

THE ADOPTION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN SMES

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Small and mid-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly regarded as an important target group of urban environmental policies as their cumulative contribution to pollution is not underestimated by policy makers any more. Although the production of these companies generates relatively small amounts of waste, one has to pay special attention to these undertakings as they use many different hazardous and toxic substances in their production processes. However, from the municipal authority point of view there is only a limited scope of action to influence SMEs to change production methods as well as to force them to replace end-of-the-pipe-technology.

SMEs are important sources of economic growth and employment, but at the same time, collectively they exert quite significant pressures on the environment. Their adoption of an EMS (environmental management system) can help address these pressures. In addition, an EMS can also have a positive impact on these companies' economic viability.

Environmental management systems – are amongst the most well-known and most important voluntary tools used by enterprises to improve their environmental performance, and help ensure compliance with environmental legislation. Examples of other instruments in this area are eco-labels, life-cycle-assessment tools, environmental reports and benchmarking initiatives [1].

EMSs can take many different forms. They often appear in their internationally recognized, formal nature, but they can also take a number of less formal, “adapted” forms [1]. Some of less formal EMSs are based on the attribution of alternative, environment related labels according to the specific requirements of the scheme in question. Example of such “alternative” EMSs is Eco-profit. It is an ongoing project which in the first place is aiming to tear down the information barrier and to introduce integrated environmental management practices in SMEs. The program recruits companies on a voluntary basis and facilitates access to technical assistance in order to help companies to identify and implement cleaner production technologies and process changes. Eco-profit uses emission standards contained in legislation enacted as part of the Austrian National Clean Air Act and Clean Water Acts.

An overall goal of each project was the identification of measures which would lead to the minimization of waste and emission through increased efficiency. The following principles were used as guidelines [2]:

- anything that leaves the production process should be considered as a product or raw material that can be used directly, or after processing, as an input for another production process;
- every product is optimized regarding repair ability and recyclability;
- production is based on renewable sources of energy and substances as far as possible, or is based on recycled materials;
- the producer is responsible for the whole life cycle of his product, including energy consumption and emissions during the use of the products, its repair ability and ability to be recycled or disposed of;
- the producer chooses material from renewable resources and releases wastes in a way that does not diminish nature;
- the producer minimizes the energy demand to a level that can be covered from renewable energy sources.

The activities of the Eco-profit projects are steering the companies' policy in two directions. Firstly, the production process and all other activities of the business get an environmental check-up on the use of materials and energy. This also includes the administrative department. Secondly, an individual company concept should enable the management to implement future environment-related measures on its own.

A typical proceeding of an Eco-profit project would cover the following areas: qualitative analysis of used materials and substances (especially hazardous substances); stock-taking of all relevant environmental legislation; waste management concept; energy saving concept; environment management concept; environmental ratio analysis; preparation for the award as environmentally friendly business [2].

The Eco-profit label improves the public image of the individual company as well as the region as a whole. Companies which achieve the environmental standards of the program (significant reduction of pollution and implementation of environmental management) are awarded the Eco-profit label. They can use the label for marketing purposes for one year. The label is granted to the company and not on its products, i.e. it is a certificate which is giving information on how the business is run, not on what it produces. After one year, companies will have to continue to participate in the on-going activities of the program and will have to implement further waste minimization and pollution prevention measures in order to gain re-authorization to continue to use the label [2].

So an EMS helps companies integrate environmental considerations into their overall activities, and make progress towards more sustainable production patterns in a systematic way.

References

1. Public Policy Initiatives to Promote the Uptake of Environmental Management Systems in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises [Electronic resource] — Mode of access: <http://www.ecoprofit.com/upload/documents/>.
2. Graz: The Cleaner production programme ECOPROFIT [Electronic resource] — Mode of access: <http://www.eaue.de/winuw/d/52.htm>.