

Nitrogen

Internal dialogue was intense too

Frustration, grief and deep-rooted concerns. Less than a week after farmers and members of the public had a 'good conversation', Impulse once again formed the backdrop for a dialogue about nitrogen. This time for WUR employees, so that pressing issues that can divide us are discussed amongst ourselves as well. It was an intense discussion.

'One of the issues that came up was the qualms people have about WUR's position in the political and public debate on nitrogen. Several scientists said they feel very committed to the nitrogen issue and proud to be able to contribute to finding the much-needed answers. But isn't WUR being too hesitant about offering its expertise and insights? 'We have been doing so much research for so long. We know more or less what the solutions are. Why aren't we much more assertive in communicating that knowledge across?' a researcher wondered.

Not everyone thought WUR was too quiet. 'Broadcasting is only useful if people are willing to listen. As scientists, we contribute knowledge. It is up to politicians and the market to decide what the consequences should be.' And another consideration: 'I am deliberately cautious about what I share. I try to keep emotions and judgements out of it so that we don't get tractors thundering across the campus or turning up at scientists' homes.'

'The situation is dramatic. But for a scientist, it's still worth getting up for in the mornings'

Suspicion

Of course, there was also some discussion about the common allegation that WUR is not impartial. Depending on who you talk to, WUR is seen as too pro-government, pro-farmers, or pro-nature. This often affects individual researchers. 'I consider myself and my work as pretty pro-farmers. And yet, being a Wageningen researcher, I get called out for not flying an upside-down Dutch flag in solidarity at home,' said a Livestock



Names are withheld due to the explosive nature of the subject
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researcher. Conversely, those working in the ecological and organic domain find themselves being treated with suspicion due to the alleged close ties between WUR and the agro-industry.

And that hurts, particularly when it concerns nitrogen. 'It distracts us from what's important, while the Netherlands is hurtling towards a future we really do not want,' said one researcher emphatically. 'As far as nature is concerned, we are past the eleventh hour,' agreed a colleague vehemently. And someone else chipped in: 'The destruction of nature really saddens me. But I also understand the desperation of the farmers.'

Polemic

So can we escape the deadlock? The Impulse group was doubtful. 'I'm afraid the polemic will first get even more intense, until the situation is so hopeless that there is no alternative but to come closer together. To quote Einstein: problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that caused them.'

The dialogue will be continued on 27 September and 26 October, with a more in-depth discussion of the possibilities for action. Because these must exist, despite the worried tone that dominated this session. As one participant said: 'The situation is dramatic. But, as a scientist, I still consider it worth getting out of bed for every morning.' ME