

Drought

The Netherlands is ripe for 'land consolidation 2.0'

The current drought is alarming. But at other times, heavy rainfall causes major problems. The solution to the two problems is the same, says aquatic ecologist Piet Verdon-schot. 'Flooding and drought are two sides of the same coin: it's all about retaining the water longer in all the watercourses of the system'

Traditionally, the Netherlands has mainly battled with a surplus of water. Water always had to be drained as quickly as possible - to keep our feet dry, but more particularly for agriculture. Verdon-schot: 'We have built an entire system. We started with canalization to drain off water quickly. When that went too fast, we built weirs to regulate the discharge.'

'Because agriculture began to use heavier and heavier machinery,' Verdon-schot continues, 'the water table had to be lowered. Locally, it was lowered even more for the cultivation of certain crops. And when shortages arose, water was pumped in from the major rivers. Water from the Maas keeps the whole of eastern Brabant and central Limburg irrigated, and water from the IJssel even supplies the eastern Netherlands!'

House of cards

In effect, a house of cards has been built, in Verdon-schot's opinion. And that house of cards is now col-lapsing. 'The hot summers mean that much more water evaporates, and there is much less precipitation. And when it does rain, it does so over a very short period of time, so that it runs off and evaporates quickly. On top of that, due to climate change, the supply of water via the large rivers is now stagnating.

'We have built a house of cards and now it is collapsing'

Little supply and no reserves: that results in a shortage. It's only logical.' And the solution is equally logical, according to the ecologist: the 'massive drain-age of the landscape' must be reversed. 'In my view, many of the ditches and gullies should simply be filled in, because we don't need them. The same goes for the thousands of kilometres of ditches in the woods. The Netherlands must be redesigned. We are on the eve of "land consolidation 2.0"'



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But this must be an 'integrated comprehensive land con-solidation', says Verdon-schot. 'And this time not just for agriculture, but taking all functions into account, includ-ing water quality, recreation, urban development, nature and so on. And under the strict condition that water gets precedence in land use planning. Function follows water, not the other way round, as has always been the doctrine of the water boards. Building with nature, giving priority to the subsoil for water retention, the valleys and streams for water storage, and the changing climate.'

Agriculture

In this scenario, the farmers will have to make a lot of concessions. 'Agriculture has got to change radically, but we don't need to have that discussion any more, surely,' says Verdon-schot defiantly. 'After the Second World War, the landscape was designed in the interests of agriculture. The aim was: no hunger ever again. But now we must move towards a new realism, and realize that a sustainable world and a sustainable food supply call for a new system.'

To say that this message does not go down well with farmers would be an understatement. But according to Verdon-schot, they too will have to be part of the new reality and the irreversible changes that are taking place. 'We have 52,000 farmers in this country, 2,500 of whom are organic. Three quarters of the remaining farmers see that things have to change. Should the remaining 10,000 plus farmers get to decide for 17 million people what should happen in this country?' RK