of INSPIRE, Umweltportal Austria is to be developed as access point for GDI-AT (SDI-AT).
4. Umweltportal Austria is a «centre of excellence» for harmonisation of environmental information at all administrative levels.
5. Umweltportal Austria is a successful example of Austrian federalism and cooperation within «Platform Digital Austria»
6. SEIS concepts are to be included in the development process of Umweltportal Austria for the purpose of strategic alignment.
7. Umweltportal Austria represents the interests of Austrian environmental administrations within the European context of information management.
8. Umweltportal Austria supports the practical implementation of INSPIRE in the niche between the European Geoportal and GDI-AT (SDI-AT).
9. Umweltportal Austria supports the compliance with national and European reporting obligations.
10. Umweltportal Austria helps to gather and provide information at low cost and with minimised effort.

designed to grant easy and free access to environmental information first and foremost for environmental administration and policy but also for non-governmental organisations, research organisations, universities and the interested public. SEIS is developed in close cooperation between Eurostat, the EU Commission, the European Environment Agency and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, as well as the EU Member States and EEA partners.

From centralised to decentralised systems

The basic idea of SEIS is the integration of systems for environmental information. Currently existing environmental information systems are aimed at the development of centralised databases for environmental data. These are to be progressively replaced by decentralised systems with a focus on direct data access, interoperability and sharing. National re-

porting obligations to the EU/EEA are to be simplified as well with the use of electronic tools (eReporting).

The objective: reduce administrative burdens

The professed aim is to maintain and improve the quality and availability of information required for environmental policy, in line with better regulation, while keeping the associated administrative burdens to a minimum.

The following 7 principles are the cornerstones of SEIS:

1. information should be managed as close as possible to its source;
2. information should be collected once, and shared with others for many purposes;
3. information should be readily available to public authorities and enable them to easily fulfil their legal reporting obligations;
4. information should be readily accessible to end-users, primarily public authorities at all levels from local to European, to enable them to assess in a timely fashion the state of the environment and the effectiveness of their policies, and to design new policy;
5. information should also be accessible to enable end-users, both public authorities and citizens, to make comparisons at the appropriate geographical scale (e.g. countries, cities, catchment areas) and to participate meaningfully in the development and implementation of environmental policy;
6. information should be fully available to the general public, after due consideration of the appropriate level of aggregation and subject to appropriate confidentiality constraints, and at national level in the relevant national language(s); and
7. information sharing and processing should be supported through common, free open-source software tools.

SEIS is the harmonisation and streamlining of various endeavours at the international level to make environmental information available and to harmonise reporting obligations.

An environmental information portal in the latest quality

In establishing an Austrian environmental information portal, the eGovernment working group on environmental information will create, on the basis of the SEIS principles and with the long-term commitment of the many thousand information providing bodies, a state of the art electronic information network, pursuant to the amended Environmental Information Act, both for the interested public and for the professional world.

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