

Vattenfall Europe

Headquarters:	Berlin, Germany
Branch of trade:	Energy
Turnover/ Net profit 2004:	€ 10.7 billion / € 264 million
CEO:	Klaus Rauscher
Owned by:	Publicly-traded corporation
Employees 2004:	17'813
WEF-Participant 2006:	yes

Summary

With its brown coal surface mining project, Vattenfall Europe threatens the wetlands of Lacoma, one of Brandenburg's most precious cultural landscapes. An opencast pit in this area menaces the local nature reserve, is highly problematic with respect to climate change and destroys ethnic settlement areas. The initiative group "Freunde von Lacoma" demands that Vattenfall Europe stop its opencast pit outside Lacoma and forgo the start-up of new surface mining and coal-fired power stations.

Information on the case and characteristics of irresponsible corporate behaviour

The German subsidiary of the Swedish Vattenfall group, Vattenfall Europe, is planning to produce coal in the wetlands of Lacoma, one of Brandenburg's most precious cultural landscapes. The wetlands will be endangered by the projected opencast pit of Cottbus-Nord.

North of Cottbus, in a landscape conservation area of approximately 380 hectares, a manifold mosaic of habitats has emerged over the last few centuries. It is home to more than 170 highly endangered species. Since 1968, the area is under landscape protection. In 2003, it was accredited European Union protection under the Flora-Fauna-Habitat Directive (FFH).

Even though the project approval procedure has not yet concluded, Vattenfall Europe made its own decision to go forward and has already commenced the construction of 30 meter broad alignments throughout the nature reserve. According to the initiative group "Freunde von Lacoma", Vattenfall Europe is lowering the groundwater table, a necessary procedure before starting to dig for coal. This intervention interferes with the delicate ecosystem of the region and may lead to serious water shortages.

The production of energy through the combustion of brown coal harms the environment. With its brown coal power plants in Germany, Vattenfall Europe emits more carbon dioxide (CO₂) than the entire state of Sweden (64.3 million tons). In Germany, the combustion of brown coal is responsible for 22% of energy induced discharges of CO₂, yet this energy source produces only 11% of the nation's primary energy demand.

Due to its close links to policy makers, Vattenfall Europe successfully lobbied for its interests at a time when Germany was establishing rules for emissions trading and thereby circumvented effective climate protection. The company received so many cost-free CO₂ certificates that it no longer needs to purchase additional certificates. Nonetheless, Vattenfall Europe claims that its acquisition of CO₂ certificates was so expensive that it is now justified in increasing its energy tariffs.

On October 21st 2005, the last two homes of families that have existed in Lacoma since the end of the Thirty Years War (1648) have been demolished. The demolition took place before an official decision was reached whether or not coal production shall go forward in Lacoma. This is only the latest event in what has become a tradition of destruction in the Sorbian/Wendian ethnic settlement areas. More than eighty villages have already been destroyed.

Consequences

With the production of brown coal out of the wetlands of Lacoma, Vattenfall Europe threatens a nature reserve accredited protection by the European Union. This area is of particular importance for many species of wildlife, including many rare birds. The resettlement of ethnic Sorbs and Wends to make way for mining destroys existing village structures and create tensions between affected communities. The continued mining of brown coal impedes the introduction of new energy sources and thereby stalls structural changes in energy politics.

Current status and demands

If the project approval procedure closes as planned, the wetland area of Lacoma will soon become nothing more than history. The initiative group "Freunde von Lacoma" demands that Vattenfall Europe:

- stop its Cottbus-Nord project and save the wetlands of Lacoma;
- forgo the start-up of new surface mining and coal-fired power stations;
- intensify investments in renewable energies.

Detailed nomination: www.publiceye.ch/nominierungen

Further information and links:

- www.lacoma-bleibt.de