

Interview with Mgr. Petr Hladík, Minister of the Environment

The Minister of the Environment wants to give people the opportunity to live in harmony with nature, and by that he does not mean just planting trees on city streets. Why does Petr Hladík call the Ministry of the Environment the Ministry of the Future? The use of rainwater, solar panels, and deposit PET bottles no longer have to represent an excessively progressive approach, but a standard for returning to our planet at least the minimum of what we take from it. Grey water subsidies? Why should we want it and what will we actually benefit from it? The new Minister of the Environment, Petr Hladík (KDU-ČSL), answers these questions for VTEI journal.

Mr. Hladík, what do you consider to be your biggest challenge as Minister of the Environment?

There are so many challenges ahead of us this year, it's impossible to choose just one. For example, we will continue with the "Nová zelená úsporám Light" (New Green Savings Light), which is intended for households with lower incomes. It is a subsidy for the insulation of windows, facade, ceiling, and other parts of the house. An applicant can receive up to 100% subsidy from the state, up to 150,000 CZK. Another big challenge is the crisis amendment to the Water Act, which responds to deficiencies in practice and puts them in order. The most famous case that pointed out the shortcomings was the accident on the Bečva river. We also want to focus on deposits for cans and PET bottles, which we would like to introduce in the spring. The closest possible date when it would be possible to have deposit cans and PET bottles in the Czech Republic is 2025. The best waste is the one that is not created. However, if it is already created, it is important to reuse it in production or as a source of electricity or heat. Support for the circular economy is key to creating sustainable development in the Czech Republic. I want the Ministry of the Environment to become a strong and self-confident department that will give people the opportunity to live healthier and in greater harmony with nature.

You mention the crisis amendment to the Water Act; what will it contain?

Among other things, the amendment is intended to ensure that we are able to prevent similar events as best as possible, such as the accident on the Bečva river in 2020. We want to introduce online monitoring of wastewater discharged from industrial operations into rivers at the outlets of significant pollutants, where wastewater discharged by them may pose a significant risk in terms of an accident on watercourses. We also added this to the updated government programme statement. Among other things, the amendment clarifies the roles of the entities involved in dealing with accidents and increases the penalties for the illegal discharge of wastewater containing dangerous substances. We expect the amendment to be approved this year. As part of the amendment, we also launched a pilot project for monitoring outlets on a selected section of the Labe – about 30 kilometres between Brandýs nad Labem and Mělník – which is taking place thanks to the Water Research Institute. I see the role of TGM WRI as very important. The data that the Institute brings us can be beneficial not only to water managers and the Ministry, but we also need it because of the changing climate. For example, the Institute can provide field

research work. With equipment for sampling and evaluation of water samples, it can measure the pollution of streams. It has been dealing with the assessment of the status of water bodies for a long time and has the necessary technical and professional capacity for these selected areas of water management.

The issue of power engineering is closely linked to the environment. What is your view on this relationship, and what steps are you planning to take to support the use of renewable energy sources?

I already hinted it a little at the beginning of the interview. It is important that power engineering policies are adopted with regard to their environmental impact and are in line with sustainable development goals. I see the solution in a combination of nuclear and renewable energy sources with the aim of reducing dependence on fossil fuels. Therefore, as a government, we try to support the installation of photovoltaics as much as possible. Within two years, we want to have a total of 200,000 panels on roofs, which is double the original programme statement. I believe we can do it with no problem. Last year alone, over 55,000 households applied for a subsidy for a solar power installation for more than 10 billion CZK, which is four times more than in 2021. The received applications represent a total installed power of 380 MWp, and the average power per installation on a family house is around 7.5 kWp. Thanks to this, a household can save over 30,000 CZK a year and, at the same time, cover up to 70 per cent of electricity from its own sources. However, the development of energy communities must also go hand in hand with this.

The Czech Republic is a bit behind in developing energy communities, in other countries they are much further. When will we have it?

The first change in the Energy Law has already occurred. The so-called LEX OZE I has already been published in the collection of laws. Now the second amendment is being discussed, which concerns energy communities. I assume that there will be a settlement of comments and a gradual process towards the government and parliament. The third legislative change will follow, which should bring energy storage, flexibility and aggregation to the Czech Republic. All of this together will bring an absolutely fundamental revolution to Czech power engineering, which is why we mentioned these changes in the revised programme statement. As the Ministry of the Environment, we support the creation of energy communities, which is probably not a surprise. However, we also have a large number of mayors and deputy mayors who want their cities and towns to become energy communities so that they can produce, share and store energy together. As a ministry, we have subsidy titles for this, so what we really need now is the legislation.

Let us talk now about the area of water management. What is your opinion on current water management methods and what changes would you like to see implemented?

It is evident that current water management is aimed at protecting water resources, ensuring the supply of high-quality drinking water, and supporting



Photo: archive of Mr. Hladik

the restoration of riverbeds and natural wetlands. All this cannot be done without measures to eliminate the risk of pollution by dangerous substances, without minimizing the causes of accidents, especially for areas protected not only from the point of view of drinking water sources, but also from the point of view of the protection of water-bound ecosystems.

Although the issue of water management also falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture, I would like to improve water management and the protection of water resources together with Minister Zdeněk Nekula, who is also my party colleague. This is where I see the priority of our interdepartmental cooperation, for example in the area of increasing the efficiency of water management.

Speaking of efficient water management, you also focus on the capture of rainwater and its reuse in the previously mentioned New Green Savings subsidy programme. How specifically?

That's right. We offer people a subsidy for collecting and using rain and wastewater. The captured water can be used for watering the garden or as service water. The benefit is saving expenses and drinking water consumption. The subsidy can range from 27,000 to 105,000 CZK. A new tank, ideally located underground, or a cleaned underground cistern or a specially adapted well can be used to accumulate rainwater. In the case of wastewater, the subsidy applies, for example, to the use of grey water – that is, from wash basins, baths, showers, and sinks.

Will you be actively involved in cooperation with neighbouring countries regarding the protection of common water resources?

As someone said, water knows no boundaries and naturally crosses them. Cooperation with neighbouring countries is therefore crucial for a sustainable and effective solution to water management problems. One of the important tools for cooperation is the European Union and its water management policy. We can share experience and information with Member States. It is necessary to maintain working relationships, especially with our neighbouring countries, with whom specific problems often need to be solved. Simultaneously, I will continue to support activities at the level of organizations such as the International Commission for the Protection of the Elbe River (ICPER).

Another big issue is drought. What are your priorities to address drought and water scarcity? Through what adaptation measures in water management can the Czech Republic best prepare for expected climate changes?

Drought and water scarcity can be faced with a whole range of measures. It is mostly a set of complex measures that complement each other. A clear priority is the retention of water in the landscape and the restoration of natural water regime. However, we must not neglect the protection of water sources, which I consider necessary to maintain the availability of water for households, agriculture, industry, power engineering, and others. Moreover, in the government programme statement, we committed ourselves to the constitutional protection of water.

Amending existing laws and adopting more effective legislative tools to protect water and agricultural land will help us fight drought and its effects. Protection and improvement of the landscape via restoration of wetlands, forests, pools, small water reservoirs and floodplains, management of valuable habitats, planting vegetation, improvement of spatial and species composition of forests or restoration of watercourses will help to minimize the effects of drought and improve water quality. Several subsidy programmes are also in progress (not only) to support water retention in the landscape; for example, support for the construction of new sources of drinking water, water pipes,

interconnection of water supply systems, rainwater absorption and utilization systems, drinking water treatment technologies, sewerage and wastewater treatment systems. Priority support takes place through the National Recovery Plan and the Operational Programme Environment (OPE). Approximately one billion CZK has been spent so far. However, OPE has a total of more than 14 billion CZK ready for the construction of sewers and wastewater treatment plants. Another total of 10 billion is aimed at the use of rainwater, the creation of pools and small water reservoirs, green roofs, but also the support of environmentally friendly farming on agricultural land and anti-flood measures.

You often refer to the Ministry as the Ministry of the Future. What should the future look like according to the new Minister of the Environment?

I want the Ministry to completely change Czech power engineering through subsidies. So that leaving coal is not a bad move, but a used opportunity. So that we no longer wonder if we are not too progressive, but that this approach is the standard. We must not forget that the Earth was entrusted to our care and we have no other. I will make an effort to ensure that we will pass it on to future generations in good condition. The current government places much greater emphasis on the climate than previous governments. We are experiencing a really big change, and in order to be able to prepare for it, we need to support not only households, but also industry and companies. Also because of what is happening in Ukraine, people and companies are now more willing to decide what kind of energy they will use in the future.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Ing. Josef Nistler

Mgr. Petr Hladík

Mgr. Petr Hladík, born 28 September 1984, graduated from the Faculty of Informatics at Masaryk University, majoring in Service Science, Management and Engineering. He joined the KDU-ČSL in 2010 and was elected to the council of the Brno-north district. In 2016, he became the first deputy mayor of the city of Brno. In 2018, he defended his position and became the first deputy mayor for the environment. In 2022, he was again elected as a representative and continues to work as an ordinary representative of the city of Brno. In 2019, he became vice-chairman of the KDU-ČSL and chairman of the KDU-ČSL expert commission for the environment. Together with Anna Hubáčková (the former Minister of the Environment), he prepared the government programme statement in the field of the environment. From 9th January 2023, he was the Deputy Minister of the Environment. He became the Minister of the Environment on 10th March 2023.

