Environmental policy

An environmental policy is a set of fundamental principles and objectives which helps an organisation to put its environmental commitment into practice. It is the foundation upon which improvement of environmental performance and an EMS can be built.

The environmental policy is the basis for any organisation's EMS.
- It is the policy that establishes the objectives against which an EMS will be judged.
- It sets both long term and short term strategies, it defines the direction in which the EMS is supposed to go.
- The policy should create a vision for everybody working in the organisation. Since the policy can greatly influence an organisation's public image, it should be clear, understandable and verifiable
- The policy should relate to products and services, as well as supporting activities.
- The results of a preliminary review and the analysis of the environmental aspects of products, services and activities need to be considered before finalizing the policy.
- This may give insights on how the organisation interacts with the environment and how well environmental challenges are being met. For example, information obtained during the preliminary review might help define specific policy commitments.

ISO 14001 is an international standard for EMS that sets criteria for formulating an environmental policy and environmental objectives while taking into account environmental impacts and compliance with applicable environmental legislation.

The standard only applies to those environmental aspects the organisation can control and over which it can have an influence. Environmental criteria themselves are not specified in the standard. There are no normative references. What is required is that the implementation of ISO 14001 is embedded in a process of continuous improvement. The most important ISO 14001 policy requirement is the support of top management. The policy sets the tone for the establishment of the principles of an EMS. It is the policy that sets environmental targets and objectives, distributes responsibilities and establishes milestones in EMS development against which the management system must be judged. It is top management that is responsible for initiating the environmental policy and for providing resources and directions for others who may have the task to develop the final policy
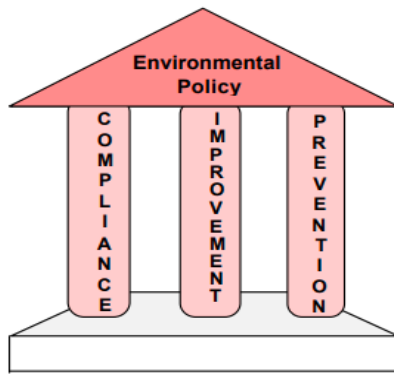
The policy should reflect the following issues:

- Reflect the moral and ethical basis for the organisation's action.
- Account for regulatory/self-imposed requirements.
- Stress commitment to continuous improvement.
- Provide coordination to other organisational policies.
- Provide attachments to requirements, internally and externally alike.
- Be appropriate to the organisation's products and services as they impact the environment.
- Be clear, concise and implemented at all levels of operations.
- Be publicly available.
- Strive toward prevention and continuous reduction of adverse environmental effects, thus supporting sustainable development.

- Set and allow for publication of environmental objectives and targets, improvement plans and management reviews.
- Satisfy the requirements of third parties concerned such as insurance organisations, banks, shareholders etc.
- Be updated and checked routinely

There are several things that need to be considered when an environmental policy is developed. The overall goal is to keep the policy as simple as possible. It is meant as a rough guideline, and how the objectives are met are dealt with in detail in the environmental programmes. The policy should nevertheless not be too general in nature. On the contrary it should reflect specific company characteristics and be related to the products and services the organisation offers. A good approach is always employee participation. If all employees have the chance to participate they will more likely identify with the policy. The policy can also be integrated into other documents that are part of other management systems (see section 7.3. "Integrated Management Systems, IMS"). Once the policy has been prepared it needs to be communicated to the employees and stakeholders of the organisation. Communicating the policy involves making it available to the public, which is compulsory for organisations that seek EMS certification.

The key areas the environmental policy has to cover according to ISO 14001 are:
- Compliance with environmental laws and regulations.
- Pollution prevention.
- Continuous improvement [ISO 14001, section 4.2 and Annex A 2].

Three Pillars of an Environmental Policy