



Only 40% of waterways are in a good ecological state – rehabilitation experiences delays

03.05.2019 - The Austrian Court of Audit submits report on the greening of waterways



While almost all Austrian waterways reach at least a good chemical state, only 40% of waterways are found to be in a good ecological state or show good ecological potential. Salzburg and Tyrol are above Austrian average and reach 59 and 57 per cent respectively. In Lower Austria and Styria, merely 31 and 34 per cent of waterways are in a good ecological state respectively. This was revealed by the Austrian Court of Audit's report on "The Greening of Waterways, Second Rehabilitation Period" published on 3 May 2019.

Second Rehabilitation Period" published on 3 May 2019.

From September to November 2017, the Austrian Court of Audit (ACA) carried out an audit at the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management and in the provinces of Lower Austria, Salzburg, Styria and Tyrol with regard to the implementation of the Water Framework Directive concerning the greening of waterways during the second rehabilitation period from 2016 to 2021.

Only 11 per cent of the required funds were invested

About two years after the end of the first rehabilitation period (2009 to 2015), the relevant stakeholders had not yet established passability in many large watercourses. It was already in the course of previous audits in 2012 and 2015 that the ACA had criticized that the objectives of the Water Framework Directive cannot be reached.

The ACA also questions the timely implementation of the measures intended for the second rehabilitation period. The National Water Management Plan 2015 [Nationaler Gewässerbewirtschaftungsplan 2015], which lays down the rehabilitation strategies of the second rehabilitation period, was published by the ministry 19 months too late. Since the Federation had not provided for any additional funds, the audited provinces had not taken any of the measures laid down in the National Water Management Plan 2015 in October 2017.

According to the ministry's estimates in the National Water Management Plan 2009, the costs incurred for meeting the objectives set for Austrian watercourses would amount to EUR three billion. In the first rehabilitation period, only a small amount of the overall costs – namely 11 per cent or EUR 339.32 million – were spent for the greening of watercourses.

Already half of the time left for reaching the targets of the Water Framework Directive until 2027 had passed in the course of the first rehabilitation period. However, 89 per cent of the overall investment needs were still outstanding.

The required funds must be covered

In order to be able to fulfil the existing obligations under the Water Framework Directive, the ACA recommended to the Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism to reach an agreement with the Federal Ministry of Finance on the required funds and the ways to cover them.

Restoration of lost habitats

The Water Framework Directive entered into force in 2000. It is based on the fundamental principle of preventing the further deterioration of waters and to improve the waters that were found to be in a poor state by 2015 or, with exceptions, by 2027. According to the plan, the restoration of the passability of waters for fish should be completed in the first rehabilitation period. This is the requirement for safeguarding stable fish populations. By way of so-called morphological improvements the water structure is to be improved. This can be achieved if e.g. bank embankment constructions are removed and local rivers are expanded or connected with their tributaries.

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From September to November 2017, the Austrian Court of Audit (ACA) carried out an audit of the greening of waterways during the second rehabilitation period from 2016 to 2021. The audit focused on the strategic provisions of the ministry responsible for water management (formerly the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, which has become the Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism in early 2018) as laid down in the National Water Management Plan 2015 (Nationaler Gewässerbewirtschaftungsplan 2015), its implementation in the provinces of Lower Austria, Salzburg, Styria and Tyrol and its funding. Furthermore, the ACA assessed the results of the first rehabilitation period from 2009 to 2015 against the provisions of the National Water Management Plan 2009. The audited period essentially spanned the years from 2011 through 2017.

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Recommendations

- (1)** The Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism should regularly coordinate, in consultation with the provinces, the progress of the project and present it in a uniform manner. The assessment should focus on the constructional realisation of the measures taken.

- (2)** In order to be able to fulfil the existing obligations under the Water Framework Directive, the Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism and the Federal Ministry of Finance should reach an agreement on the required funds and the ways to cover them.

- (3)** The provinces should promote the drafting and issuing of rehabilitation ordinances for the second rehabilitation period or initiate procedures according to section 21a of the Water Rights Act 1959 (Wasserrechtsgesetz 1959).

