

National Ecological Network - Impact Assessment 2009

In this Impact Assessment we look at the follow-up to the conclusions and recommendations we made in our report on the National Ecological Network (EHS) in 2006. We had concluded that government policy was being implemented too slowly to protect the endangered biodiversity of the Netherlands by means of a coherent network of protected nature areas. The EHS is being created in three ways:

1. by purchasing land and developing it for nature;
2. by concluding agreements with private parties who develop their land for nature (private nature management);
3. by granting subsidies to farmers so that they manage their land in an environmentally friendly manner (agri-environmental schemes).

In our Impact Assessment, we conclude that policy steering has improved since 2006. The speed at which policy is being implemented, however, is still not high enough to achieve the goal of developing 275,000 hectares of new EHS by 2018. The speed has actually declined in the past three years: from an average of 7,000 hectares of nature area per annum in 1990-2004 to less than 5,000 hectares per annum in 2005-2007. At the end of 2007, 44% of the EHS was complete, including areas managed by farmers outside the EHS (31% without these areas). The area managed by farmers declined in 2007. Furthermore, private parties are not willing to develop that part of the EHS designated for private nature management. The Court of Audit also found that a lot of land had been purchased for new nature areas (35,000 hectares) but it has not yet been developed. We also concluded that appropriate assurances could not be given on the quality of the data presented in the first progress report, although it was better than that presented in previous reports issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality.

Government planning policy is now clearer and the EHS is better protected but policy implementation in the provinces' spatial plans and the municipalities' development plans is still inadequate.

Our Impact Assessment therefore recommends that the Minister continue the improvements already in train. The speed of implementation must be increased considerably if the EHS goals are to be achieved by 2018. We again underline the importance of the recommendations we made in 2006:

- Ensure that central government and provincial decisions are guided by considerations of which manager will achieve the required nature goals at the intended EHS location the most effectively and at the lowest cost.
- Ensure that provinces make more effective use of agri-environmental schemes by defining areas managed by farmers more compactly in provincial area plans.
- Study the opportunities available to increase the continuity of agri-environmental management schemes.

The Court of Audit also recommends that the Minister and the provinces make clear agreements as soon as possible on accountability for the rural investment budget that the provinces receive to implement EHS policy. The Court of Audit further recommends

that clarification be provided on which areas are or should be part of the EHS by posting digital maps on the internet. The Minister will study the feasibility of this recommendation.