

# The right environment

If Ireland is to become more sustainable - and create new green jobs in the process - we need to establish proper structures and examine planning processes, writes Bill Hennessy.



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Vestas, one of the world's leading producers of wind turbines is closing its blade manufacturing unit in the Isle of Wight, UK, with the loss of 600 jobs. Ed Miliband, the UK secretary of state for energy and climate change, has blamed the planning regime in the UK for the closure. The long waiting times for planning permission and the uncertainty of project approval have been major deterrents. This is causing investors to invest in other countries where wind is viewed more favourably. In their own back yard, where the wind industry was providing hundreds of jobs, the local planning authority on the Isle of Wight turned down a Vestas application for a relatively small wind-farm consisting of three turbines.

Yes, thousands of green jobs can be created in Ireland - but there are many challenges to be faced if we are to succeed, not least of which will be planning and stakeholder management. Many of the jobs will be temporary - in construction, installation and the expansion of the transmission grid network, but large numbers of permanent jobs will also be created in operations and in maintenance.

With proper strategic management of the sector, jobs will be created in research and development, which in time will hopefully lead to manufacturing activity. In due

course, having built up the knowledge and know-how, international opportunities for providing engineering consulting services from Ireland will evolve.

According to Eamonn Ryan, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, "Renewable electricity is a critical cornerstone of Ireland's approach to moving towards a low-carbon and robust economy." Dr Werner Kruckow, chief executive of Siemens Ireland states that, "Ireland is geographically well positioned to achieve 50% of its energy requirements from renewable resources by 2030 and we could potentially become a net global exporter of renewable energy."

To capitalise on the opportunity to create vital climate-friendly green jobs, Ireland must act quickly to create the structures and business environment for renewable energy to prosper. Obviously huge investment will be required and with banking suffering on a global scale, funding is going to be a significant obstacle. The other major challenges are going to be in planning approval and expanding the grid to provide connection to the many wind farms that are planned for construction, a lot of which are in remote areas of the country.

Ireland has a unique problem in that we have about 200,000km in our transmission and distribution network which, because of our sparse population density, is almost four times the average in the rest of Europe. This pushes up the overall cost of wind power per head of population in Ireland versus Europe. Notwithstanding this, Eirgrid, the state-owned transmission system operator (TSO) is well positioned with its Grid25 strategy to meet the needs of the renewable sector and to achieve the objective of 40% renewable electricity in our system by 2020.

The biggest challenge of all will be in planning. The Spirit of Ireland initiative suggests that we can provide tens of thousands of jobs, achieve energy independence, save €30 billion over the next ten years in reduced fossil fuel bills and dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Its proposal is to use glacial valleys near the west coast adjacent to the sea as reservoirs for sea water, filled using power generated by both on-shore and off-

shore wind farms. Just like the Turlough Hill hydroelectric scheme, power can then be generated at peak demand times through hydro-electric generation.

This project will necessarily involve the building of dams in some valleys and some impairment of the environment and the aesthetic amenities of the areas affected. Landowners and environmentalists may not be pleased. It is right that objections be carefully considered and that stakeholders are treated with respect and decisions made with the best interest of the economy, the environment and the stakeholders at heart. The concept of a co-operative approach to ownership by farmers, landowners and the local community has been mooted and warrants consideration.

It was decided in 2007 that responsibility for planning policy in the renewable energy sector would transfer from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of the Environment. This transfer is happening slowly and delaying the approval process. An added problem for some companies that have received planning permission is that by the time grid connection is agreed, planning permission has expired. This issue has caused the authorities to consider expanding the planning timeframe to 10 years from five, because of the long timescale of such projects. All sorts of problems will continue to arise and cause delay.

For investors to invest and jobs to be created, Government must create the structures and environment for quicker planning. The Strategic Infrastructure Bill, which came into force in 2007 will help. This bill allows planning applications of national or regional importance to be lodged directly with An Bord Pleanála instead of the local authority.

The planning applications can be fast tracked and dealt with in six months, so instead of having to apply for planning permission from the local county council, the board will instead decide if a significant project should be approved. Hopefully some of the major energy projects can be handled in this way.

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