

ACCESS TO FACILITY-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION



AUSTRIA

This memo describes the European framework that applies to Austria as an EU Member State and in the final section discusses and links the country specific implementation of these requirements as well as national variations.

Environmental Information Directive

Austria is a Member of the European Union and has transposed the [Environmental Information Directive, Directive 2003/4/EC](#). This is a broad-based disclosure requirement that requires transparency for information about the environment.

“The directive defines “information relating to the environment” in a very broad manner, covering “any available information in written, visual, aural or data-base form on the state of water, air, soil, fauna, flora, land and natural sites and on activities or measures adversely affecting, or likely to affect these, and on activities or measures designed to protect these, including administrative measures and environmental management programmes.”¹

The exceptions where disclosure may be denied are actually fairly limited.² The exceptions include, however, criminal and disciplinary proceedings and proceedings by public authorities which are confidential under national law.³ This particular exception

¹ Resources for the Future, “Public Access to Environmental Information and Data,” 2001, p. 23.

² [Article 4](#): “2. Member States may provide for a request for environmental information to be refused if disclosure of the information would adversely affect: (a) the confidentiality of the proceedings of public authorities, where such confidentiality is provided for by law; (b) international relations, public security or national defence; (c) the course of justice, the ability of any person to receive a fair trial or the ability of a public authority to conduct an enquiry of a criminal or disciplinary nature; (d) the confidentiality of commercial or industrial information where such confidentiality is provided for by national or Community law to protect a legitimate economic interest, including the public interest in maintaining statistical confidentiality and tax secrecy; (e) intellectual property rights; (f) the confidentiality of personal data and/or files relating to a natural person where that person has not consented to the disclosure of the information to the public, where such confidentiality is provided for by national or Community law; (g) the interests or protection of any person who supplied the information requested on a voluntary basis without being under, or capable of being put under, a legal obligation to do so, unless that person has consented to the release of the information concerned; (h) the protection of the environment to which such information relates, such as the location of rare species.” (emphasis added).

³ There is no explicit authority to include administrative enforcement measures within this definition of exceptions. However, the European Court has ruled that proceedings with possible penalties may come within the exemption as to “secret” information involving internal preparation of a proceeding or decision.

varies widely by Member State in its implementation. Preliminary investigations can also be excluded. However, the Court of Justice for the European Union has indicated that the reason for confidentiality of certain public proceedings – even where set by national law – may not apply after the proceedings are resolved. See [Flachglas Torgau GmbH v Germany](#), C-204-09, February 14, 2012. Actions related to imminent threats to public health or the environment are also mandated for disclosure. See Article 7(4). The Aarhus Convention⁴ requires that the interest of disclosure of public proceedings must be balanced against the need for confidentiality in each case, so that a blanket exemption is not the intent of the EU Directive implementing the Convention.⁵ All restrictions on disclosure are discretionary with each Member State and national authorities are not necessarily compelled to have the same exemptions in their individual country's laws. See "National Law" section below.

European-Pollutant Release & Transfer Registry

In line with the Aarhus Convention and the EU EID, all emissions data must be publicly available. The EU also maintains the online European Pollutant Release and Transfer Registry or E-PRTR which requires by regulation ([Regulation EC No. 166/2006](#)) the reporting of releases – both accidental and deliberate – to the air, water or soil. E-PRTR searches can be done [online](#). The data base is about two years out of date, but it can be useful to identify past problems at facilities. Reports of discharges or releases from facilities are themselves not confidential under EU law and can also be readily obtained from each Member State.

National Law

This is transposed or adopted into national law by the Austrian Environmental Information Act (EIA), as amended on June 10, 2014. Available in German [here](#). Austria has a very broad access law. The exceptions to disclosure are narrow and would only preclude trade secrets of the company (EIA, Section 7) or internal deliberations of the government authority (EIA, Section 6(1)) especially "unfinished" documents. Mere embarrassment or damage to reputation of a company is not sufficient reason for nondisclosure ([EIA, Sec. 6\(3\)](#)). Section 9A established National Pollutant Release and

See [Mecklenburg v. Pinneberg](#), C-321-96, 1998 ECRI 3809, 3835. After the matter is resolved by officials, the reason for the exemption is arguably no longer valid. See [Flachglas Torgau](#), supra.

⁴ The [Aarhus Convention](#) on access to justice in environmental matters also has relevant disclosure requirements. The objective is the right to participate in environmental decision-making and the information covered includes administrative measures by public authorities affecting the environment. See Article 2 (definitions). Most of this convention has been incorporated into the Environmental Information Directive at this point.

⁵ See Dirk Bunker, DEFICITS IN US AND EU MANDATORY ENVIRONMENTAL DISCLOSURE, (Springer 2011), p. 141.

Transfer Registers searchable by “the owner or operator of the facility and, where appropriate, the parent company” among other terms. The register even includes “off-site transfers of waste and, where appropriate, the destination of the shipment of waste.” Id.

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