

Review

Development of Infrastructure for Protected Areas under Sectoral Operational Programme Environment

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Abstract

For the 2007 - 2013 interval, the European Union will dispense to Romania structural and cohesion funds adding up to 19.7 billion Euros, implemented by seven operational programs, both sectoral and regional, plus eight more territorial cooperation programs, developed with other countries. Romania is bound to use these funds in order to develop itself to reach the European standards for key areas, such as transportation, environment, energy, research, professional training, agriculture and rural development. In order to achieve the overall objective of Sectoral Operational Programme (SOP) Environment - to protect and improve the environment and living standards in Romania – was identified 6 priority axes. One of them is Priority Axis 4 - Implementation of adequate management systems for nature protection, which envisages the management of protected areas. Priority axis 4 will contribute to achieving of compliance with Birds and Habitat Directives in connection with setting up of the Nature 2000 network. The total terrestrial surface of the natural protected areas represents around 8% of the total terrestrial country surface. This percentage should reach 15% by the end of 2013.

Keywords: structural funds, Sectoral Operational Programme Environment, nature protection

1. Introduction

The Sectoral Operational Programme Environment is one of the seven operational programmes under Objective “Convergence” for the European Union programming period of 2007-2013. It has been drawn up in correlation with the third Priority of Romania’s National Development Plan (NDP) 2007 - 2013 - “Protection and improvement of environment quality” [2] and the priorities under National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) - “Develop Basic Infrastructure to European Standards” [4]. The SOP contains essential elements for the successful implementation of the NDP and NSRF referring to environmental protection development.

The overall objective of SOP is to protect and improve the environment and living standards in Romania, focusing in particular on meeting on environmental acquis. In order to achieve this objective, the following priority axes are identified:

- Priority axis 1 - Extension and modernization of water and wastewater systems;
- Priority axis 2 - Development of integrated waste management systems and rehabilitation of historically contaminated sites ;
- Priority Axis 3 - Reduction of pollution and mitigation of climate change by restructuring and renovating urban heating systems towards energy efficiency targets in the identified local environmental hotspots;
- Priority Axis 4 - Implementation of adequate management systems for nature protection;
- Priority Axis 5 - Implementation of adequate infrastructure of natural risk prevention in most vulnerable areas;

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➤ Priority Axis 6 - Technical Assistance.

The SOP's total budget for the 2007 - 2013 programming period amounts to about Euro 5.6 billion. Out of this, about Euro 4.5 billion is envisaged as Community support, which represents about 23.5% of the financial envelope of the NSRF, and about Euro 1.1 billion comes from national contribution. The Community sources that will support SOP Environment implementation are Cohesion Fund (CF) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

2. Romanian Realities

In Romania, there are 13 National Parks, 13 Natural Parks, as well as the "Danube Delta" Biosphere Reserve. The total surface covered by Natural Parks, National Parks and Biosphere Reserves is 1,687,512 ha (121,780 ha maritime surface), which represents 7% of the total terrestrial country surface. Besides the National Parks, Natural Parks and Biosphere Reserves, there are 935 scientific reserves, nature monuments and nature reserves with a total surface approximated at 180,000 ha. Therefore, the total terrestrial surface of the natural protected areas represents around 8% of the total terrestrial country surface at the end of 2005. By the end of 2013, this percentage should reach 15%.

During the last decades, natural conditions and landscapes of Romania have been influenced by the development of economic activities, as well as by the economic increase from the last years that led many times to an excessive exploitation of the natural resources. In these conditions, many plants and animal species are in danger and the modification of the landscape is an important indicator for environmental deterioration.

The presentation of the current situation of the biodiversity in Romania led to the inclusion of a separate priority axis under SOP Environment, in order to support biodiversity and nature conservation through development of an adequate management framework for protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites [1, 7]. This includes development of infrastructure for protected areas as well as maintenance, operation and monitoring activities. Raising public awareness for environmental protection and nature-friendly behavior – as basis for sustainable development – is also a key element considered.

Particular support is envisaged for the preparation and implementation of management plans. This includes sections of spatial framework, inventory (natural features and socio-economic information), planning and management tools,

including definition of environmental units and their evaluation, proposed zoning (reserve, priority for conservation, restricted use and general use), management objectives and guidelines. The latter provides for relevant legislation, human activities compatible with conservation, habitat improvement measures.

Administrators or custodians of protected areas, Biosphere Reserve "Danube Delta" Administration, public administrations, NGOs, research institutes, universities, museums are foreseen as beneficiaries for this priority axis. For those protected areas without administrator, the management responsibilities belong to the environmental authorities [5].

The operations to be developed under this key area of intervention will finance the following indicative activities [5]:

- assistance in the preparation of management plans, scientific studies, inventories, mapping;
- training and institutional capacity building of the Nature 2000 sites and protected areas
- management bodies;
- ecological restoration of habitats and the reinforcement of species population;
- construction and improvement of infrastructure of national protected areas and Natura 2000 sites (building of visitors' and informational centers and information panels, risk management – fire prevention and control, etc.);
- reducing impact of infrastructure improvements on species affected by fragmentation of landscape;
- setting up of the monitoring systems for the Natura 2000 sites and protected areas, including infrastructure and equipment for monitoring of the natural habitats and flora and fauna species conservation status;
- preparation of information and publicity materials, awareness raising for the protected areas and Natura 2000;
- acquisition of high biodiversity value land in order to become state public property.

The selection of projects under this priority axis will be done on a competitive basis, following calls for proposals. In submitting the applications for reimbursement, the Beneficiaries will substantiate the incurred expenditures and their compliance with the project requirements contained in the Financing Agreement. All applications for reimbursement must be supported by confirmed invoices.

Project appraisal will be performed to ensure that applications fully meet the criteria established in the Council Regulation No 1083/2006 laying down general provisions on the European Regional

Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund, and that benefits to the area are maximized [3]. The following general selection criteria will be applied: relevance of the project,

quality of the project and capacity of the beneficiary.

For projects financed from ERDF, Priority Axis 4, the maximum rate for financing is 80%.

Table 1. Financial plan of the SOP Environment - Priority Axis 4

Priority axis 4 (in EUR)	Community funding	National counterpart	Total funding	Co-financing rate
	171,988,693	42,997,174	214,985,867	80.00 %

The beneficiary will be responsible for:

a) elaboration of the applications for the provision of assistance, including the identification, assessment and preparation of the project, including the financial plan;

b) preparation of the project contract documents; procurement of services and works approved under SOP Environment according to the national public procurement legislation;

c) the public procurement procedure and the signature of appropriate contracting documents with contractors;

d) proper implementation of the project according to contracts concluded with the selected contractors;

e) verification and payment to contractors based on approved verified invoices;

f) operating of a separate project accounting system or of an adequate accounting code for all transactions;

g) internal financial control and an independent annual audit of the organization;

h) keep project dossiers to provide adequate audit trail oriented on financial flows;

i) regular and ad-hoc reporting to the Ministry on the progress in the project;

j) elaboration and submission of data for monitoring;

k) regional and local publicity and information billboards at the construction sites in accordance with appropriate European Union rules and with the Communication Plan.

The beneficiaries will be responsible for the eligibility of proposed and claimed projects expenditures and, during the implementation of the projects, for complying with the contracting terms.

Under Axis 4 SOP Environment, 4 sessions of project submission have been launched so far and were signed 64 contracts of financing, with a value of 89,901,081 Euro. The session number 4 has not ended. At national level 122 projects are under evaluation.

Most projects were submitted by the Natural and National Parks Administrations, because they manage the natural heritage of parks and have specialized personal experience, material and

financial resources necessary to develop and implement projects.

Table 2. ERDF contracting state under Axis 4 SOP Environment

Session	Contracts of financing (number)	Value (Euro)
1	11	
2	16	
3	37	
TOTAL	64	89,901,081

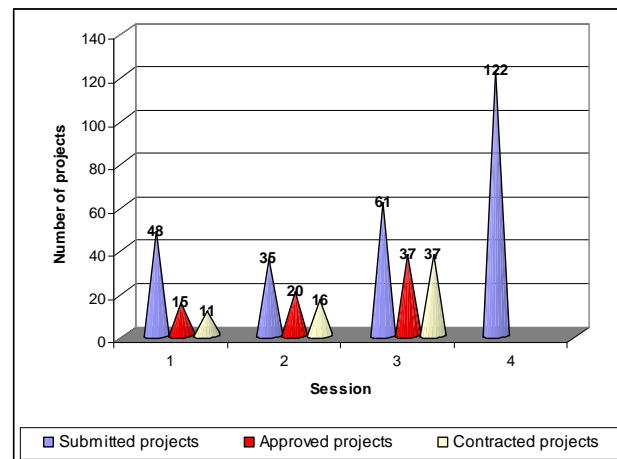


Figure 1. Number of projects under Axis 4 SOP Environment

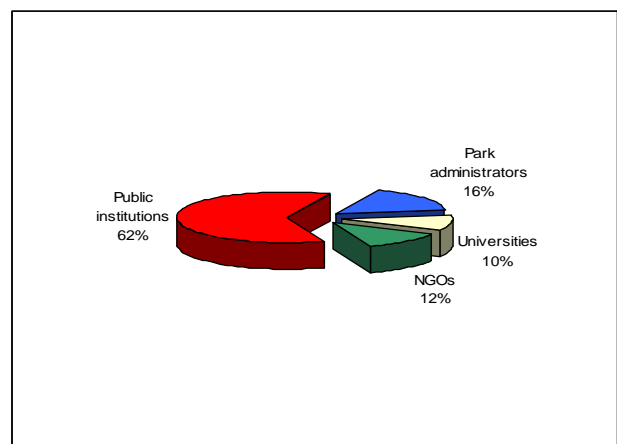


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of funds under Axis 4 SOP Environment

Only a relatively few projects were submitted by environmental NGOs, that have a reduced capacity to implement projects financed from the Structural Funds and technical universities. The main reason for the small number of projects is the principle of reimbursement. This involves the fact that the Final Beneficiaries make the payment to the suppliers of works or services from their own funds; on a later date, based on the honored invoices and promissory notes that evidence the payments, the reimbursement of the expenses will be required. The Council Regulation no. 1083/2006 on July 11, 2006 stipulates the general provisions that may be applied to the European Fund for Regional Development, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and abrogates the Regulation no. 1260/1999 [3].

3. Conclusions

The European Union cohesion policy may bring an essential contribution to protect and improve the conservation status of habitats [1] and species of National and Community interest [7]. The SOP's total budget for the 2007 - 2013 programming period amounts to about Euro 5.6 billion. For priority axis 4 - Implementation of adequate management systems for nature protection - the total financial allocation is about 215 mil Euro. The purpose of this priority axis is to support biodiversity and nature conservation through development of an adequate management framework for protected areas, including Nature 2000 sites. This includes development of infrastructure for protected areas as well as maintenance, operation and monitoring activities.

Raising public awareness for environmental protection and nature-friendly behavior – as basis for sustainable development – is also a key element considered [6]. Particular support is envisaged for the preparation and implementation of management plans.

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