

## PRESS RELEASE

September 2017

### Report to the Flemish Parliament

#### *Protection of drinking water from groundwater collection areas - Inventory and decontamination of risk grounds*

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The Court of Audit examined whether the Flemish government deals with soil pollution near the groundwater collection areas of drinking water companies. Soil pollution can indeed affect the quality of groundwater. It compared the situation in the safeguard zones with the rest of Flanders, where historical soil pollution areas must be dealt with by 2036. This examination proved that the mapping of the risk grounds by the municipalities leads to good results after 20 years in the municipalities with a safeguard zone, but not yet in the others. The decontamination of the risk grounds in the safeguard zones is examined and started up methodologically under the auspices of the OVAM (the public waste agency in Flanders). The institution also developed a global plan for the general treatment of risk grounds in the rest of Flanders which is jeopardised by uncompleted municipalities' inventories and a high demand of financial inputs.

#### **Introduction**

The Flemish government wishes the decontamination of all historical soil pollution areas which form a serious threat (*decontamination objective 2036*) to be *started up* by 2036 at the latest. Therefore, the municipalities are obliged to draw up a municipal inventory of all the risk grounds and to share their data with the OVAM. In this inventory, the minister wishes to give priority to vulnerable areas, for example the safeguard zones of the groundwater collection areas for drinking water.

#### **Drawing up of a risk ground inventory**

The OVAM's objective to get all municipalities have their inventories completed by the end of 2017 will be difficult to meet, since only about half of them is finished. Moreover, the OVAM has only been able to perform a quality control on 32.9% of the completed inventories. The follow-up by the OVAM does nevertheless prove that the municipalities with a groundwater collection area for drinking water, which already should have been done by the end of 2016, are most advanced. In January 2017, 93 of those 109 municipalities (85,3%) had completed their inventory, compared to 53 of the 199 municipalities without a groundwater collection area for drinking water (26,6%). The objective to register all active risk institutions in an inventory by the end of 2016 hasn't been met either. For almost all vulnerable water sources of drinking water companies though, inventory data are sufficient for the OVAM to determine where further examinations are required.

The drawing up of the inventory is a complex, time consuming activity, especially when it comes to older permits. Moreover, the knowledge of provincial environmental permits and the access to them is diverse, both in the municipalities and in the provinces. Over the past years, the *OVAM* has taken several initiatives to accelerate the completion of the inventory. For example, it has adapted its “weboffice” and has seen to it that specialised staff is at the disposal of the demanding municipalities (personalised advice). A lot of progress was made during the second half of 2016. The *OVAM* is working on a plan to keep the inventories up-to-date automatically as much as possible.

### Decontamination

The Flemish government also wishes to deal with the soil decontamination in the groundwater collection areas for drinking water quicker than in the rest of Flanders. The objective to have the execution of all decontaminations of polluted soils in vulnerable areas started by 2019, however, has been narrowed down to known risk grounds registered at the end of 2014.

Based on the current soil decree, the government only has little influence on the start up of the examination and decontamination process, except when it comes to the active companies liable to the periodical reporting obligation. Therefore, the *OVAM* now also finances and uses exploratory soil examinations. If those small-scale examinations reveal the presence of enough severe soil contamination, the *OVAM* can oblige those liable to the decontamination duty to conduct a more elaborate study within a certain term.

At the end of 2014, the *OVAM* had listed 1.015 locations with possibly contaminated groundwater collection areas for drinking water. For those locations, the interim examination and decontamination objectives 2016 were met thanks to several actions taken by the *OVAM*. The soil studies prove that the number of contaminated risk locations situated in groundwater collection areas for drinking water is significantly lower than in other areas. At the end of 2016, it was known that decontamination works started place at 85 of those 1.015 locations. For 54 of those 85 locations the works have been completed. According to the drinking water companies, decontaminations should be handled more quickly in some cases, since in the past, they already had to take extra measures or limit extractions.

Some risks and bottlenecks, the decree regulation regarding the start up of the examination process and the use of additional means for example, all constitute a threat to the decontamination objective 2036. For some of them, the *OVAM* has taken management measures. For instance, it wishes to follow up more strictly whether those liable to the decontamination duty comply with the periodical analysis duty.

### The Minister's answer

In her response of 17 July 2017, the minister states that she will ask for clarifications and draw up an appropriate solution for the finalisation of the inventories of the municipalities. She is of the opinion that the report's recommendation to fulfil the conditions for the decontamination objective 2036 in time, is pertinent.

### **Information for the press**

The Court of Audit exerts an external control on the financial operations of the Federal State, the Communities, the Regions and the provinces. It contributes to improving public governance by transmitting to the parliamentary assemblies, to the managers and to the audited services any useful and reliable information resulting from a contradictory examination. As a collateral body of the Parliament, the Court performs its missions independently of the authorities it controls.

The audit report on the *protection of drinking water from groundwater collection areas - inventory and decontamination of risk grounds* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: [www.courtsofaudit.be](http://www.courtsofaudit.be).