

## Kissing ODZ goodbye – 3



This illegal boathouse close to the Inland Sea at Dwejra was erected in less than a week in the summer of 2012. Why does Mepa tolerate it rather than demolish it outright?

This is the third and last article in a short series that sheds light on the implications of the proposed amendments to Outside Development Zone policies.

This article focuses on the expected proliferation of agricultural stores, slaughterhouses, greenhouses and pump rooms as a result of the proposed changes in ODZ policies. For instance, according to policy 2.3 (agricultural buildings for livestock farming), new or extensions to 'agricultural' buildings for livestock farming may be allowed in Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Areas of Ecological Importance (AEIs) (Level 1) as long as they fall within their 'boundary' (whatever that means), without specifying whether an extension will be permitted even on uncommitted land (such as garigue) owned by the applicant as long as the land falls within the 'boundary'.

There are no provisions for a waste management plan in the new policies. So a legitimate question arises here: will a condition be included for a permitted structure to be demolished if it is no longer in use, so as to avoid the proliferation of derelict buildings?

Policy 2.4 paves the way for slaughterhouses within the precincts of poultry and rabbit farms. The mind boggles as why this is necessary in the first place. What's wrong with farmers transporting their rabbits and chickens to centralised slaughterhouses, as is done now?



The 'owner' of this illegal two-storey 'boathouse' at Dwejra had the cheek to apply for its sanctioning. When this was refused, he appealed. The case is waiting to be heard.

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## *previous planning guidelines and regulations*

This policy would only be justifiable in the age of horse-drawn carriages and sloppy transport systems. The most debatable aspect of this policy is that it stipulates/imposes no restrictions on the sizes/dimensions of the same slaughterhouse, creating the umpteenth loophole and grey area.

Policy 2.5 refers to agricultural stores, and even contemplates the 'need' for cold storage facilities, which could easily be housed in an industrial area.

Are there any statistics that shed light on how many of these so-called 'agricultural stores' or 'tool rooms' are actually used for majjalati (suckling pig dinners), which have become the rage of late, many often against payment?

The maximum storage entitlement for farmers have been cranked up in the latest version of the ODZ policy proposals, such that a farmer with a holding (how will holdings be determined?) ranging between five and 18 tumoli is entitled to a storage room footprint of 30m<sup>2</sup>, while farmers with more than 18 tumoli of land are entitled to a maximum storage room footprint of 60m<sup>2</sup>. Such dimensions are gargantuan for ODZ areas.

As with other ODZ policy proposals in the document, the policy also completely omits to include buffer zones (Levels 2 and 3) where such development may not occur in the areas of conservation importance, such as AEIs and Sites of Scientific Importance (SSIs).

The same dubious policy stipulates that "permission may be granted for additional storage requirement (i.e. 10 per cent) for farmers on the basis of....". Along with a preceding policy in the document, the message this is trying to convey is plain and simple: one should apply for a particular footprint plus an additional 10 per cent, as this will be favourably considered.

The policy continues: "Structures should be made of recyclable material such as timber" – timber is completely extraneous to the Maltese rural landscape.

A further Achilles' heel of this flawed policy proposal is that the onus for enforcement has been placed on the Department of Agriculture, when monitoring of compliance falls squarely within the Malta Environment and Planning Authority's remit.

Policy 2.5B will usher in a way of sanctioning applications, since it contemplates the sanctioning of agricultural stores built before October 1994. By not pushing the benchmark back to 1967, as is done in most planning cases, this policy will simply invite a plethora of sanctioning applications.

Worst still, even illegally-constructed stores built between 1994 and 2008 will be considered for sanctioning by Mepa, effectively giving the green light for en masse sanctioning and condoning of illegalities.

Policy 2.6 concerns greenhouses, and it contemplates structures exceeding a height of 3.5 metres in cases of innovative new technology, completely skirting visual impact considerations.

But the most preposterous proposals are probably in policy 2.7, which concerns reservoirs and pump chambers. For instance, despite the commendable drive to increase the collection and use of surface water, provisions to ask farmers to use newly-constructed reservoirs for surface water collection have been completely removed from the latest ODZ policy proposals.

The policy states: "The authority will permit a pump chamber constructed in recycled stone which would serve an existing reservoir having a minimum volume of 30 cubic metres on land of one tumolo or more....". This will have very serious implications since it might lead to further land fragmentation to create justification for the new reservoir structure and pump room.

The proposed minimum volume of 30 cubic metres will not suffice to meet the irrigation demands for one year of one tumolo of land. Besides, 45 per cent of local agricultural land is not irrigated as it is used for fodder and depends only on precipitation (rain). In fact, according to reports on Malta by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), vineyards, orchards and summer vegetables need 550mm, 580mm and 470mm of irrigation.

There are at least 8,000 officially registered sources of groundwater so why do we need to legislate for a further proliferation of pump rooms in the countryside? These pump rooms will need an electricity supply, leading to the prospect of more overhead lines and similar infrastructure.

AFDS policy 2.6 introduces a blanket exclusion on reservoirs and pump chambers in designated and scheduled sites, both at protection levels 1 and 2. Structure Plan policy RCO 12 makes specific reference to Areas of Ecological Importance and SSIs and distinguishes between three different levels of protection in such sites, unlike the proposed ODZ policy

changes. As a result, the proposed changes to ODZ policies are a retrograde step, annulling in one fell swoop all that was achieved through previous planning guidelines and regulations.

Public submissions or representations in response to these proposals may be e-mailed to Mepa on [odzpolicies@mepa.org.mt](mailto:odzpolicies@mepa.org.mt) until Friday. Hopefully, the sobering scenarios depicted in this series of articles will nudge readers to make such a submission.

The unsightly mess around Inland Sea keeps growing

The top photo shows the latest addition to the (originally) illegal and (now) mostly sanctioned (in 2008) unsightly boathouses at Dwejra, Gozo, built in just a week in summer, 2012. Mepa allowed the 'owner' to rebuild the roof, but he then decided to rebuild the entire boathouse, claiming the structure had been accidentally damaged. Mepa has launched enforcement action.

The lower photo shows an unsightly two-storey boathouse just a stone's throw away. The 'owner' had the temerity to apply for its sanctioning and, when this was understandably refused, appealed the sentence. The case is waiting to be heard.

Nothing less than its complete demolition, a still fine to serve as a deterrent and the site's complete reinstatement is acceptable.

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