

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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Report Name: Dutch Government Announces Programs to Curb Nitrogen Emissions

Country: Netherlands

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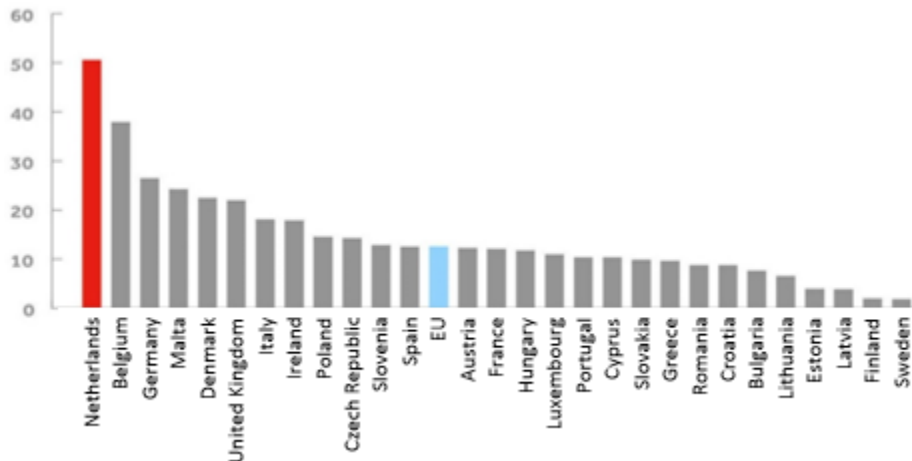
Report Highlights:

The Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality has announced a €5 billion (\$5.4 billion) package of structural measures aimed to reduce nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands. The plan includes an annual investment of €300 million (\$325 million) to restore natural areas and €200 million (\$217 million) for measures to help the agricultural, industrial, energy, and construction sectors reduce nitrogen emissions (for a period of ten years). The government is aiming for at least 50 percent of nitrogen-sensitive land in Natura 2000 areas to measure below critical deposition values (< 255 mole per hectare) by 2030.

Background

The Netherlands is the world's second-largest agricultural exporter after the United States. Given the country's size, however, many of its farms are situated close to protected nature areas. The [Natura 2000 Network](#), which stretches across more than 18 percent of the European Union's (EU's) land mass, is a European Union (EU)-wide scheme meant to protect natural areas. The Netherlands has more than 160 such areas, and EU rules mandate that they be protected. However, according to government data, two-thirds of the Natura 2000 areas in the Netherlands exceed critical limits for nitrogen.

Average Nitrogen Emissions by EU Member State (N/kg)



Source: The Netherlands Organization (TNO) for Applied Scientific Research

In response, the Dutch government instituted a program for tackling nitrogen in 2015. However, in May 2019, the Dutch Administrative Court of the Council of State nullified a number of permits granted by the Netherlands' competent authority for certain nitrogen emitting activities. The Court determined that the Netherlands had granted these permits in violation of the European Council directive on the conservation of natural habitats for wild flora and fauna.¹ As a result, construction permits were put on hold.

Subsequently, the government commissioned an external body, under the lead of Johan Remkes (a former Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands), to advise the cabinet on short-term solutions to address the nitrogen problem. The 'Remkes Committee' published its report at the end of September 2019.² For the agricultural sector, the Committee recommended the government find ways to reduce the livestock herd in the Netherlands (including looking at ways to buy-out farmers that are operating livestock enterprises near natural areas, while encouraging other farms to install additional emissions-control measures).

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A31992L0043>

² The full report (in Dutch) is available at: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2019/09/25/eerste-advies-adviescollege-stikstofproblematiek>

These proposals, coupled with a proposal from a Dutch political party to halve the nation's livestock herd, led Dutch farmers to come together in frustration. Specifically, the farmers argued they had made substantial efforts to reduce emissions in recent years, and believed that their role in providing food for the nation was being under-appreciated. As a result, thousands of farmers descended on The Hague in the fall of 2019 to protest measures that could possibly affect their business.

On November 13, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands announced a package of measures to cut nitrogen emissions. These measures were aimed at reducing emissions, in the short term, so that the economy could keep moving forward and necessary construction projects could be continued. One of the measures put forward was to reduce the speed limit on highways from 130 km/h to 100 km/h. The so-called nitrogen emergency bill passed the parliament in December (and took effect in March 2020). Additionally, in December, the government proposed to set aside €180 million (\$195 million) to buy-out swine farmers who would be willing to close their operations. Additional measures were also proposed; including modifying livestock feed mixes and mixing manure with water in order to reduce emissions.

Registration for the swine farmer buy-out scheme was officially opened in January 2020, and more Dutch pig farmers registered for the program than the amount of money could support. Therefore, the government set aside an additional €170 million (\$184 million) (increasing the total buy-out scheme's budget to €350 million {\$379 million}). An additional €172 million (\$186 million) was also made available for innovation to facilitate animal stables becoming more sustainable.

On April 22, the Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality announced that the government would invest an additional €5 billion (\$5.4 billion) over the next ten years to curb Dutch nitrogen emissions.³ The investments will be focused on nature restoration and encouraging farmers, industry, aviation, and shipping to reduce their emissions. The intent of the program is to significantly reduce nitrogen deposits by 2030. Through these measures, the government believes at least 50 percent of nitrogen-sensitive land in Natura 2000 areas will measure below critical deposition values (< 255 mole per hectare) in ten years. In order to ensure that this target will be reached, progress will be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis.

€3 billion (\$3.25 billion) of the fund will be used to restore protected nature reserves. The remaining €2 billion (\$2.17 billion) will be invested in measures aimed at reducing nitrogen emissions at their source. The Cabinet reportedly also wants to extend additional opportunities to help farmers leave the industry if they would like so that nitrogen emissions can be further reduced. Reportedly, the previous program to buy-out swine farmers will be extended to include interested cattle farmers (using some of the €2 billion referenced above) -- bringing the total cost of the buy-out program to €1 billion (\$1.1 billion). Moreover, in addition to the €172 million referenced above, €280 million (\$303 million) will also be taken from the fund to provide additional support for farmers that invest in low-emission housing systems. The additional funds are expected to help expedite modernization and further reduce emissions.

³ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/04/24/stikstofaanpak-versterkt-natuur-en-biedt-economisch-perspectief>

Some Dutch farmers have expressed concern that the nitrogen measures proposed by the government are expensive, will not significantly improve the environment, and could lead to rural flight. The Netherlands Agricultural and Horticultural Association (known by its Dutch acronym of LTO) argued that the government is investing too little in the future of the Dutch agricultural sector. The organization argued that farmers who are working to reduce nitrogen emissions by modifying cattle feed and by diluting manure are not receiving enough financial support. Moreover, the LTO has commented that the funding set aside for innovations to reduce the environmental impact of farm stables is also insufficient.⁴ The LTO and another farmer group have indicated they are considering pursuing legal action against the State. Additionally, some Dutch environmental organizations are also disappointed by the proposals (and are threatening litigation). They are arguing that the measures are not strict enough and will not sufficiently enhance the quality of nature.⁵

Attachments:

No Attachments.

⁴ <https://www.boerderij.nl/Home/Nieuws/2020/4/18-miljard-voor-stikstofluwe-landbouw-575405E/>

⁵ See, e.g., <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2331660-milieuorganisaties-opnieuw-naar-de-rechter-om-stikstofplannen.html>