



In Europe's race for green success, research impact is vital

More clean technologies must reach the market for the EU to meet its climate-neutrality goal, according to Austria's Henriette Spyra.

24 May 2024 - By ANTHONY KING

As France prepares to host the 2024 Summer Olympics, a top Austrian climate official thinks the games can serve as guide of sorts for viewing Europe's green ambitions.

Henriette Spyra, director general for innovation and technology at the Austrian Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology, says slashing EU greenhouse gas emissions involves tests and rewards much like an athletics contest.

On your marks...

'The challenge we all have is to decarbonise but not to deindustrialise,' Spyra told the [European Research and Innovation Days](#) event in Brussels on 20-21 March 2024. 'But let's frame it as a race – a race to a better future.'

She said that European research is crucial to achieving the EU's goal of becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

The EU has spent the past two years putting in place a range of laws to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% in 2030 compared with 1990 levels.

In February, the European Commission [recommended](#) a 90% reduction in EU emissions by 2040, further underpinning the [European Green Deal](#).

A third of the technologies needed to decarbonise by 2050 remains at the stage of research and development, according to Spyra, who said authorities across Europe have a role in ensuring more green tech moves from the laboratory or pilot scale to the market.

'Funding for applied research is crucial to cover the many incremental steps needed to move research results towards application in practice,' she said. 'We are convinced that this needs a whole-of-government approach to transform industry.'

Austrian advice

Austria's own experience offers a potentially useful lesson for Europe as a whole about the road to decarbonising.

The country invited its 11 largest industrial companies at the end of 2020, including chemical, steel and cement manufacturers, to forge a joint action plan finalised in 2023.

The move led to the establishment in 2022 of a €5.7 billion "Climate and Transition Fund". It includes €3 billion for the transformation of industry.

Nine large-scale projects have been funded in 2023, with a total expected emissions cut of 2.4 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂). In 2019, Austria emitted 83 million tonnes of greenhouse gases, [2.2%](#) of the EU total.

In one project, steelmaker Voestalpine will build two electric furnaces by 2027 and trim 3% to 4% off Austria's CO₂ emissions, according to Spyra.

'This is the sector with the largest CO₂ emissions, but also a sector which is very, very important for our industrial base,' she said.

Spyra hopes to deepen climate collaboration among Austrian governmental agencies and to align their activities more closely with European and global counterparts.

'There is no magic wand,' she said. 'We must turn over every stone.'

EU benefits

In an interview with Horizon Magazine after R&I Days, Spyra said the EU research programme can be especially proud of its projects on renewable and clean technologies, such as solar power and batteries, as well as on digital technologies.

She praised five "Missions" in the EU research programme. They're aimed at adapting to climate change, tackling cancer, restoring oceans, cleaning up soil and creating 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030.

Austria, along with Australia, leads an international initiative to help achieve the EU's climate goals. It's called [Mission Innovation Net-Zero Industries](#).

'This is about global competitiveness,' Spyra said. 'The only chance we have is to stay on top of developments.'

With a degree in politics and economics from the University of Oxford in the UK and in international studies from Johns Hopkins University in the US, she highlighted the scale of the climate challenges facing Europe by joking about the lengthy name of her own ministry.

'I sometimes say I'm working for the Ministry of Magic,' she said.

But Spyra also said the underlying reality is that Europe must deliver on its green promise.

'Let's be clear: not being successful is not an option,' she said.

The views of the interviewee don't necessarily reflect those of the European Commission.

More info

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