

Scenario study on agriculture's PROVINCIAL PUZZLE

What needs to be done at the provincial level to achieve the national targets for water quality, the climate and nitrogen in agriculture? And is this feasible? These questions are at the heart of a new Wageningen scenario study.

Researcher Edo Gies of Wageningen Environmental Research presented the study, commissioned by the ministry of Agriculture, last week during a WUR Live event. Paul Pestman, who heads the government's National Programme for Rural Areas (NPLG), gave an introduction. Pestman pointed out that while nitrogen

'The study offers support for decision-making'

dominates the political and public debate, there are other issues too facing rural areas. It will be a serious challenge for the agricultural sector to

achieve the agreed objectives for nature, water and the climate by 2030. 'A complex puzzle' was how Pestman put it. To help solve that puzzle, about a year ago NPLG asked WUR 'to provide inspiration for both the national government and the provincial authorities.'

In early February, the minister Christianne van der Wal sent the result of this assignment — the scenario study — to the Lower House of Parliament. The study explains how the national targets for water quality, the climate and nitrogen in agriculture can be translated into objectives per province. It also assesses whether the regional objectives can be achieved with a comprehensive package of measures that WUR researchers see as promising.

Big impact

Regarding that last aspect, the announcement on WUR.nl was quite clear: yes, the objectives are largely attainable in theory, but only if major measures are taken that would have a big impact on farmers. To cite two examples, the scenario study assumes livestock

numbers that are about 25 per cent lower than current numbers, and much higher groundwater levels on peatland (40 centimetres below ground level, and even that may not be enough).

Even with such far-reaching measures, the aggregate effect is not enough to turn all target indicators green. For example, the study concludes that only Drenthe and Overijssel would achieve the provincial targets for the leaching of phosphate into the surface water. And none of the provinces would achieve the goal for carbon sequestration in the soil. In contrast, the calculations show the reduction of methane and nitrous oxide production is attainable for nearly all the provinces.

Not a blueprint

In his talk, Gies emphasized that the scenario study is mainly aimed at showing how big the task is exactly in each province, revealing how the various issues are interlinked and indicating the effectiveness of the various measures. He stressed that the study is not a blueprint. 'It is not a model where we input the targets and the model churns out the required measures, but this study does give important insights as support for political decision-making.' ME



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