

Performance Audit: Safeguarding Malta's Groundwater

The Auditor General concluded that the prevailing and climate change threats to groundwater have generally been identified. The performance audit report: Safeguarding Malta's Groundwater concluded that although the implementation of various initiatives have commenced, efforts must be stepped up to ensure the sustainability of this resource.

The risks and vulnerability assessments undertaken classified the overall status of Maltese groundwater bodies as being 'at risk'. These assessments attributed this status to excessive over abstraction as well as high nitrates and chlorides levels. These assessments were based on a number of assumptions, due to limited groundwater abstraction data.

The groundwater regulatory framework is mainly reflected in the four key documents, 'A Proposal for a Water Policy for the Maltese Islands' (Water Policy), the 'National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy' (NCCAS), 'The Water Catchment Management Plan for the Maltese Islands' (WCMP), and the 'Nitrates Action Programme' (NAP). Significant progress has been registered in the implementation of measures listed in the WCMP, and to a lesser extent, in the NAP. However, the Water Policy is still in draft form and the NCCAS has only recently been officially approved by Cabinet and is awaiting Parliamentary discussion. Although a number of measures listed in these two documents are being implemented through other plans, a number of initiatives remain outstanding awaiting their formal adoption.

Legal and technical complexities hindered the implementation of groundwater metering. This measure is considered critical for providing groundwater abstraction information and for control purposes. The installation of meters has progressed significantly in the commercial sector but that related to agricultural sources has been re-scheduled for completion by mid-2013. Thus for the time being, groundwater metering in terms of L.N. 241 of 2010 cannot proceed.

Generally, enforcement of the EU obligatory NAP has been limited to measures listed in the 2004 programme rather than extended to encompass the initiatives included in the revised and updated version published in 2011. Although the use of nitrates has recently been legally regulated, the relative enforcement is not proceeding since the farming community is deemed not to be fully aware of its NAP obligations.

The current status of Malta's groundwater implies that over time the regulation of this resource was not appropriate. The status of groundwater can be improved and sustained through long-term investment which necessitates that current cross-sectoral efforts are sustained and augmented.