

The Court of Audit assessed the heritage management by the Forest and Nature Agency

The Flemish Forest and Nature Agency (ANB) sees to extensive forest domains and natural areas. The Court examined whether these nature heritage sites are under good management. The audit showed that regulations and planning documents are available but any precise, measurable and time-related objective framing is widely lacking. The management plan drawing up process is very slow as far as natural areas are concerned. The Court also noticed that a complete central inventory was only available for forest domains. Management revenue is collected mainly according to the rule, but not in a uniform way. The Court recommended that the various planning documents, including objectives and indicators, be assessed. Data base management should also be subject to additional arrangements.

Introduction

The ANB and the department are both part of the Flemish ministry for Environment, Nature and Energy (LNE). It came into existence after the merger of the previous Forestry & Greenery and Nature divisions of the Environment, Nature, Land and Water Management department (AMINAL). In 2007, the ANB administered 123.8 million EUR policy appropriations, designed for staff, operation, subsidies and investments.

Regulatory and policy frame

An extensive regulatory frame has been worked out as far as forest domains are concerned, but the various standards have not been assessed yet. There is an abundance of planning documents at all sorts of levels, for instance the five-year environment policy plan, the environment year programme, the forest planting long term planning and the forest planting action plan. The latter two were not approved by the Flemish Government or submitted to the Flemish Parliament and account for an additional planning burden because they were only partly incorporated into the environment policy plans. The service instructions drawn up by ANB as applicable to the natural areas management are not always in line with the higher regulatory provisions. In general the various planning documents contain objectives that are insufficiently specific, measurable and time-related, concerning for instance the drawing up of management plans, the establishment of advisory committees, etc.

Drawing up of management plans

The ANB has done quite a lot these last few years to draw up forest domains management plans more rapidly. It has, for instance, called upon specialized staff and subcontracted management plans. As regards natural areas drawing up management plans was still a painful task in a number of external services. The remedial measures taken by the ANB did not turn out to be sufficient. The remaining sore spots are among others the creation of advisory committees and the workload of management planners in the external and central services. The present follow-up instruments are incomplete and not updated. There is hardly any external reporting about the situation from the ANB.

Inventory

About forest domains the ANB maintains a central data bank, the so-called B Statements. The central Natural areas data bank, administered by the Institute for nature and forest research (INBO) is incomplete and not very user-friendly. The ANB's external services maintain their own decentralised

databanks but these have problems with continuity, definitions used and data protection. As far as permanent movable property is concerned, failing uniform instructions, inventories differ greatly in terms of content and form. ANB's assets should also be found in the Flemish administration's property accounting system. The latter is inexhaustive, due to, on the one hand, the incompleteness of the start inventories and, on the other hand, the lack of data exchange between the LNE's department's assets accountant and the persons responsible for the inventory at the ANB. As a result, the worth of ANB's assets is unknown.

Revenue

Asset management is a source of revenue, which mainly stems from logging, but also from user charges such as farming and hunting leases. The audit made it clear that, for the most part, their collection occurred in accordance with the rule, but not in a uniform way. There was a lack of instructions respecting the various collection processes and the internal control thereof. Furthermore, the accounting process showed a number of anomalies, mainly due to a lack of guidance and support of the LNE's accountant.

Minister's response

In her answer dated 2 August 2007, the Flemish minister for Environment and Nature largely subscribed to the Court's conclusions and recommendations. She pointed to the initiatives already taken by the ANB to meet the Court's recommendations.