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Interview with Mgr. Petr Birklen, Director General of the Povodí Odry, state enterprise

At the beginning of March this year, Petr Birklen became Director General of the state enterprise Povodí Odry. How long was the journey to this position and what does it mean to him? How did he cope with the aftermath of the 2024 floods, and how does he manage to fight against misinformation? And will the long-discussed Nové Heřminovy dam finally be built? Mgr. Petr Birklen answers our questions.

Mr. Birklen, you studied Systematic Biology and Ecology with a focus on Hydrobiology at Palacký University in Olomouc. What was the motivation, or rather, what led you to this field?

Even as a boy, I was fascinated by two phenomena: the world of living organisms – how the entire complex system functions – and, more specifically, the human body. When I was deciding which path to take after secondary school, studying medicine

was my first choice. I am from the strong generation of the 1970's; so the numbers of applicants to study were staggering then, which, combined with my somewhat rebellious years, ultimately led to me not getting accepted to any university. It was a hard blow, but as time had shown, a rather useful one. By chance, I came across a newly opened post-secondary study programme in Ostrava focused on applied ecology. It felt close to my interests, so I gave it a try, planning to use that year for intensive preparation for further admission exams. In the end, my decision proved to be an excellent choice. At that time, the field was just beginning, little was known about it, and there were only a few students enrolled. The lecturers were from the Department of Biology and Ecology at the Faculty of Science, University of Ostrava. There, I encountered personalities such as Zdeněk Ďuriš, Zdeněk Majkus, Jaroslav Ašmera, and Aleš Dolný, who had an absolutely fantastic approach to us. Moreover, since there were so few of us, a great group formed, and we had lots of fun together. This short but intense experience ultimately became a crucial impulse

for me to apply to the field of Systematic Biology and Ecology. I began my studies at the University of Ostrava, so I was, in effect, continuing with the same lecturers. I then completed my master's degree at Palacký University in Olomouc.

After completing your studies, you worked – with a brief break – for more than eight years as the head of the regional office of the Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic (NCA) in Ostrava. What ambitions did you have when you took up this position? Can you recall your first project?

Although NCA was a career goal for me after graduation, it was not my first work experience. I faced compulsory civilian service, and I set myself the goal of doing something that would not be a complete waste of time and would be useful for my future professional career. At that time, I came to the NCA office in Olomouc and asked if they could use me as a civilian service worker. The head, Jiří Šafář, patiently listened to me but told me to come back after I had completed my civilian service. So, I had to forget about NCA for the time being. However, I found an advertisement in the newspaper for a selection procedure for a water management technician at the Czech Fishing Union office in Ostrava. Boldly, I went there with the condition that if they hired me, they would first have to allow me to complete my civilian service there – which, as I found out, was possible at the Fishing Union. And they actually took me on! Although it was not entirely in line with the civilian service rules at the time, I was immediately able to perform the work of the advertised position. This fulfilled my goal, and I ended up staying there for another two years as an employee. I mention this mainly because it was a crucial experience for my further career. There, I immersed myself in water management practice and, thanks to the area managed (which included the entire Oder basin and partly the Morava basin), I gained detailed knowledge not only of the hydrographic network in the region but also of local specifics. One of my important professional encounters also took place here – with Associate Professor Milan Jařabáč, a forestry and water management researcher who was then a member of the Union's governing bodies. With him, I went on countless field trips and meetings with watercourse managers and designers, which essentially supplemented my water management education. Those years of our cooperation were truly a great learning experience. Only after this first work experience did the offer to work at NCA come – at the Ostrava regional office. When working on the restoration of the Jičinka river, the head of the regional office, Vladimír Mana, approached me to see if I could help with the declaration of Skalická Morávka National Nature Monument and prepare the materials for the management plan. This project thus became my first at NCA, which I began while still an external collaborator. I was soon hired by NCA as a zoologist, and even before I had a chance to settle into the role, I was appointed head of the Ostrava office. That was a big leap for me. At NCA, I then mainly focused on water, river restoration, and the removal of migratory barriers.

Your professional career has also been connected with the private sector. For over five years, you worked at Ekotoxa, s. r. o. How strongly did you feel this change compared to your previous professional experience?

Anyone who has experienced such a change will surely agree that the difference between the public and private sectors is truly significant. Although Ekotoxa always had research ambitions and was primarily focused on supporting public administration, it was still a limited liability company that had to sustain itself mainly through contracts – which is not always straightforward in the field of environmental consulting. Until then, I was used to working with an allocated budget and did not have to worry so much about where the money for expenses would come from or how to pay the staff. Suddenly, as executive director, this became my daily routine, and it was essential to understand knowledge and experience as

capital that either has current market demand or does not. In simple terms, on one hand it meant constantly thinking about new products based on demand or competition and, on the other hand, managing cash flow – that is, ensuring a steady influx of money into the company. I believe that during our time working together, we managed to achieve a few things, especially in areas I had focused on before, such as at the Ministry of the Environment. I launched products such as the Climate Change Adaptation Strategies and the Territorial Landscape Studies, which we helped the Ministry of Regional Development to set up both methodologically and through the implementation of a pilot project. During my tenure, we were also quite successful in the research field and managed to secure several research projects supported by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic.

The next five years or so of your professional life were connected with the regional development agency Moravian-Silesian Investments and Development, a. s. (MSID). Within a few months, you progressed from the position of an environmental expert to company management, with responsibility for the successful implementation of projects. Which projects are you proud of, and which, on the other hand, were not implemented?

I am undoubtedly proud of the first project, the management of which actually brought me to MSID. It is the ten-year integrated LIFE COALA project, which I came up with together with a friend, and then went on to prepare the funding application. The Moravian-Silesian Region and twelve other partners succeeded in securing a grant for it from the LIFE programme amounting to nearly ten million Euro, which represents sixty per cent of the total costs. The project is still ongoing and to this day remains only the second integrated LIFE project in the Czech Republic and the first to be implemented solely at the regional level. I believe it will help the Moravian-Silesian Region strengthen its climate change resilience and support the broader transformation of our coal-mining region. I am also proud of the POHO 2030 development programme, which I built with my team on the basis of the Post-Mining Area Development Concept for the Karviná region created by my predecessors. One of the region's flagship strategic transformation projects – POHO Park Gabriela – eventually emerged from this programme. It focuses on transforming a former hard coal mine – now a listed cultural monument – into a cultural and educational centre for the Karviná area. The project has obtained planning permission, secured funding of CZK 400 million from the Just Transition Operational Programme, and construction work is scheduled to begin next year. What has not been successful within the POHO 2030 programme, however, is the conversion of two decommissioned hard coal mines into economic zones. This is crucial for the region, as the coal phase out has resulted in the loss of economic activity in parts of the region. It is therefore necessary not only to replace that activity, but also to actively create conditions for the re-development or establishment of new and forward-looking industrial sectors. As far as I know, the newly established state-owned company SIRS is expected to take over these pre-prepared MSID projects and carry them forward. What matters most is that the work was not in vain.

Since 1 March this year, you have held the position of Director General of the Povodí Odry, state enterprise. As you yourself noted, you took up this position at a crucial time for removing flood damage, implementing flood protection measures, and meeting the schedule for preparing the construction of Nové Heřminovy reservoir. What has been achieved in terms of removing flood damage since you assumed the role of Director General?

It would be rather presumptuous to speak of any accomplishments after such a short time in the role. I inherited, among other things, an already initiated process of addressing flood damage from my predecessor, including

a timetable for the following period, which I am more or less adhering to. There is not much room to speed up the process, but I want to focus in particular on removing potential barriers that could delay preparation and subsequent implementation. This means, above all, intensive cooperation with local authorities and the public, especially landowners in the affected areas. To take it step by step, since last year approximately CZK 240 million has been effectively spent on addressing flood damage. These funds were primarily allocated to urgent stabilisation works wherever necessary, in order to at least provisionally prevent further damage. We have also partly begun the restoration of water management infrastructure. We completed the restoration of damaged embankments in Opava – Palhanec, in Krnov – Kostelec, and at the confluence of the Oder and Opava rivers in Ostrava. Given that the damage to water management assets alone at the Povodí Odry has been estimated at CZK 6.1 billion, we still have a major workload ahead. We are currently cooperating on a flood protection restoration study for selected sections of the Opava and Opavice rivers, which is being prepared by the NCA CR. We will follow up the results, which we will have by the end of July, with design work (*the interview was conducted in May, ed.*). In many places – particularly along the Opava river between Vrbno and Nové Heřminovy – it will probably involve a complete shift in the concept of flood protection towards more semi-natural approaches. Although there will be no such studies at the Bělá and Vidnávká, we will consult with AOPK on the design preparation of the restoration. However, on many watercourses, we have already independently launched the design phase for restoring sections located primarily within built-up areas, which are not covered by the aforementioned study. In these locations, restoration is generally only possible within the original parameters. We are also currently finalising the documentation required to apply for a building permit for the Nové Heřminovy reservoir, including the resolution of property and legal relationships. As part of the complex of measures on the Upper Opava, in addition to the reservoir itself, we are also preparing modifications to the streams below the dam from Zátor to Krnov. Building permits have already been issued for two sections, and documentation for the others is nearing completion. This year, we also plan to launch the design phase for flood protection measures within the town of Krnov – a process that, thanks to an agreement with the town, we are bringing forward by several years.

Which current flood protection projects are now in the implementation phase, and for which do you anticipate a “ribbon-cutting” ceremony?

First and foremost, I must mention the flood protection measures in Bohumín–Pudlov. This CZK 400 million project is expected to be completed in 2026. Once the technical measures have been implemented, the built-up areas of the affected site will be protected from flooding during a discharge of 1,555 m³/s, which currently corresponds to a one-hundred-year flood flow on the Oder – with a 0.5 m safety margin. It is also one of the closely watched construction projects that will significantly contribute to the protection of the town of Bohumín. This year, we will be symbolically cutting the ribbon at Baška hydraulic structure, where the reconstruction of the spillway is nearing completion. This CZK 130 million investment will ensure the safe and reliable transfer of extreme flood flows and enable the structure to withstand the impact of a control millennial flood. This hydraulic structure operates as part of the multi-purpose Oder River Basin Water Management System and, with a total reservoir capacity of around 1.1 million m³, it is the smallest reservoir in the Oder catchment. The construction of the Ráj – Karviná weir, with a budget of CZK 94 million, is scheduled for completion by the end of the year. This weir is located in an area affected by mining activity and had deteriorated to the point where it could no longer fulfil its primary function – water abstraction. The reconstruction is co-financed by OKD, which bears responsibility for the damage caused by mining operations.



Launch of the Let's Clean Up the Czech Republic event at the Slezská Harta dam. On the left in the photo is Petr Birklen, on the right is dam manager Petr Poledna (source: P. Birklen archive)

The zoning decision for the Nové Heřminovy reservoir was challenged by the environmental organisation Děti Země/Children of the Earth, and at the same time, it was necessary to resolve property rights concerning eighteen landowners in the cadastral area of the village. How are you progressing in this area?

The court's decision is now known. The lawsuit filed by Děti Země was dismissed, thereby eliminating a significant source of uncertainty in the preparatory work for the reservoir's construction. However, for the sake of accuracy, it should be noted that an appeal is still possible – specifically, a cassation complaint to the Supreme Administrative Court, which Děti Země may yet choose to pursue. However, I would like to point out that one thing is the challenged course of the administrative procedure concerning the siting permit for the reservoir – specifically, the way Děti Země's comments were addressed in the challenged decision – and another matter is the actual content of those comments. What I can influence is how we work with these comments, regardless of the current ruling. That is why I met with Mr. Patrik from Děti Země to go over the comments. We agreed that we would work with them in the documentation for the project permit, or

subsequently in the construction procedure and the implementation of the construction. As for property settlement, we have reached an agreement on purchase terms with the majority of landowners. Expropriation is probable in only one case; we are continuing negotiations on two others, but we are already dealing with a very specific form of land acquisition. It is also worth mentioning that on 26 April, Nové Heřminovy held a referendum in which the citizens expressed their support for the construction of the reservoir and the associated flood protection measures in the village, effectively removing a long-standing obstacle to further negotiations. I am in close contact with the village management. We need a change to the local development plan, and we will begin preparing compensation measures for the village, the preparation of which was halted around 2010. We have already presented the proposed measures at a public hearing. We have also set up a joint working group involving representatives of the village, citizens and the designer to refine these measures and improve communication.

The last important point you highlighted upon taking up the position of Director General was the importance of effective communication with village and town authorities. How do you address misinformation in this context?

Yes, in my view, this is fundamental. It is not some superficial policy, but an absolutely key part of the company's operations that can save a great deal of complications, especially in times of crisis or when pushing through important projects. I will mention only the basic principle here, as the topic is very broad given the scope of the company's activities. It is important to realise that misinformation or incorrect information spreads very easily nowadays because it is often attractive either in form or content. If there is no intelligible and objective alternative, such information becomes the sole source for many and spreads quickly. Then all that remains is to defend oneself, which is usually a disadvantageous position, even though we have support in legislation, technical standards, or some kind of socio-cultural consensus. My goal is therefore to establish the level of information about the company's activities at a standard that will lead to a general awareness of what we do and how the population benefits from it in the long term. To gain public support, so that in times of crisis we have a foundation to build on and can rely on a certain level of understanding that things happen for a reason. I understand that this explanation is rather general, but from my previous experience with such ongoing campaigns, I know its value. We are currently developing this in more detail in the company's new communication strategy we are currently working on, which will help us both with targeting and with the main topics we want to communicate on an ongoing basis.

To conclude, could you share with our readers where you see your future involvement in water management?

That is not on my mind at the moment. Right now, I have only one ambition – to work with full commitment for the Povodí Odry, focusing on the tasks I have outlined in response to the previous questions. However, I believe water management must be systematically interconnected with broader environmental aspects, particularly in the context of climate change and other global challenges. Therefore, I consider it natural to continue developing and applying my existing experience and professional expertise in my field.

Mr. Birklen, thank you for taking the time to speak with us.

Ing. Josef Nistler

Mgr. Petr Birklen

Mgr. Petr Birklen was born on 27 October 1974 in Opava. After graduating from Mendel Grammar School in Opava, he studied at the Faculty of Science of the University of Ostrava and later at Palacký University in Olomouc, where he specialised in hydrobiology. After completing his studies, he worked for ten years in state nature conservation, where he held the position of head of the Nature Conservation Agency regional office in Ostrava, director of the Department of Landscape Management at the Ministry of the Environment, and later head of the Poodří PLA Administration. After leaving public administration, he served as Executive Director at Ekotoxa, s. r. o., and subsequently held a position on the board of the regional development agency MSID, a. s. He is the author and co-author of numerous projects focused on the sustainable use of the landscape and the impacts of climate change. Since 1 March 2025, he has been the Director General of the Povodí Odry, state enterprise. He currently lives in Ostrava, is married, and has two adult children.

