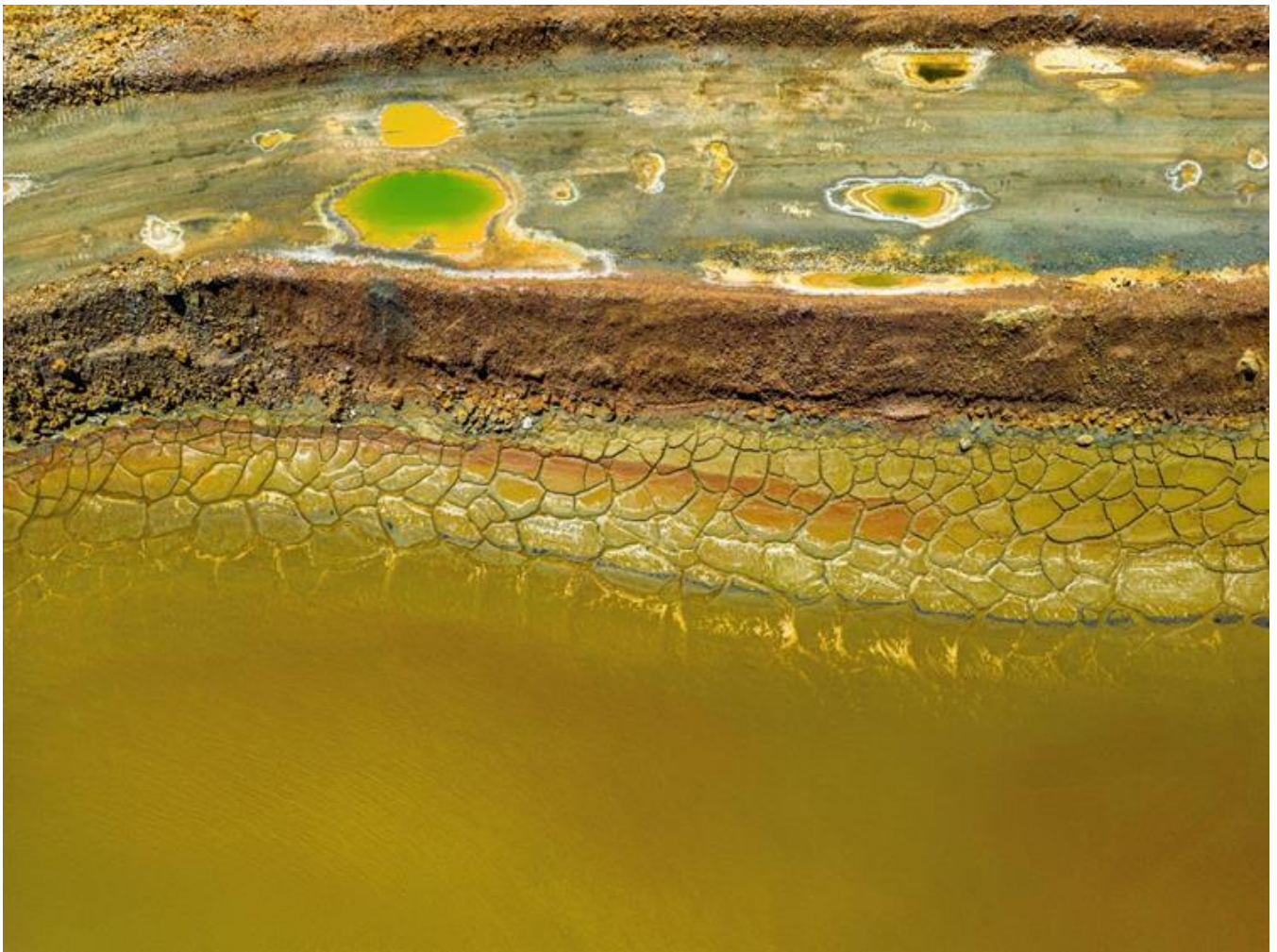


Member states set out negotiating position on critical raw materials

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03 Jul 2023

National capitals have reached a compromise on the Critical Raw Materials Act with a raised overall ambition, more flexible timelines for environmental impact assessments and a slightly broader list of materials covered.



An aerial view of the Gossan reservoir at the Rio Tinto mines, Huelva Province, Spain, June 2023. EU member states want to push for more domestic mining of critical raw materials. Photo: Octavio Passos/Getty Images





On Friday, the last day of the Swedish EU Council presidency, member states agreed on a ‘general approach’ on the European Commission’s proposal for new regulation aimed at safeguarding domestic supplies of critical raw materials.

The Council’s position on the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) raises the overall ambition for domestic processing of strategic raw materials by 10 percentage points to 50% of annual consumption by 2030. Member states will also seek to boost the recycling target to meet 20% of the EU’s annual needs for strategic raw materials, instead of the European Commission’s initial proposal of 15%, while maintaining the goal of mining 10% of annual consumption domestically by 2030.

In a statement, Ebba Busch, Sweden’s energy and industry minister, cautioned against a perceived over-reliance on “a few third countries” for the bloc’s material needs. “We want to recover our autonomy [by] extracting our minerals sustainably; recycling as much as we can and working in partnership with like-minded third countries,” she said.

But green campaigners were less ebullient about the boosted targets. “We are... concerned about the increase in metal production in Europe from 40% to 50%,” Michael Reckordt, from environmental campaign group PowerShift, wrote in an email exchange with ENDS Europe, referring to the domestic processing target. “Some countries might argue that this is a neo-colonial approach to keep commodity-exporting countries dependent,” he added.

The agreed Council position maintains the proposed maximum two-year delay for mining permits, alongside one year for recycling projects, but the Council adds a caveat in an amended recital. “The first two steps... within the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive... are often predominantly performed by the project promoter [and] as these steps also includes consultation with the public, which is directly linked to public acceptance, it is important that sufficient time is given,” the recital reads, while clarifying that these steps should not be part of the binding timelines for permits.

The additional time for environmental impact assessments was welcomed by PowerShift’s Reckordt. “It is good that the EU is giving member states and mining companies more time to carry out meaningful environmental impact assessments,” he said. “Nevertheless, there is a risk that mining will be seen as a priority interest over other legitimate interests such as water or forest protection.”

Reckordt also took issue with the continued emphasis on meeting current raw material needs. “The Council failed to improve Europe’s independence on raw material imports by continuing to treat sufficiency and reduction of consumption as a marginal issue,” he noted.

Member states are seeking to set an obligation on national capitals to support the development of projects tied to critical raw materials, instead of the Commission’s proposal for flexibility to allow national capitals to provide administrative support.

“The member state whose territory is concerned by a strategic project shall take measures to contribute to its timely and effective implementation,” reads an amendment to the ‘general approach’. However, another proposed amendment would allow member states to block the designation of projects as strategic for the purposes of the CRMA.

Alongside the stricter provision for ensuring “enabling conditions” for strategic projects, the Council position broadens the overall list of strategic raw materials by scrapping grade requirements for some minerals, including the Commission’s proposal to limit lithium and other prioritised materials to battery-grade only. It also adds bauxite and aluminium to the list of strategic materials.

Inclusion of the metal was welcomed by the aluminium industry. “Aluminium is one of those raw material industries that European cannot afford to lose, as it plays a vital role in various energy generation, transmission, and storage technologies, that make it a key element for the EU’s green transition,” said Paul Voss, director general at European Aluminium.

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