



MINISTER
FOR AGRICULTURE AND FOREIGN TRADE

EU-Commissioner Potočník

The Hague, 13 April 2012

Dear Commissioner Potočník,

In response to your letter of 13 October 2011, the Dutch government informed you of the measures that would be taken for the restoration of nature in the Western Scheldt in a letter of 20 January 2012. As a result of this correspondence, discussions were held with the European Commission on 16 February 2012, followed by further discussions at official level.

The Dutch government is fully aware of its obligations under the European Birds and Habitats Directives, and will base measures for the restoration of nature in the Western Scheldt on these Directives. Furthermore, the 2010 Development Plan for the restoration of nature in the Western Scheldt was elaborated with these obligations in mind. The objectives put forward in the Development Plan – safety, accessibility and naturalness – were endorsed by the Dutch government. It was agreed that 600 hectares of estuarine nature would be developed in the Dutch part of the Western Scheldt. The measures described below relate to almost 300 hectares of estuarine nature that will be created under the responsibility of the national government.

The creation of a total of 600 hectares of estuarine nature in the Western Scheldt will stop the further deterioration of the estuary and will offer a sustainable and robust basis on which to further improve the quality of estuarine nature in the Western Scheldt in the future. Measures for further improving the quality will be described in the Natura 2000 management plan. This plan will be determined by the end of 2012.

Proposed measures

To halt the further deterioration of the estuarine quality of the Western Scheldt, the Netherlands will implement the following measures:

- depolderisation and creation of 125 hectares of estuarine nature in the Welzinge polder and an area of the Schorer polder;
- depolderisation and creation of 100 hectares of estuarine nature in the Hedwige polder;
- depolderisation and creation of 65 hectares of estuarine nature in Appelzak location;
- creating a connection between the Verdrongen Land van Saeftinghe and the Sieperdaschor/estuarine nature in the Hedwige polder through the partial removal of the Gasdam. There will be a significant qualitative improvement in estuarine nature due to the creation of a natural connection between the abovementioned areas. This measure will also result in the creation of 5 hectares of estuarine nature outside the dykes.



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The aforementioned measures will entail depolderisation and the creation of 295 hectares of estuarine nature. The Dutch government will set up an independent committee headed by an independent chairperson and comprising Dutch and international scientists and stakeholders, including representatives of NGOs, and other civil society organisations and competent public authorities. This committee will oversee the implementation of the measures in addition to the natural benefits that will materialise over the coming years. The Dutch government will of course provide you with periodic reports to inform you of the committee's findings.

Scientific Basis

The abovementioned measures have been developed according to a sound scientific basis. A general analysis of the quality of the estuary and possible solutions to halt the continuing deterioration of estuarine nature in the Western Scheldt are described in a report prepared by the specialist knowledge institute Deltares, as well as in the recommendations and reports referred to therein. The scientific quality of this report was endorsed by three independent international experts. The European Commission was informed of this by the Dutch government in letters dated 20 January 2012 and 6 February 2012.

The Dutch government has also verified the sound scientific basis of the abovementioned measures. Deltares concludes: *All locations inside the dikes are a process focused measure. Process focused measures create space for hydro-morphological processes so that ecotopes can develop naturally and contribute to large-scale process restoration (depending upon extend and location of surface expansion). Locations inside the dike where the full tide has access (i.e. no limited or controlled tide), contribute 100% to the task of nature restoration. This statement has been underlying all previous research and studies and is subject to scientific unanimity.*

The Dutch government would also like to emphasize several key findings of the Deltares report with regard to specific areas. Deltares drew the following conclusion with regard to the development of estuarine nature in the Hedwige polder: *Based on all research carried out on the Hertogin Hedwige polder, it can be concluded without doubt that every hectare of the Hertogin Hedwige polder that is converted to estuarine nature, contributes 100% to the task of nature restoration in the Western Scheldt. A part of 100 ha that is connected to the Sieperda salt marsh in the north-west and to the Prosper polder in the south-east will thus be part of a greater added ecological value.*

Deltares makes the following assessment for the Appelzak location (65 hectares): *As the current intertidal area outside the dikes is characterised as low dynamic, the flooded Appelzak location is expected to develop into a low-dynamic intertidal area as well. Pioneer vegetation would be expected to establish itself alongside the dike, followed by salt marsh vegetation. In time, this could lead to the development of a broad transition zone extending from the channel to the salt marsh.*

The partial removal of the Gasdam, which will create a natural connecting zone between the Verdrongen Land van Saeftinghe, the Sieperdaschor and the estuarine nature in the Hedwige polder, can be seen as making a significant contribution to improving the quality of the individual elements covered by the measures.



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Deltares makes the following assessment: *Partial removal of the Gasdam will contribute to nature restoration in two ways. At the location of the Gasdam, estuarine nature will develop. Also, the removal will create a direct connection between the Saeftinghe and Sieperda marshes and further to the small Hedwige and Prosper. A connection that is now absent. Water, sediment and flora (e.g. seeds) and fauna can be transported or migrate through the opening.* The Welzinge and Schorer polder were already identified in the aforementioned Deltares report as useful measures for process-based restoration, which will also stimulate the estuarine character of the Western Scheldt.

The comprehensive scientific analysis of measures that was carried out by Deltares is enclosed with this letter.

Single package of measures

The Dutch government will implement the above measures as one coherent package as soon as possible. The measures will no longer be implemented in phases, whereby a subsequent phase is dependent on the results of a preceding stage. This will also have the benefit of expediting implementation.

There will be considerably more space for the estuary as a result of the process-oriented measures in the package, and this will ensure that natural processes have the opportunity and space to develop, thus allowing the characteristic nature of the estuary to develop.

The measures taken by the Dutch government will also ensure the creation of coherent, contiguous estuarine areas in the Western Scheldt. The partial removal of the Gasdam (500 meter) to the extent that the pipeline will be put underground, will ensure that a robust and sustainable estuarine corridor is created between the estuarine nature that will be created in the Hedwige polder, the adjacent Sieperdaschor and the Verdrongen Land van Saeftinghe. These areas on Dutch territory will be integrally connected to the Prosper polder, that will be depolderised, on Belgian territory. The approach to the Appelzak location on the opposite side will mean that both sides of this crucial part of the Western Scheldt estuary will have the necessary space to allow development of estuarine nature. Moreover, the multichannel system at this location will remain intact and shipping will not be affected.

Where possible, the Dutch government will in addition to the package, implement measures outside the dykes to halt the further deterioration of the estuarine quality of the Western Scheldt. These measures relate to the locations of Slikken van Hulst and Platen van Ossensisse. The possible development of these areas will provide an initial impetus for the further improvement of the quality of nature in the estuary for the longer term. Scientific research and argumentation into optimally effective development of these sites already commenced at the beginning of the year and will continue.

Implementation: timeframe and financing

The land required for the development of the locations inside the dykes will be acquired as soon as possible so work can commence without delay. The Dutch government will start the implementation this year and by the end of 2016, or earlier if possible, the implementation will be completed.



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As mentioned, studies have already commenced into the most effective approach for certain locations outside the dykes which in the longer term will make a significant contribution to improving the estuarine quality.

A budget of 190 million Euros has been earmarked for the purposes of implementing these measures.

Finally

By presenting this robust package of measures –which supersede the measures presented earlier to the European Commission by the Dutch government – we would like to emphasise the importance we attach to taking a serious approach to nature restoration in the Western Scheldt. On this basis, the Dutch government will see to it that these measures are implemented as soon as possible in order to halt the further deterioration of the Western Scheldt and to improve the quality of the estuary.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'H' and 'B' followed by a long horizontal line.

dr. Henk Bleker