

Planning and management of the Walloon Region's investments in its inland waterway network

In Wallonia, more than 40 million tons of goods are transported annually on a network consisting of 450 km of inland waterways. A properly managed network shall contribute to the modal shift of freight transport from road to less polluting waterways; it shall also foster economic activity and job creation as well as a better management of flood risks.

The Court of Audit has investigated into the planning and the management of the Walloon Region's investments in its inland waterway network. For this purpose, it has examined the procedures for identifying water engineering structures that have to be repaired or modernised, the selection of the network sections to be dredged, the planning of the works, their financing and completion in time and within budget.

A good knowledge of the condition of the navigable waterway network is necessary to safeguard the investment schedule, the maintenance of waterways and the navigability. This requires periodic controls as well as the best use of available information so as to make a reliable estimate of the human, budgetary and technical needs.

The Directorate-General for Mobility and Hydraulic Ways of the Walloon Region has different tools for assessing the state of the water engineering structures and electromechanical appliances: the management regulations relating to engineering structures, the ad hoc database which centralizes all information on bridges, the regulations on the management of water engineering structures (locks, dams, pumping stations, hydroelectric plants, waterside facilities, etc.) and the computer-assisted maintenance management system.

However, the practical implementation of these tools is neither complete nor fully operational. The Court of Audit therefore recommends carrying out the periodic inspection of engineering structures and continuing to streamline databases. It also calls for a better follow-up of the controls that have been performed and for a mobilisation of the financial and human resources required to ensure the application and the respect of the maintenance plans.

In 2008, the Walloon Region had drawn up a priority dredging plan aimed at restoring a sufficient navigation capacity on the entire waterway network. The focus of this plan was to clear fifteen years of dredging backlog by extracting an annual quantity of sludge amounting to 300.000 m³ during a period of eight years

This plan did not mention that the dredging works would stretch to the building structures or the edges (i.e. to the level of the "old beds and banks"), what leads to the risk of having to dredge again in a very near future the areas that silt up the

most rapidly. Yet, owing to budgetary restrictions, the dredging process occurred at a slower pace than was originally intended. As a result, the Court of Audit recommends achieving at least the dredging pace set by the priority plan, dredging to the “old beds and banks” of the most problematic waterways and setting up collective centres as well as sufficient sludge treatment and recycling systems.

The lack of financial means to ensure the maintenance and the investments in the waterway infrastructure puts weight on the regional authorities to set up various financial mechanisms and limits the number of projects carried out each year. However, the selection criteria used for funding projects do not give rise to a classification by order of priority or to a formal statement of reasons for a decision. The Court of Audit recommends that the multiannual planning of investments and extraordinary maintenance be considered as a fully-fledged activity, which implies a procedure, resources, a regular monitoring, an evaluation and further strategic coordination with Sofico, the Walloon company for the additional financing of infrastructure. It emphasises the importance of collecting and integrating the overall information related to the work of Sofico in the management tool (in this case the budget monitoring table) and, since this tool merely relies on commitments, of generalizing the measures which have recently been taken to improve the monitoring of settlement appropriations.

The review of a sample of planned and completed - or soon to be completed - investment projects has shown that the initial budgets and deadlines could be largely exceeded. The Court of Audit recommends that extensive preliminary studies of the projects be carried out before starting work and that human, budgetary and technical needs be better anticipated. Such good practices would prevent the recurrence of situations requiring exceptionally high additional delays or even additional costs exceeding 50 % of the initial offer.