

October 10 2022

Harmonisation of building and real estate labels to achieve energy and climate targets

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Introduction

The ultimate aim of building labels Minergie, Der Gebäudeenergieausweis der Kantone (GEAK), Swiss Sustainable Building Standard (SNBS) Hochbau and 2000-Watt-Areal is to contribute to the goals of Switzerland's energy and climate policy and the Sustainable Development Strategy. On 17 March 2022, this "building label family" and the Swiss Federal Office of Energy (SFOE) concluded a contract to define the framework for their future cooperation. This will involve the harmonisation of building labels to help achieve Switzerland's energy and climate targets.

Background

The Swiss buildings stock consumes approximately 100 terawatt hours or 45% of the total end energy demand in Switzerland. Buildings also account for about one third of Switzerland's carbon dioxide emissions.

The Energy Strategy 2050 (Switzerland's new energy policy) targets a reduction of the consumption of the Swiss building stock by half, to approximately 55 terawatt hours, by 2050. In addition, to achieve the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement, the Federal Council has decided to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to net zero by 2050.

Exploiting the still large potential for energy savings and emissions reduction in the building sector is of great importance to the national economy. The building sector is significantly responsible for the consumption of material resources, the volume of waste and the environmental impact of society.

The federal government, the cantons, private associations and the industry have developed and supported numerous labels to achieve the reduction targets. By harmonisation and pooling of resources in the building label family, the impact of the labels will be significantly strengthened.

Labels for realisation of sustainable construction

Building labels simplify planning of energy-efficient, climate-friendly buildings and provide specific requirements and guidance for new constructions and renovations. Also, they make energy and climate aspects measurable and comparable.

When choosing the appropriate standard, questions arise as to:

- which label fits the planned project best;
- which aspects of sustainability it covers;
- what relevance the label has for Switzerland;
- how well it fits the construction and subsequent operation of a building; and
- whether a label or certificate will be used at all or whether the standard will "only" be used for self-assessment in sustainable construction.

The certification by a label is voluntary and goes further than the cantonal energy laws require. There is a wide range of labels, which differ in their characteristics, focus and their calculation factors. Thus, there is something suitable for every building project, but it is difficult to find what suits best due to the present lack of clarity. The following labels, certificates and guidelines have been used in Switzerland most frequently:

- EAK/GEAK Plus;
- Gutes Innenraumklima;
- ECO-BKP Merkblätter ökologisches Bauen;
- Minergie (-P/-A);
- Minergie (-P/-A)-ECO;
- SIA Merkblatt 2040, SIA-Effizienzpfad Energie;
- Energiestadt;
- 2000-Watt-Areale;
- DGNB (SGNI) für Neubau Stadtquartiere;

- DGNB (SGNI) für Gebäude; and
- Standard SNBS (Standard Nachhaltiges Bauen Schweiz) Hochbau.

The "building label family" of the Swiss Federal Office of Energy's vision for the Swiss Building Stock 2050 involve the labels Minergie , GEAK, SNBS Hochbau and 2000-Watt-Areale:

- The Minergie association has been defining Swiss standards for efficient and comfortable buildings since 1998 in close coordination with the federal government, the cantons and the business community. Minergie's main concern is energy-efficient construction. The three basic standards Minergie, Minergie-P and Minergie-A can be combined with the energy company obligation supplement for ecological and healthy construction. MQS products are available for the construction and operation phases. By Spring 2022, 53,500 properties had received a Minergie certificate.
- The SNBS label is the first Swiss standard to cover all aspects of sustainability. It covers the building itself and the site in the context of its environment. It enables the needs of society, the economy and the environment to be taken into account as equally and as comprehensively as possible in planning, construction and operation. The prerequisite for this is a view of the entire life cycle of a property. By the end of 2019, over 380 buildings had been constructed in accordance with SNBS building construction and eight buildings had been certified.
- The GEAK is not a label, but the building energy certificate of the cantons, which – in accordance with the Swiss Energy Act – evaluates the quality of the building facade and the overall energy efficiency of the building technology. It thus records the actual condition of a building and serves as a basis for planning a renovation. By the end of 2019, more than 80,000 GEAK certificates, 28,000 of which with an advisory report (or GEAK Plus), had been issued.
- The 2000-Watt-Areal certifies not just one building but a whole area as climate-friendly and energy-efficient. It stands for sustainable mobility, an attractive living environment and high-quality buildings. The certificate evaluates the entire development process from construction to operation. It is based on the core idea of an ongoing evaluation of the energy sustainability of sites and also takes mobility into account. At the beginning of 2020, 33 sites throughout Switzerland were certified.

A certain relationship between the labels already exists, given that GEAK and SNBS are supervised by the Minergie office. In the future, however, the cooperation is to be intensified.

Harmonisation of labels

The three associations GEAK, Minergie and Sustainable Construction Network Switzerland as well as the SFOE have in 2020 agreed to cooperate. They aim at simple, marketable labels of high quality, the exploitation of synergies and the reduction of redundancies. The participating associations and organisations thus signed a joint declaration of intent at the end of April 2020. This declaration contained the following key points:

- The labels contribute as much as possible to the goals of the energy and climate policy as well as the sustainable development strategy.
- The labels are to be in greater demand and become self-sustaining business models.
- The well-known and successful brands will continue in the market.
- The labels are to be positioned transparently, clearly differentiated from one another, modular in structure and simply designed from the market's point of view.
- The calculations of the labels are to be harmonised.
- The provision of services will be coordinated and aligned with market needs.
- Services, such as administration, communication and marketing, certification, quality assurance, training and further education are to be provided as joint services.
- The possibilities of digitalisation are to be used more intensively.

These aims have been specified in the contract which the sponsoring organisations and the SFOE signed on 17 March 2022.

The cooperation also entails a redesign and harmonisation of the labels. In the future, the focus will be on two labels each for buildings and sites plus the building energy certificate:

- The 2000-Watt-Areal will be replaced by the Minergie-Areal and the SNBS-Areal. The former will focus on the classic Minergie themes such as climate protection, energy efficiency, adaptation to climate change and quality of life, and the latter on a more comprehensive definition of sustainability, including socio-economic aspects. The 2000-Watt-Areal will no longer be available after 31 December 2023. For existing 2000-Watt sites or those on the way to certification or re-certification, the new labels will offer a follow-up solution.
- The existing categories of the Minergie labels (Minergie, Minergie-P, Minergie-A, Minergie-ECO, Minergie-P-ECO and Minergie -A-ECO) will continue to be available.
- The GEAK will remain and constitute the basis for the calculation and balancing methodology of all labels.

In the future, only one operating organisation will be responsible for certification, quality assurance and communication. The energy and climate calculations of the building labels will be harmonised (eg, only one system for weighting factors). Moreover, a superordinate coordination body of the labels and the (SFOE) will be established and the contact person for customers and organisations will be clearly defined.

Comment

Sustainable real estate makes a major contribution to climate protection. Whereas the trend is positive, the potential is currently far from being exhausted. Through the planned harmonisation of the building labels, it is possible to achieve a much greater impact. The labels will complement each other and will be better coordinated with each other. This will allow building owners and planners to easily orient themselves as to which label best meets their needs.

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