

Safeguarding Malta's Groundwater (Follow-Up)

The conservation, preservation and sustainable use of ground water is a complex, highly technical and financially material endeavour. The economic and social benefits related to groundwater sustainability were the drivers for this follow-up audit. Within this context, this follow-up audit acknowledges that initiatives taken in this area will bear fruit in the long-term, in particular due to the long natural response times of these natural underground systems. Furthermore, it is also acknowledged that the national policy objective established under the 2nd WCMP has committed to achieve good groundwater quantitative status in all bodies of groundwater by 2021. Nonetheless, it remains critical that the competent national authorities implement programmes to reverse the '*at risk status*' of Malta's groundwater expediently and effectively.

Since the NAO's 2012 report, in accordance with good governance practices, EWA and the MRA now have separate and distinct roles, which are intended to minimise the risks of conflict of interests while clearly delineating the roles and responsibilities of the implementor and regulator respectively. Substantial progress has also been registered in beefing up EWA's administrative capacity which enabled this agency to assess more accurately the status of Malta's ground water, collate ground water replenishment and usage data. Additionally, there is now a higher degree of fiscal motivation to minimise and shift from using ground water to New water within the agriculture industry. Progress and preparatory work are also among the more important initiatives for the implementation of the 2nd WMCP. Moreover, national competent authorities secured funds to co-finance groundwater related projects through EU programmes.

While it is commendable that the initiatives referred in the preceding paragraph have commenced, most have not yet been concluded. This is understandable when the projects are of a long-term nature. However, in many instances, valuable time has elapsed prior to the start of implementation of the NAO's proposals. These delays were mainly due to the lengthy application processes for securing substantial EU Funds. Another contributory factor to lead times concerned the vetting of major EU projects. Moreover, enforcement is still a weak link as a comprehensive framework remains lacking and spot-checks still predominantly focus on a segment of potential risks to Malta's groundwater. However, NAO acknowledges that in the coming years, the €7 million monitoring project will provide new tools to the involved public agencies to broaden groundwater monitoring structures.