

Summary

PlanMER NPLG



Summary

Introduction

The block below outlines the essence of the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). This summary of the SEA provides an outline description of the content of the SEA. The SEA was prepared by Royal HaskoningDHV in consultation with its partners and the commissioning organisation, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The proposal (the structuring choices and variations) and the positioning of the National Programme for Rural Areas (NPLG) were submitted by the Ministry. The description of the reference situation, the impact description and assessment were prepared by Royal HaskoningDHV and the expert team of Royal HaskoningDHV and its cooperating partners.

What are the key findings?

For nature, climate change and water, choices will have to be made in and for the rural area, aimed at the quality of the natural and the living environment. This is the essence of the NPLG. In the SEA, the structuring choices that can be elaborated in area programmes have been examined for their environmental impact, according to a series of indicators. The SEA reveals that the structuring choices in relation to nature, climate and water above all offer opportunities and positive impact. In the case of certain indicators and with specific structuring choices, there is also a potential risk of negative impact. If we examine the agricultural sector (the area of land in use for agriculture and earning capacity), it becomes clear that the majority of structuring choices will result in a reduction in overall land area (or extensification). This in turn could place the earning capacity of farmers under pressure. The various compensation schemes currently in place have not been considered in the impact assessment. The aim of these schemes includes minimising or removing the identified effects for the agricultural sector. The structuring choice 'Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture' will contribute to retaining and protecting high-opportunity agricultural areas for the agricultural sector, as far as possible.

Finally, the goal of the NPLG is to promote coherence. The effects of the individual structuring choices cannot simply be stacked up in terms of use of space or consequences for the area in use. Certain structuring choices can be deployed in combination in order to achieve the best possible result. Individually or (in part) in the same areas, depending on the area type and conditions. At the end of the day, the objectives will have to be achieved by taking measures in the areas (either individually or overlapping). In the area elaborations undertaken by the provinces, it will become clear at a later stage whether the choices made and the measures formulated will in fact result in the objectives being achieved.

Why a National Programme for Rural Areas?

As a consequence of climate change, pressure is growing on the vitality of rural areas and the quality of the living and natural environment in those rural areas. At the same time, rural areas are experiencing the negative consequences of nitrogen deposition, the emission of greenhouse gases, water shortages and periods of flooding, loss of biodiversity, soil subsidence, insufficient water quality and salination. By taking measures it is possible to comply with international obligations such as the Bird and Habitats Directive, the Water Framework Directive and the climate goals. This in turn will improve the conditions for nature, the environment and health, thereby contributing to the vitality and quality of the natural and living environment in rural areas. The National Programme for Rural Areas (NPLG) aims to provide a coherent, area-specific and futureproof approach for tackling all of these problems in rural areas.

What is the focus of the NPLG?

The NPLG forms the basis for spatial elaboration and measures, in provincial area programmes. The eventual aim is to achieve the transition targets in rural areas, as far as possible in a coherent approach. In part on the basis of the choices contained in the NPLG, provinces are working on a package of measures specially adapted to the ecological, socioeconomic and cultural and historical characteristics of the individual areas. The overall goal of this common approach is to ensure that future interventions in the structure, management and use of rural areas will make a contribution to a healthy and liveable physical environment for future generations.

Relationship with other plans and programmes

The policy framework of the NPLG is prescribed by the National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment (NOVI), the National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment Extra (NOVEX) and the new Policy Memorandum on Space (Nota Ruimte). There is clear interaction between the NOVEX and the NPLG. Both aim to provide (agreements on) the implementation of spatial tasks. The NPLG is above all focused on localisation, programming and implementation of measures for nature, nitrogen, water and climate. The NOVEX on the other hand is above all focused on spatial choices and future developments. The agreements that emerge from the programmes and that are reached with the provinces will eventually be implemented in the new Policy Memorandum on Space. The NPLG is not the only implementation programme aimed at fulfilling the tasks for rural areas as identified in the NOVI. A series of other long-term national government programmes are also currently underway, that share considerable substantive overlap with the NPLG. These include the Nature Inclusive Agenda (Agenda Natuurinclusief), the Forest strategy (Bossenstrategie) and the Major Waters Approach Programme (Programmatische Aanpak Grote Wateren). All these programmes call for collaboration with provinces and water authorities. There are also various other programmes that in one way or another relate to rural areas or the NPLG, such as the National Environmental Programme and the Healthy Green Living Environment Programme (Programma Gezonde Groene Leefomgeving).

What is the aim of the NPLG?

The NPLG will help bring about the futureproof development of rural areas. It will ensure that choices are made on supraregional issues regarding the distribution and quality of space in rural areas. The programme also preserves and improves a vital rural environment. Moreover, the NPLG contributes to a learning approach to cooperation between administrators and managers deployed by national government. The NPLG makes this possible by providing frameworks for provincial area programmes, in which an area-specific elaboration of the goals of the NPLG and of the so-called structuring choices are laid down. In this way, the area programmes also play an important role in elaborating the future prospects for agriculture.

What are structuring choices?

Structuring choices within the NPLG are choices made by national government regarding the use of space. The choices in the NPLG take the form of general structuring principles that consider the desirability or undesirability of new and existing activities in rural areas. By means of the structuring choices, the NPLG sets a course for the spatial elaboration of the area programmes by the provinces.

The role of environmental impact assessment in the establishment of the draft NPLG

The NPLG is a programme subject to an environmental impact assessment requirement. The aim of the environmental impact assessment tool is to take account of the importance of the living environment, people and nature at the earliest possible stage and to the fullest possible extent, in the decision making process. The results of the investigation into environmental impact are then described in a report, the SEA report. The environmental impact assessment tool has contributed to developing the vision and reaching decisions on the NPLG.

What is assessed in the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)?

Within the SEA report, the effects of eleven selected structuring choices have been investigated. These eleven structuring choices from the NPLG together form the central thrust of the proposal. The SEA examines the (environmental) impact of the structuring choices but does not consider whether the goals of the NPLG are achieved because actually achieving those goals will depend on the measures to be taken by the provinces, in their area-specific elaborations. For the various structuring choices, variations of these choices were also examined. The variations in question relate to the content of the choices and in certain cases also the level of national government supervision. For each of the variations, a determination was made of whether the effects will be enhanced or reduced.

Table 1: Overview of the structuring choices

1: Transition areas
Transition areas are areas adjacent to Natura 2000 areas, in which the activities and land use are harmonised with the conservation objectives of the adjacent Natura 2000 area. Tasks for nature, water and climate in these areas are elaborated in combination with agriculture so that system recovery of the Natura 2000 area in question is achieved. The SEA has considered variations in terms of content and management.
2: Integration of areas of agricultural nature/new nature
<p>New nature and agricultural nature are planned at locations that are ideally suited for realising the nature target type in question in terms of physical, geographical, hydrological and ecological aspects. Account is taken of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The spatial nature and agricultural nature task beyond 2030; • Limiting edge zones; and • The possibilities of also contributing to related policy objectives (for example extensification in favour of nature and nitrogen targets in transition areas). <p>The SEA has considered variations in terms of content and management.</p>
3: Meeting the criterion of 10% green-blue networking
Green-blue networking ties in ideally with the existing physical, geographical, hydrological and ecological conditions in the area. In addition, wherever possible, it establishes links between point, line and surface elements, with a view to creating basic ecological and landscape quality in rural areas, links between existing nature conservation areas in the Netherlands Nature Network, and links with green-blue networks in urban areas. The SEA has also considered variations in terms of content.
4: Space for retention, storage and discharge
We create space for retaining, storing and discharging water in our spatial layout, land use and land management. This increases the resilience of both the main water system and regional water systems. The SEA has also considered variations in terms of content.
5: Peatland water level plan
In lowland peat areas, we are working towards wetting peat pastureland areas to limit CO ₂ emissions and soil subsidence. We will move towards a groundwater level of 20 cm to 40 cm below ground level, depending on the soil composition, circumstances of the water system and the needs of the area. This refers to a groundwater level of 20 cm to 40 cm below ground level that must be maintained year round. The SEA has also considered variations in terms of content.
6: Water availability in salination areas
We call upon all water users to take account of and to implement their own measures to improve resilience to periods of extreme drought, water shortages and salination. The SEA has also considered variations in terms of content.
7: Water retention and slower discharge on high sandy soils
On high sandy soils we retain water for longer and discharge it less quickly. In this way, we recover the sponge effect of the soil and achieve a robust groundwater system. The SEA has also considered variations in terms of content.
8: Raising groundwater levels on high sandy soils
We will raise groundwater levels by possibly 10 cm to 50 cm. This will help prevent drying out on high sandy soils. The SEA has considered variations in terms of content and management.
9: Large-scale stream valley recovery on high sandy soils
To promote water quality, extensive buffer zones will be established in stream valleys on sandy soils, that also contribute to groundwater infiltration. In the area processes, we will focus on large-scale recovery of stream valleys on sandy soils to improve water quality. The underlying principle is the development of buffer zones of between 100 and 250 metres on both sides of the stream. Variation will be achieved in terms of content and management.
10: Restricting groundwater extractions around Natura 2000 areas on high sandy soils
On high sandy soils, we will restrict the extraction of groundwater around Natura 2000 areas. This will prevent the drying out of these areas. The SEA has considered variations in terms of content and management.
11: Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture
In designing area programmes, we will carefully consider any intended functional change for agricultural land. Any functional changes for agricultural land will be based on arguments from the consideration framework. Application of that framework will require classification of the three area types outlined in the consideration framework, at provincial level. The SEA has considered variations in terms of content and management.

How is assessment conducted in the SEA?

The Wheel of the Living Environment is used to assess the choices.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT WHEEL OF THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

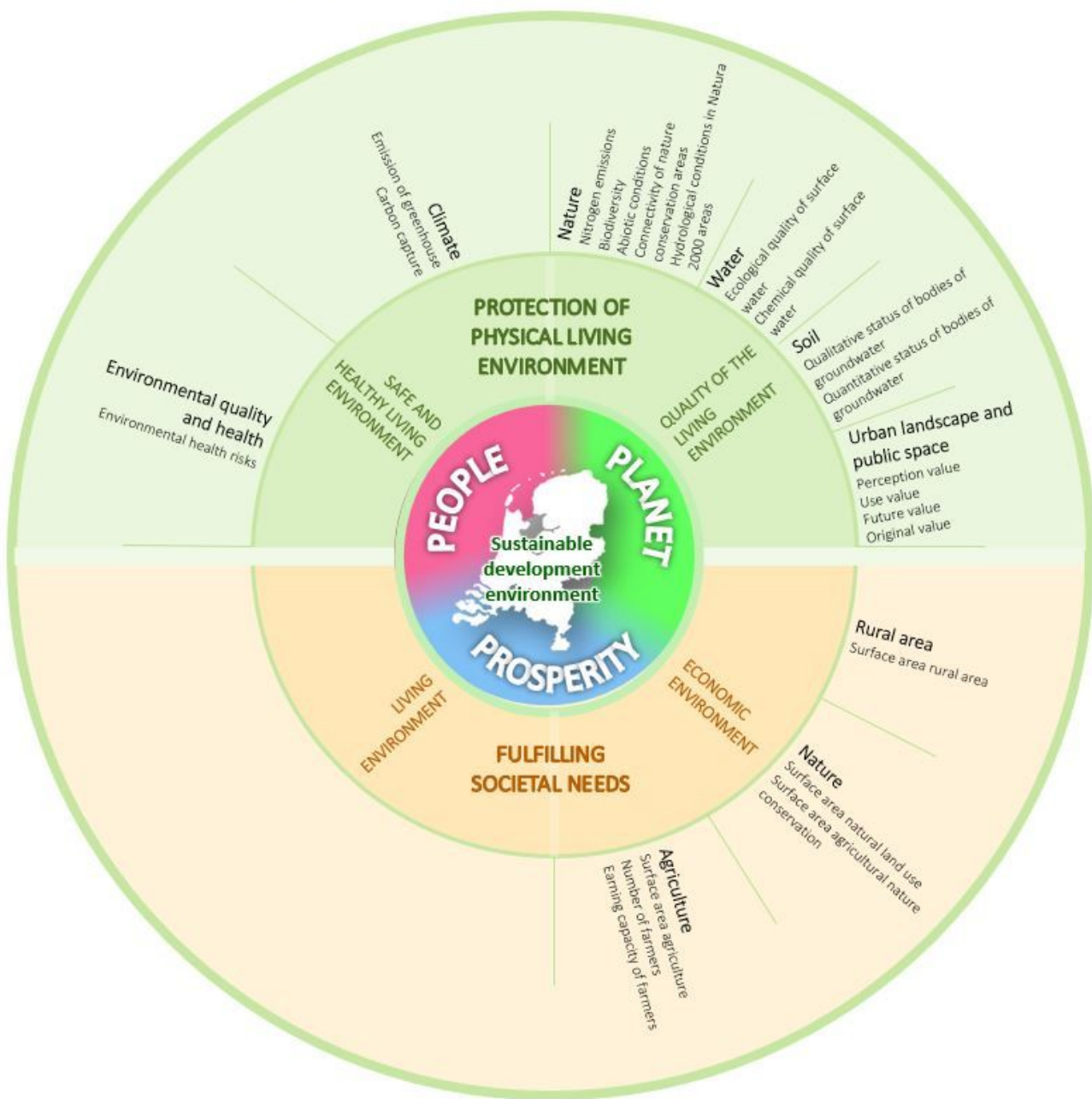


Figure 1: Wheel of the Living Environment

The evaluation process in the SEA is focused primarily on the upper section of the Wheel, the effects on the physical environment. The decision has however also been taken to separately describe the impact on agriculture, as part of the economic environment. The themes in the Wheel relate directly to the objectives of the NPLG. Several different indicators are linked to each theme.

What are indicators?

The indicators are seen as an effective reflection of the factors on which the NPLG will have an impact, in rural areas. For each indicator, the current situation and the physical trends and developments over the past decades are considered and then extrapolated to the future, wherever possible.

Main theme: the Economic environment

In respect of the main theme 'Economic environment', it has been decided to only consider the theme Agriculture in the impact assessment of the structuring choices and the variations. For the indicator 'Size of rural area (surface area)', the only insight provided is that of the current situation and trends, without considering the effects. This decision was taken because the underlying principle argues that the transition of functions will always take place within the current/future size of the rural area. The indicators Surface area nature and Agricultural nature conservation are dealt with under the theme Nature. The 'number of farmers' is described in terms of the current situation and trends but is not evaluated.

What environmental effects is the NPLG expected to deliver?

This SEA for the NPLG describes the current situation and trends, together with an estimate of the expected effects from the elaboration of the structuring choices. Because it is not yet clear which area-specific measures the provinces will take, the impact assessment is at a high level of abstraction. A three-point scale has been used: probability of a positive impact, no clear effect (neutral) and probability of a negative impact.

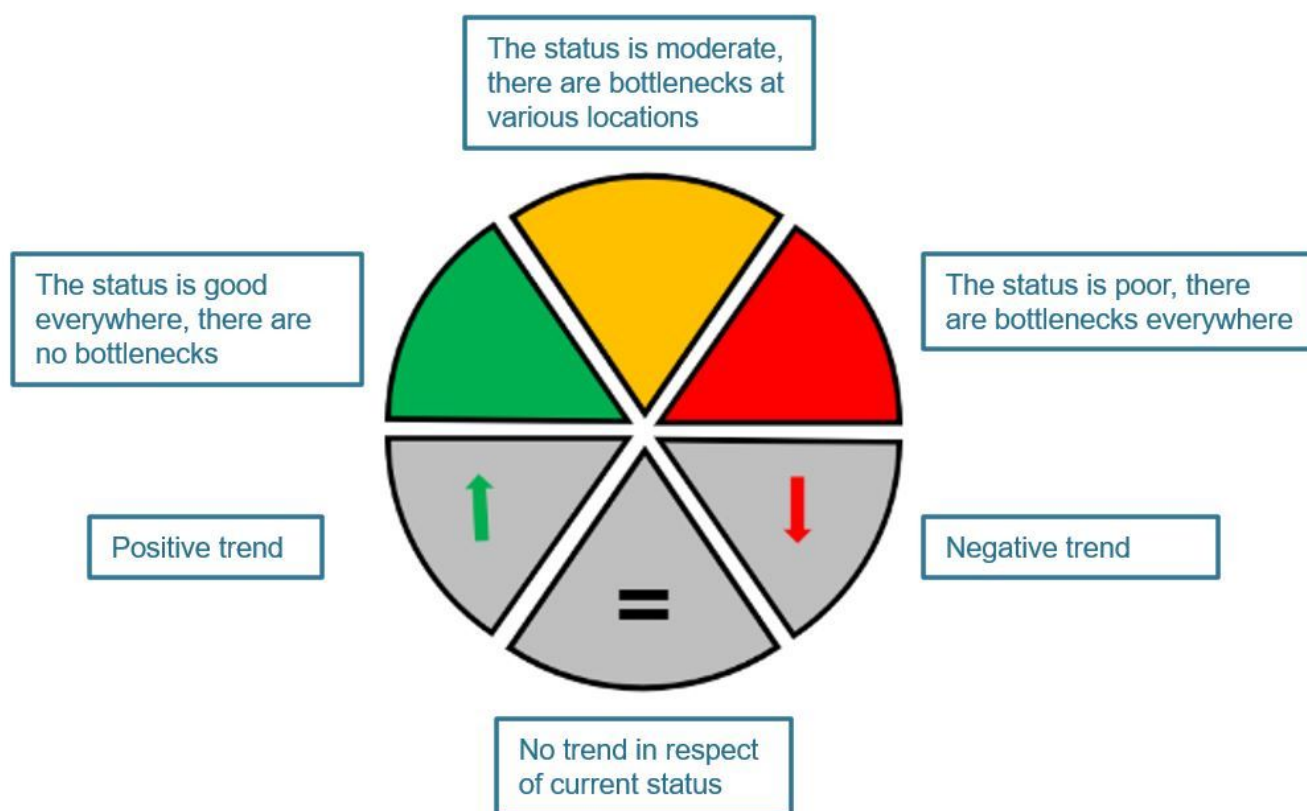


Figure 2 Explanation of current situation and trends

Table 2: Explanation of the evaluation table

Valuation	Explanation
↑	Probability of positive impact
•	No or practically no consequences
↓	Probability of negative impact
to be determined	Cannot be assessed

Abbreviations in the tables

- WU = Limited future challenges¹ for agriculture
- ZU = Serious future challenges for agriculture
- KT = Short term
- LT = Long term

Agriculture

At present, almost two million hectares are in use as agricultural land, in the Netherlands. The trend shows a slow decline in the area of agricultural land. By contrast, over the past few years, the average nominal income per farmer has risen. Depending on the level of extensification or function change, all the structuring choices will result to a greater or lesser extent in a reduction in the area of land used for agriculture. There is a probable negative impact on the area of agricultural land and the earning capacity of farmers due to the claiming of space for other functions (nature, green-blue networking) or to a change in the use of agricultural land (nature-inclusive agriculture, wettening of peat pastureland areas, etc.). In areas where agriculture faces limited challenges, as the structuring choice indeed intends, the structuring choice Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture (choice 11) will have no clear effect on the surface area or the earning capacity.

Table 3: Evaluation table of the NPLG for the theme Agriculture

Indicators under the theme: 'Agriculture'	Current situation and trend	1: Transition areas	2: Integration of nature area	3: Meeting the criterion of 10% GBDA	4: Space for retention	5: Peatland water level plan	6: Salinated areas	7: Water retention and slower discharge	8: Raising groundwater levels	9: Large-scale stream valley recovery	10: Restricting groundwater extraction	11: Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture
Surface area agriculture	2.000.000 hectares Trend: ↓	to be determined	↓	↓	↓	↓	•	•	•	↓	•	WU: • ZU: ↓
Earning capacity of farmers	€ 100.000 per unpaid AWU Trend: ↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	WU: • ZU: ↓

¹ The term 'challenges' in this context refers to 'obstacles to optimum agriculture' as a consequence of area characteristics.

Environmental quality and health

The umbrella term environmental health risks covers the subjects health for local residents, animal disease and zoonoses, odour and particulate matter. The current situation in the Netherlands reveals a number of different bottlenecks. Work is underway to improve the situation, but for the time being there are no clear results. The structuring choices that relate directly to the redevelopment of areas result in a probability of a positive impact. Other choices have no direct impact on environmental health risks.

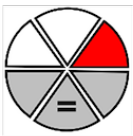










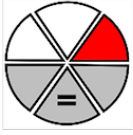









Table 4: Evaluation table for the NPLG for the theme Environmental quality & health

Indicators under the theme: 'Environmental quality & health'	Current situation and trend	1: Transition areas	2: Integration of nature area	3: Meeting the criterion of 10% GBDA	4: Space for retention	5: Peatland water level plan	6: Salinated areas	7: Water retention and slower discharge	8: Raising groundwater levels	9: Large-scale stream valley recovery	10: Restricting groundwater extraction	11: Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture
Environmental health risks		↑	↑	↑	●	↑	●	●	●	↑	●	↑

Climate

Climate goals for emissions of greenhouse gases (CH₄, N₂O and CO₂) are not achieved in the current situation. Without the NPLG, this is also expected to not be the case by 2030. The majority of structuring choices have a probability of a positive impact such that they will contribute to achieving the climate goals. In Transition areas (choice 1), however, there is a probability of a negative impact. By introducing links between ecosystems in the landscape and encouraging biodiversity by adjusting land management, there is a risk of increased N₂O emissions from the establishment of soil organic material. All the structuring choices do have a probability of a positive impact in terms of carbon capture. Through the extensification of tillage (such as the postponement of mowing management and stubble fields), the decomposition of soil organic materials will be reduced.

Table 5: Evaluation table of the NPLG for the theme Climate

Indicators under the theme: 'Climate'	Current situation and trend	1: Transition areas	2: Integration of nature area	3: Meeting the criterion of 10% GBDA	4: Space for retention	5: Peatland water level plan	6: Salinated areas	7: Water retention and slower discharge	8: Raising groundwater levels	9: Large-scale stream valley recovery	10: Restricting groundwater extraction	11: Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture
Emission of greenhouse gases		 			to be determined		to be determined					
Carbon capture					to be determined		to be determined					

Nature

For the indicators under the theme Nature, the current situation is poor or fair. For certain indicators a positive trend is emerging as a consequence of existing policy. However, this is not yet the case for biodiversity and the hydraulic conditions in Natura 2000 areas. Following application of the structuring choices, a large proportion of the indicators do show a probability of a positive impact. This is in fact logical since nature is an element of the objectives of the NPLG. Only with regard to the structuring choice Water availability in salination areas (choice 6) is there a probability of a negative impact because the abiotic system could be disrupted. For choice 11 (in the case of agricultural land with limited challenges), the agricultural transition will be barely achieved, if at all, in certain areas. This can in turn be expected to result in some further deterioration of the abiotic factors for nature, which results in a probability of a negative impact.

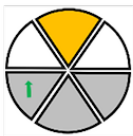
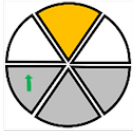
Table 6: Evaluation table of the NPLG for the theme Nature

Indicators under the theme: 'Nature'	Current situation and trend	1: Transition areas	2: Integration of nature area	3: Meeting the criterion of 10% GBDA	4: Space for retention	5: Peatland water level plan	6: Salinated areas	7: Water retention and slower discharge	8: Raising groundwater levels	9: Large-scale stream valley recovery	10: Restricting groundwater extraction	11: Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture
Nitrogen emissions		↑	↑	↑	●	●	↑	●	●	↑	●	WU: ● ZU: ↑
Biodiversity		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	WU: ● ZU: ↑
Abiotic conditions		↑	↑	↑	to be determined	to be determined	↓	↑	●	↑	↑	WU: ↓ ZU: ↑
Acreage of nature conservation areas		↑	↑	↑	●	●	●	●	●	↑	●	WU: ● ZU: ●
Connectivity nature conservation areas		↑	↑	↑	●	●	●	●	●	↑	●	WU: ● ZU: ↑
Hydrological conditions in Natura 2000 areas		↑	●	●	●	↑	●	↑	↑	●	↑	WU: ● ZU: ↑

Water

The current status of the surface water in the Netherlands is fair. In terms of both ecological quality and chemical quality, a positive trend can be expected in line with current policy. The majority of structuring choices will reinforce this trend. Potential regional salination (choice 6) could deliver either a positive or negative impact, depending on the chloride standards/nutrient standards that are agreed upon. In terms of ecological quality of the surface water, too, the choices applied on high sandy soils, in particular Water retention and slower discharge on high sandy soils (choice 7) and Raising groundwater levels on high sandy soils (choice 8) show a somewhat more differentiated picture. There could be a temporary improvement or deterioration. This is because these choices ensure that water courses continue to flow, but eventually this could also result in the (temporary or permanent) leaching out of phosphate from agricultural areas. Nevertheless, in the longer term, no permanent impact is expected. With respect to the chemical quality of surface water, in the case of structuring choices 7 and 8, there is a probability of a negative impact due to the leaching out of contaminants.



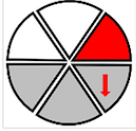
Table 7: Evaluation table of the NPLG for the theme Water

Indicators under the theme: 'Water'	Current situation and trend	1: Transition areas	2: Integration of nature area	3: Meeting the criterion of 10% GBDA	4: Space for retention	5: Peatland water level plan	6: Salinated areas	7: Water retention and slower discharge	8: Raising groundwater levels	9: Large-scale stream valley recovery	10: Restricting groundwater extraction	11: Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture
Ecological quality of surface water		↑	↑	↑	↑	KT: ↓ LT: ↑	↓ ↑	KT: ↑ ↓ LT: ●	KT: ↑ ↓ LT: ●	↑	↑	↑
Chemical quality of surface water		↑	↑	↑	↑	●	●	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑

Soil

The qualitative and quantitative status of bodies of groundwater in the Netherlands is fair. However, no improvement in this status is expected in the future. The majority of structuring choices will not bring about any improvement in quality, but could result in improvements in the quantity of groundwater. There is only a probability of a positive impact on quality in the event of the integration of new areas of nature or nature-inclusive agriculture with attention for area characteristics, since this is expected to bring about a reduction in the use of fertilisers and pesticides. An improved quantitative status will above all be achieved through the structuring choices specifically applied on high sandy soils (choices 7, 8, 9 and 10) and through the application of Transition areas and Peatland water level plan. The situation in terms of soil subsidence in rural areas is poor. The trend is also negative. Only in the event of structuring choices Transition areas, Integration of areas of agricultural nature/new nature and Peatland water level plan is the probability of a negative trend reduced.

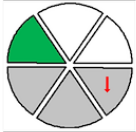
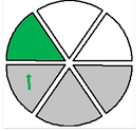
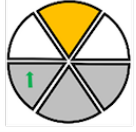
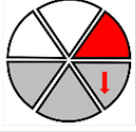
Table 8: Evaluation table of the NPLG for the theme Soil

Indicators under the theme: 'Soil'	Current situation and trend	1: Transition areas	2: Integration of nature area	3: Meeting the criterion of 10% GBDA	4: Space for retention	5: Peatland water level plan	6: Salinated areas	7: Water retention and slower discharge	8: Raising groundwater levels	9: Large-scale stream valley recovery	10: Restricting groundwater extraction	11: Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture
Qualitative status bodies of groundwater		●	↑	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Quantitative status bodies of groundwater		↑	●	●	●	↑	●	↑	↑	↑	↑	●
Soil subsidence rural areas		↑	↑	●	●	↑	●	●	●	●	●	●

Landscape and spatial quality

Building volume in rural areas is steadily rising. Against that background, it is suggested that there is a negative trend in respect of the perceived value of the landscape. The majority of structuring choices have little or no impact on this trend. Only Meeting the criterion of 10% green-blue networking (choice 3) represents a probability of a positive impact. Origin value also shows a negative trend. The number of structure carriers (landscape elements including water courses, parcelling patterns, rows of trees, residential patterns and roads) is slowly declining in rural areas. The structuring choices Meeting the criterion of 10% green-blue networking (choice 3) and Large-scale stream valley recovery on high sandy soils (choice 9) can contribute to reducing the negative nature of this trend. The vast majority of the structuring choices deliver additional opportunities for increasing the use value of soils. This also applies to future value. The one exception is structuring choice Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture (choice 11). If this choice is implemented, there is a probability that multipurpose use of space for agricultural land will be discouraged. Changes to the function thereby resulting in increased adaptability will not be promoted by this choice.

Table 9: Evaluation table of the NPLG for the theme Landscape & spatial quality

Indicators under the theme: 'Landscape & spatial quality'	Current situation and trend	1: Transition areas	2: Integration of nature area	3: Meeting the criterion of 10% GBDA	4: Space for retention	5: Peatland water level plan	6: Salinated areas	7: Water retention and slower discharge	8: Raising groundwater levels	9: Large-scale stream valley recovery	10: Restricting groundwater extraction	11: Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture
Perception value		●	●	↑	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Use value		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	●	●	●	↑	●	↓
Future value		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	●	↓
Original value		●	●	↑	●	●	●	●	●	↑	●	●

Variation in terms of content

For the majority of structuring choices, multiple variations have been examined. These variations could be considered a sort of sensitivity analysis: what will happen if we reinforce or indeed weaken specific elements of a structuring choice? In some cases, these variations result in an improvement of the described impact. Because of a focus on specific themes (cultural history) or specific objectives (for example the climate goals or nature goals) or because specific indicators are made decisive, a more positive impact could be brought about above all for the indicators relating to those elements.

Variations in which nature is made the primary guiding function (Transition areas and Meeting the criterion of 10% green-blue networking) or in which the integration process makes an optimum contribution to bringing about the particular nature target type (Integration of areas of agricultural nature/new nature), for the themes Environmental health risks, Climate, Nature, Water and Soil, the impact could prove more positive than prior to the proposal.

For variations in which agriculture is made the primary guiding function (Transition areas) or where implementation delivers the best possible result for the agricultural function (Integration of areas of agricultural nature/new nature), the impact on the themes Environmental health risks, Nature, Climate, Water and Soil will be less positive than prior to the proposal.

For variations in which multifunctional use of space is encouraged (Transition areas), the themes Climate, water and Soil will achieve a less favourable score than in the proposal. For the indicator Use value, this variation achieves a positive score. This is in fact the objective of this variation.

In broad terms, in the event of variations in time (Peatland water level plan) or in the size of the area (Large-scale stream valley recovery on high sandy soils) and Space for retention, storage and discharge) in which the structuring choice in question is implemented, the effectiveness of the structuring choice will be affected. The impact can be either negative or positive, depending on the particular variation.

As a rule, creating a distinction between green-green and green-red combined functions in carefully dealing with land in use for agriculture will not result in any major impact changes in respect of the structuring choice. The clear expectation is that any action will be taken in line with the consideration framework for carefully dealing with land in use for agriculture. Green-green combined functions will mainly occur in areas facing extensive to moderate challenges for agriculture, while green-red combined functions will above all occur in areas in which agriculture faces limited challenges.

Variations in terms of management

The extent to which management measures by national government contribute to achieving the objectives has been considered. The reasoning behind this consideration is that precise and practical management of structuring choices by national government will result in greater certainty about the spatial structures employed by the area programmes in arriving at measures that effectively achieve the intended aim. In broad terms, it can be concluded that the more directive the variation, the faster, more efficiently or more effectively the objectives will be achieved. At the same time, such structured management will be to the detriment of the customised area-specific focus which is the heart of the NPLG approach.

Cross-border effects

The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) charts out the potential effects of the structuring choices. However, those effects do not end at our national borders. Depending on the application of the structuring choice (where, how and to what extent), the effects can all cross national borders. Broadly speaking, it can be concluded that the structuring choices reveal a number of opportunities for positive effects which can sometimes (on a local level) result in a positive cross-border impact, mainly in the border regions. At present, it is not possible to specify to what extent these effects will occur. In situations where sometimes temporary negative effects can be expected, for example the effect of Water retention and slower discharge on high sandy soils on the chemical water quality due to the leaching of pollutants from agricultural areas, it will be necessary to reach international agreements.

Conclusion to the impact assessment

What follows is a conclusion regarding the results of the impact assessment. In addition to more general findings, we briefly consider the time horizon, the relationship between the tasks in relation to structuring choices and in respect of areas. We also briefly consider the socioeconomic aspect.

General

Because the aim of the NPLG is to improve nature, water and climate, it is entirely logical that the scores for the environmental indicators in the tables generally demonstrate the probability of a positive impact. It is also understandable that almost all structuring choices with the exception of Dealing carefully with the area of land in use for agriculture (choice 11), do have a probability of a negative impact on the area of land in use for agriculture and consequently on the earning capacity of farmers. A number of schemes are available to agricultural businesses that include choices for innovation, extensification, relocation and business cessation. The effects of these choices are not included in this assessment.

Time horizon

To assess the effects of alternatives in an environmental impact assessment, they are normally related to a specific reference year. The structuring choices for which the effects are assessed in this SEA set a course for the area-specific measures to be taken by provinces. The consequences of those measures for achieving the objectives will have to be evaluated in the provincial programmes. Area implementation takes time; completing a restructuring process takes time; and the impact on adapted management or land use in terms of water, soil or nature quality also takes time. Exactly how quickly those processes are or can be put into practice is difficult to predict. Because there is uncertainty about exactly which area-specific measures will be taken, the SEA is not yet able to provide a clear insight into the short-term effects of the structuring choices. For that reason, the impact assessments are above all assessments for the medium and long term.

Relationship between tasks, structuring choices and areas

The underlying principle behind the draft NPLG is that objectives are viewed in relation to one another, and contribute to the essential goals of nature recovery and conservation and the climate and water obligations. This combination of structuring choices is logical, perhaps even obvious. Transition areas, the Integration of areas of agricultural nature/new nature, Meeting the criterion of 10% green-blue networking, Large-scale stream valley recovery on high sandy soils and Space for retention, storage and discharge can all be placed close together, resulting in a potential amplification effect. For example a transition area, a green-blue networking zone and an area of new nature, located close together, can make an above average contribution to the connectivity of nature conservation areas or to biodiversity and hence to the nature goal (and possibly the goal of integrated green-blue

networking). It is also possible for structuring choices to overlap one another. Whether and where this potential overlapping can occur will depend on the regional choices that are made. In elaborating those choices, for example within the spatial possibilities available, provinces can seek optimisation. However, the fact that measures are taken in an area on the basis of different structuring choices does not automatically mean that there will be synergetic effects. If in realising new nature, green-blue structuring is also achieved as an overlapping consequence, this probably means that less area of nature will be created than if the two structuring choices were to be implemented without overlap.

The structuring choices can be implemented spread across the Netherlands. A number of structuring choices are related to specific areas as is the case with Peatland water level plan, Stream valley recovery on high sandy soils and Water availability in salination areas in the coastal regions, for example. Moreover, it is logical to assume that obvious combinations will also be created for sand, peatland and clay.

In many cases, the space needed for implementing the structural choices will be agricultural land. Either in the form of a function change or in the form of extensification of agricultural use. The spatial elaboration of the structuring choices is however not exclusively restricted to agricultural land. In the case of green-blue networking, for example, it could also include roadside verges or watercourses managed by water authorities.

Although many of the structuring choices will result in a degree of extensification or a reduction in the total area of land in use for agriculture, this reduction will not be achieved one on one. The use of this agricultural land can serve multiple choices. As a consequence, the area of land affected by the measures may be smaller than could be concluded from simply adding up the individual NPLG objectives.

To what extent this takes place will still have to be determined from the regional programmes, and may result in further adjustment of the NPLG. In that process, the provinces will have to consider carefully what the potential overlap of measures (in combination with the different structuring choices) means for achieving the objectives for which the individual structuring choices are intended.

Structuring choice 11 means that the area of land with 'few future challenges' will as far as possible remain focused on agriculture and consequently, to a large extent, will remain beyond the sphere of influence of the measures. In relation to agriculture, therefore, it is also relevant that as outlined in the National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment (NOVI), a number of agriculture-based programmes will continue to exist. These programmes (and the resultant measures) will together contribute to improving agricultural areas (soils) in the Netherlands.

Socioeconomic aspect

The structuring choices in the NPLG are above all focused on realising and achieving the objectives in respect of nature, water, climate and green-blue networking. Despite the fact that in general terms this will result in overall improvements in rural areas, the structuring choices are not directly aimed at revitalising rural areas in socioeconomic terms. The SEA suggests that socioeconomic effects will be considered in the provincial elaboration of the NPLG, because the individual elaborations refer to measures for regions where the socioeconomic consequences can be better envisaged.

In outline, this SEA considers the impact that the structuring choices will have on the area in use for agricultural land and on the earning capacity of farmers. These are difficult matters to quantify. If we consider purely the impact of the structuring choices, it can be concluded that to a certain extent the area of agricultural land will shrink or that on this land only extensive agriculture will remain possible. In principle this will lead to a greater decline in earning capacity and most probably also a decline in the number of farmers than would have been the case without the measures (autonomously). Essentially, therefore, there is a risk of a negative socioeconomic impact. It must however also be considered that as part of this transition, in consultation with the sector, government will consider possibilities for alternative sources of income, such as nature management and recreation. Moreover, a number of incentive schemes have already been introduced to organise the transition and at the same time to counterbalance the negative socioeconomic impact.

Although there may be negative social, commercial and economic impact for individual farmers, for the Netherlands as a whole, the NPLG could be an opportunity for positive socioeconomic impact, since realising the objectives will contribute to the prosperity and wellbeing of the Netherlands, for example via healthy ecosystem services.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Once a plan subject to compulsory environmental impact assessment is adopted, the relevant competent body is required to investigate the actual environmental consequences of the implementation of the proposed activity. A number of suggestions are already made in the SEA regarding the eventual monitoring programme. These include:

- Monitoring the quality of nature and the environment.
- Monitoring compliance with international agreements in respect of water quality, climate and nature, such as:
 - Monitoring the conservation objectives in the Natura 2000 areas;
 - Monitoring compliance with the objectives from the WFD.
- Monitoring the level of implementation of the measures at provincial level, with particular attention to:
 - Changes in hectares for agriculture, nature or nature-inclusive agriculture;
 - Changes in farm and animal densities and/or changes in livestock units;
 - Changes regarding the level of biodiversity.

Where do we go from here following publication of the SEA and draft NPLG?

The draft NPLG together with the SEA will be presented for inspection. Over a period of six weeks, everyone will have an opportunity to submit an opinion on the draft NPLG and the SEA. During this period, meetings will be organised for civil society organisations and all levels of government, to inform them about the content of the documents that are available for inspection and about the opinion submission process. The period for submitting opinions runs from 12 December through to 22 January. The submitted opinions will be assessed and responded to and may result in amendments to the definitive NPLG. The Memorandum of Reply, as drawn up, reflects how the opinions are taken into account. Together with the civil society organisations, a participation plan will be drawn up, for the future implementation of the NPLG.