

REPORT

Scoping report

SEA National Programme for Rural Areas

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TRANSLATION of the Notitie Reikwijdte en Detailniveau voor het planMER Nationaal Programma Landelijk Gebied.

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1 Introduction

This is the Memorandum of scope and level of detail (NRD); the first step towards the Strategic Environmental Assessment report for the National Programme for Rural Areas¹ (NPLG). The NRD describes what is to be investigated in the SEA report (the scope) and at what level of detail. This memorandum will be used to inform stakeholders and to consult administrative bodies and legal advisors on the scope and detail of the SEA report for the NPLG. The Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment will also be called upon to issue recommendations on this memorandum. Anyone is also able to respond to the NRD by submitting a vision document. This chapter provides the initial introduction to the NPLG, and describes why an SEA report has been drawn up for the NPLG. Section 1.3 contains the reading guide for this NRD.

1.1 Strategic Environmental Assessment for the National Programme for Rural Areas (NPLG)

The NPLG, a programme under the Environment and Planning Act², is a substantive policy document that elaborates and describes the policy from the NOVI (National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment) for the layout of the rural Netherlands. The NPLG is adopted by the Cabinet, but is interadministrative in nature and requires collaboration between municipalities, provinces, water authorities and national government. In addition, the NPLG is self-binding, which means that in reaching its decisions, national government must take account of the NPLG. The NPLG lays down structuring (indicative) choices and (regional) goals, as the basis for integrated provincial programmes for rural areas – for the sake of simplicity referred to here as ‘broad area programmes’. For now, national government is presenting the indicative ideas to regional governments, under the control of the provinces.

1.2 Why a strategic environmental assessment?

Difference between SEA and SEA report

The abbreviation SEA (Strategic Environmental Assessment) relates to the procedure while the term SEA report refers to the eventual environmental report in which results of the study are recorded.

The NPLG is a programme subject to a compulsory Strategic Environmental Assessment according to the extended procedure, because it is a programme (generic designation under Section 16.34 of the Environment and Planning Act) that sets the framework for decisions subject to compulsory EIA (Section 16.36 of the Environment and Planning Act). The purpose of the SEA as an instrument is to take full account of the interests of the human environment, people and nature, and at the earliest stage, in the event of important and strategic decisions. An SEA is a procedure according to which an investigation is conducted into environmental impact. The results of the investigation are described in a report; the SEA report. The SEA report provides an insight into the effects of the possible solutions for arriving at the policy objectives. In this way, the SEA report can contribute to the human environment in the process of planning and decision making.

The SEA procedure specifies that the public must be given an opportunity to deliver input and to express its interests, thereby engaging civil society in the decision-making process. The NRD presents the subjects that will be covered by the SEA. The public then have an opportunity to present their visions in the

¹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/omgevingswet/nationaal-programma-landelijk-gebied>

² <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/omgevingswet>

participation stage. Public participation results in improved plans and better decisions. The SEA also ensures greater transparency regarding the effects of the decisions.

1.3 Reading guide

Chapter 2 discusses why the National Programme for Rural Areas has been drawn up, together with the functions and objectives of the NPLG, and the relationship between the NPLG and other plans and initiatives. Chapter 3 provides further explanation of the proposed solutions for rural areas, with the alternatives and variations to be investigated. Chapter 4 describes how the effects of the proposal will be investigated in the SEA report. Chapter 5 concludes with the procedures to be followed and the related roles.

2 The National Programme for Rural Areas

2.1 Why the NPLG?

The NPLG is a logical consequence of the [National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment](#)³ (NOVI) and is integral to the Coalition Agreement. According to the definition of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), the term rural area refers to the whole of the Netherlands, with the exception of urban areas and the large waters.

Problem definition

As a consequence of climate change, there is growing pressure on the vitality of rural areas and the quality of the (living) environment in rural areas. Moreover, rural areas are affected by the negative impact of nitrogen deposition, the emission of greenhouse gases, water shortages and periods of flooding, biodiversity loss, soil subsidence, poor water quality and salination. As a consequence, now and in the future, without far-reaching measures, it will not be possible to comply with a number of compulsory international objectives, as laid down among others in the Bird and Habitats Directive, the Water Framework Directive and the climate goals.

What decisions will be taken in the NPLG?

The NPLG forms the basis for area programmes and contains the national objectives, an affirmation of the structuring choices and a description of the approach to administration. The NPLG decides on two issues, namely:

- 1) The spatial distribution of the various tasks (nature, water, climate).
- 2) The structuring choices: these comprise structuring principles that set the course for spatial planning. The choices relate to the desirability and undesirability of (new) activities in rural areas. As such, the NPLG describes the course for the spatial elaboration of the area programmes by the provinces.

In other words, the NPLG does not deal with the packages of measures themselves: as part of the area programmes, these will be drawn up by the provinces, and comprise measures and packages of measures for achieving the goals. The NPLG instead forms the framework, within which the structuring choices are laid out.

2.2 The functions of the NPLG

The primary task of the NPLG is to ensure implementation of the (inter)national objectives for nature and nitrogen, water, soil and climate. In this way, the aim of the NPLG is to arrive at a more futureproof structure for our rural areas. This demonstrates considerable overlap with other (international) tasks and interests in rural areas (see section 2.4). To ensure mutual support, a number of these tasks are brought together in the NPLG, in the form of a cohesive approach for rural areas. At the end of the day, the international objectives for nature and nitrogen, water, soil and climate must be translated into national and regional goals. On that basis, the policy laid out in the NPLG can be adopted and implemented.

The NPLG fulfils four functions:

1. **Futureproof development of rural areas** Also with a view to satisfying international obligations in the field of nature, climate and water, we must make sure that the capacity inherent in the water and soil system is taken as the starting point for land use in rural areas.

³ <https://www.denationaleomgevingsvisie.nl/default.aspx>

2. **Ensuring that choices are made about supraregional distribution and quality issues in rural areas**, now and for the long term. This will require further implementation and interpretation of the three consideration principles from the NOVI:
 - a. Combinations of functions take precedence over single functions;
 - b. Characteristics and identity of an area are the central focus;
 - c. Shifting of responsibilities is prevented.
3. **Protecting and promoting vital rural areas**, as a pleasant, healthy and safe place to live, work, do business and spend leisure time. With a lively and attractive landscape in which there is space for vital agriculture, resilient nature and other functions.
4. **A learning approach for interadministrative cooperation with a coherent contribution from national government** for rural areas and an area-specific work approach for realising these substantive objectives.

2.3 The objectives of the NPLG

The NPLG is aimed at ensuring the futureproof development of rural areas while satisfying international obligations for nature (including the national targets for nitrogen), water and climate. These international obligations are then translated in the following specific targets as summarised in Table 1. The targets are specified in the [Development Document for the National Programme for Rural Areas](#)⁴.

These international obligations are then translated into the following concrete objectives, taken from the Development Document for the NPLG:

Table 1: Summary overview of regional objectives NPLG

Theme	Objectives
Natural resources	30% nature recovery Birds and Habitats Directive (VHR) (2030)
	Indicative national area and quality challenge in nature for 30% VHR and favourable conservation status
	Per province an (indicative) spatial translation of the necessary nitrogen reduction. This effort is part of the total required nitrogen reduction essential for achieving the national targets: 2025: 40% of area with nitrogen-sensitive habitats within N2000 below the critical deposition value • 2030: 74% of area with nitrogen-sensitive habitats within N2000 below the critical deposition value
	Area challenge per province for new woodland (2030), rising to 37,400 hectares
	Remaining area challenges per province for Nature Network Netherlands (NNN), rising to 40,571 hectares (2027)
	Hydrological conditions N2000 areas in order (2027)
	10% green-blue networking (2050) of which half will have been achieved in 2030
Water	Concentrations of nutrients (P and N) in bodies of groundwater and surface water satisfy legal standards (2027)
	Concentrations of crop protection agents in bodies of groundwater and surface water satisfy legal standards (2027)
	Bodies of groundwater satisfy the standard for good quantitative status (2027)

⁴ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2022/11/25/ontwikkeldocument-nationaal-programma-landelijk-gebied>

	Policy, layout and management adapted to the changing climate. Damage and disruption due to extreme weather limited as far as possible (2050)
Climate (greenhouse gases)	Emission reduction challenges greenhouse gases peat pastureland for 6 provinces (2030) as part of the national challenge Greenhouse gases land use amounting to 1 Mtonne CO ₂ eq (2030)
	National emission reduction challenge greenhouse gases for livestock farming and arable farming (manure application in arable farming) of 5 Mtonne CO ₂ eq (by 2030). Still to be allocated per province, based on still to be determined allocation key.
	To satisfy the Global Methane Pledge, a methane emission reduction in livestock farming and arable farming of at least 3.82 Mtonne CO ₂ eq must have been achieved with the NPLG by 2030.
	National carbon sequestration in trees/woodland/nature of 0.4 - 0.8 Mtonne CO ₂ eq and in agricultural soil of 0.5 Mtonne CO ₂ eq (2030) (Trees/woodland/nature achieved via afforestation strategy).

Explanatory notes to individual elements: natural resources

The primary objective for natural resources is that before 2030, 30% of the shortfall in favourable conservation status can be bridged (baseline measurement laid down in the [Nature Recovery Regulation](#)⁵). This target is known as the '30% VHR nature recovery' and comprises three sub targets:

1. At the latest by 2030, measures will have been taken for:
 - a. 30% of the area of protected habitat types currently not in good condition should be raised to good condition, and;
 - b. 30% of the additional area necessary for a favourable conservation status of habitat types and habitats for species must be developed.
2. Taking measures so that in 2030, at least 30% of VHR species and habitat types currently with an unfavourable conservation status will have achieved a national favourable conservation status, or that a strong positive trend has been initiated.
3. At the latest by 2030, the national negative trends of all VHR species and habitat types should be halted as far as possible.

Further explanatory notes to individual elements: water

The water targets are laid down in law, both for chemical and ecological status. In respect of ecological status, for each body of water. There are targets for bodies of surface water and groundwater. For groundwater, the quantitative status is also important. See the [river basin management plans](#)⁶ and the [factsheets](#)⁷ on [waterkwaliteitsportaal.nl](#) for specific targets. The NPLG focuses on the contribution towards quality, from agriculture and land use, and on water availability, among others with a view to nature recovery.

Further explanatory notes to individual elements: climate

Targets for climate are as follows:

- Agriculture has an indicative residual emission challenge of 18.9 Mtonne CO₂ equivalents by 2030. This challenge must be achieved with measures in the [Coalition Agreement](#)⁸ (NPLG) and further implementation of the [Climate Agreement](#)⁹ and the [structural approach to nitrogen](#)¹⁰;

⁵ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2022/10/14/kamerbrief-bij-bnc-fiche-verordening-natuurherstel>

⁶ <https://www.helpdeskwater.nl/onderwerpen/wetgeving-beleid/kaderrichtlijn-water/stroomgebiedbeheerplannen-2022-2027/>

⁷ <https://www.waterkwaliteitsportaal.nl/>

⁸ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2022/01/10/coalitieakkoord-omzien-naar-elkaar-vooruitkijken-naar-de-toekomst>

⁹ <https://www.klimaatakkoord.nl/>

¹⁰ <https://www.aanpakstikstof.nl/>

- The indicative reduction challenge for livestock farming including manure application is 5 Mtonne CO₂ eq by 2030 as compared with the Climate and Energy Outlook 2021¹¹ (KEV2021) in combination with the integrated area approach via livestock farming and arable farming;
- The Netherlands has committed to the Global Methane Pledge¹². On that basis, by 2030, the Netherlands must emit 30% less methane compared with 2020. The integrated area approach of the NPLG in these areas must deliver at least 3.8 Mtonne methane reduction (working documents NPLG – 25 November). Depending on the choice of measures, this can be achieved as part of the 5 Mtonne challenge. Upon handover of the area programmes, an assessment will be made as to whether the methane challenge has also been met.

National government will allocate the national reduction challenge for climate for livestock farming (including manure application) of (an indicative) 5 Mtonne CO₂ eq by 2030 compared with KEV2021 in the NPLG, on a geographical basis (per province) according to the current CO₂ emissions per subsector, per province.

Compelling character and timeline of objectives

The objectives within the NPLG do not all share the same origin. There are differences in terms of the degree of compulsion and the nature of the international obligation, the legal and ecological consequences of non-compliance with an obligation and the deadline by which an obligation must have been met. The Development Document indicates that the objectives with the greatest weight and the shortest time horizon deserve the highest urgency in the implementation of measures.

2.4 Relationship with other plans and initiatives

NPLG as an iterative process

It is considered extremely important that the follow-up steps be taken in close collaboration with provinces, water authorities, municipalities, sectors, businesses and individual citizens in the areas. Each of these parties have their own responsibilities, knowledge and expertise. As area authority for the rural area, the provinces have an important role to play in elaborating the measures in the area processes, together with local and regional government bodies and area partners, with a view to achieving the NPLG objectives. For that reason, the NPLG is being developed as an interadministrative programme, to be implemented by national government, together with provinces, water authorities and municipalities. Sector and chain parties, financial parties, businesses and individual citizens are emphatically part of the transition of our rural areas. All stakeholders must be seen as equal parties at the table. National government and the provinces are responsible for ensuring the appropriate support. The challenges from the NPLG together form part of the 'spatial puzzle' that has to be completed nationally so as to create development space in the areas for all the objectives and ambitions at national level.

Tackling the challenges in these areas is an iterative process. In other words, not everything has to be done at once and a learning approach is the most appropriate. In developing the area programmes, the regional targets and choices per area will have to be increasingly refined and adjusted. One essential precondition is that there must be certainty that the ambitions of the NPLG will be achieved. Following assessment of the provincial area programmes by national government, the definitive regional targets will be laid down in the area programmes and in administrative agreements with provinces. As the area programmes are adopted, the provinces are automatically bound by these targets. National government will then place the regional targets as a set of frameworks in the NPLG programme.

What is the higher framework

¹¹ <https://www.pbl.nl/publicaties/klimaat-en-energieverkenning-2022>

¹² <https://www.globalmethanepledge.org/>

With the National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment (NOVI), national government has taken on a more active role in spatial planning. In the government agreement, ambitions were raised further and control over spatial planning was once again placed in the hands of national government. The NOVEX programme¹³ outlines these proposals and will achieve control on the basis of sound interadministrative cooperation, resulting specifically in a shared vision on the challenges, clear conditions and realistic implementation agreements. The NPLG is part of the NOVEX programme.

What are the subordinate plans and programmes?

To fulfil the ambitions of the NPLG, it is essential that all parties such as businesses, farmers and citizens be given a clear role in the steps that need to be taken for the future development of agriculture and rural areas. The agricultural sector is vital in this process, according to its role as food producer, manager of (agricultural) nature, green-blue networking, from a sociocultural and economic perspective and as the sector with the largest spatial claim. The elaboration of the NPLG therefore ties in closely with the letter from the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (LNV) about the future of agriculture (Letter to Parliament Future of Agriculture¹⁴ of 25 November 2022) and the Agriculture Agreement¹⁵ being developed by the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality together with the various parties and in which the principles of the NOVEX and the NPLG are taken as underlying parameters.

Agriculture Agreement

Farmers need clarity on what agriculture will look like in 2040, so that they can enjoy peace and confidence in fulfilling the targets in the field of nature, climate and water. Government, the chain and consumers must help farmers to produce more sustainably. These are the underlying principles for the Agriculture Agreement that Minister Adema of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (LNV) wishes to enter into with the agricultural organisations as well as nature organisations, local and regional authorities and chain parties, during the first quarter of 2023.

The (national) objectives from the NPLG will set the framework for the Agriculture Agreement. The elaboration of those objectives and the structuring choices in the NPLG, together with the design of the area processes, will be an iterative process that to a large extent will be fulfilled according to the Agriculture Agreement. Wherever the Agriculture Agreement has an impact on the elaboration of the structuring choices from the NPLG or the NOVEX programme, the elaboration of the structuring choices in the further application of those choices will be duly adapted or supplemented.

Many of the structuring choices in the Letter Water and Soil as Guiding Elements have the character of 'comply or explain'. This means that any deviation must be explicitly explainable, or verifiable, and that the targets still have to be achieved.

What is the relationship between the NPLG and other programmes?

In the relationship between the NPLG and other national programmes, a distinction is made between:

1. Broad spatial programmes such as the NOVI, in which there is a supervisory role for balancing the key spatial issues.
2. Programmes that demonstrate considerable substantive coherence and which require intensive cooperation at both a national and area level, including the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature

¹³ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2022/07/01/programma-novex>

¹⁴ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2022/11/25/kamerbrief-toekomst-landbouw>

¹⁵ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/11/25/sterke-duurzame-landbouwsector-2040>

Improvement Programme¹⁶, the Nature Programme¹⁷, the Letter Water and Soil as Guiding Elements¹⁸ and the Policy programme on Climate¹⁹.

3. Programmes with spatial impact based on other issues, which require harmonisation, including the Energy Main Structure Programme²⁰, the Urbanisation and Housing Programme²¹, the National Environmental Programme²², the Multi-Year Programme for Infrastructure, Spatial Planning and Transport²³ and the NOVEX process / Mooi Nederland.

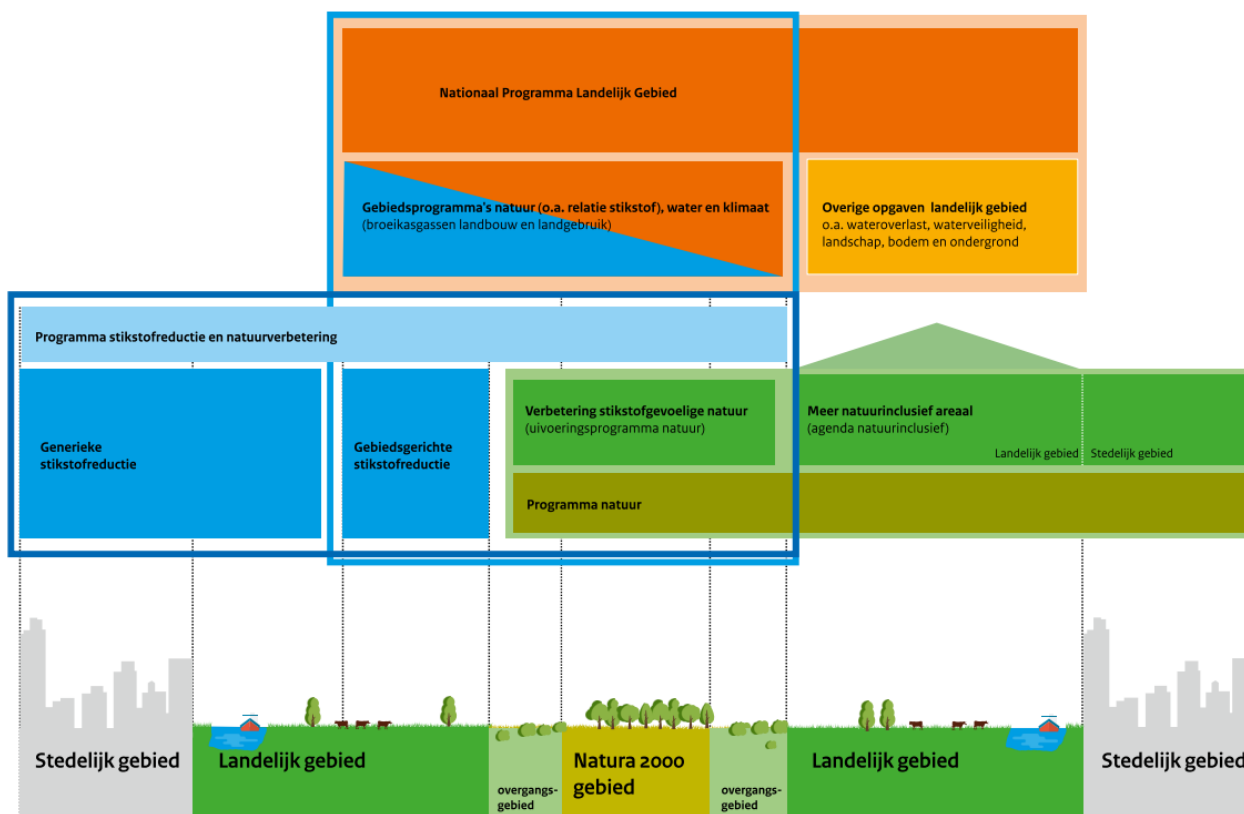


Figure 2-1 Relationship between the NPLG and programmes for nitrogen and nature. The two blue blocks show the overlap between the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme and the NPLG (source: Initial Memorandum National Programme for Rural Areas)

¹⁶ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2022/12/19/programma-stikstofreductie-en-natuurverbetering-2022-2035>

¹⁷ <https://www.aanpakstikstof.nl/de-stikstofaanpak/programma-natuur-en-aansluitende-programmas/programma-natuur>

¹⁸ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2022/11/25/water-en-bodem-sturend>

¹⁹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2022/06/02/ontwerp-beleidsprogramma-klimaat>

²⁰ <https://www.rvo.nl/onderwerpen/bureau-energieprojecten/lopende-projecten/peh>

²¹ <https://denationaleomgevingsvisie.nl/novex/nationale-programmas/programma-verstedelijking+en+wonen/default.aspx>

²² <https://nationaalmilieuprogramma.nl/default.aspx>

²³ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/ruimtelijke-ordening-en-gebiedsontwikkeling/meerjarenprogramma-infrastructuur-ruimte-en-transport-mirt>

3 The proposed solutions for Rural Areas

This section deals with the demarcation of the proposed solutions for achieving the objectives from the NPLG. The section starts with a description of the proposals. Subsequently, the possible alternatives and variations will be discussed. This includes the zero alternative, and the possibility of working with a sensitivity analysis.

3.1 The proposal

How will the objectives and frameworks be passed on to the provinces?

In order to achieve the objectives of the NPLG in respect of nature, soil, water and climate (as explained in section 2.3), and to safeguard the future-proofness of rural areas, structuring choices have been formulated. This set of structuring choices clarifies the frameworks and the bandwidth according to which the provinces themselves can determine what is and what is not achievable. The structuring choices are the result of various routes for policy development by national government with civil society partners, between elements of national policy and national and local governments. Appendix A3 describes the way in which these structural choices were arrived at.

It is typical for the ambition of the NPLG to create cohesion between national policy for rural areas and to demand cohesion from the provinces in the packages of measures. National government will sketch out the parameters within which the provinces themselves can indicate, within the area programmes, which land use and measures are appropriate to the area in question.

What are structuring choices?

The structuring choices contain ordered principles that set the course for spatial planning. The choices relate to the desirability and undesirability of (new) activities in rural areas. As such, the NPLG describes the course for the spatial elaboration of the area programmes by the provinces.

The structuring choices as a proposal

The proposal to be investigated in the SEA for the NPLG consist of a set of structuring choices from the NPLG Development Document, that together create a framework for the various provinces that can/must be used in order to achieve the nationally set targets, with provincial allocation keys (if present). In the SEA report, the effects of the structuring choices will be investigated.

The structuring choices can be divided into two categories:

- Choices with **direct continued effect** for the area programmes. The structuring choices from national government leave space for a tailored regional approach, but must be given a place in the area programmes. In principle, these choices are assumed as having continued effect in terms of policy for the area programmes. As a start is made on adopting the NPLG, the choices can be backed up by planological safeguarding and it is possible to investigate whether legal safeguarding is necessary.
- Choices which **boost** the drawing up of the area programmes. These are choices that can benefit from the approach for the area programmes, but which do not by definition contribute to the major objectives of the NPLG. These boosting opportunities relate to 'public health', 'animal diseases and zoonoses', 'odour nuisance' and 'particulate matter'. In these areas, the NPLG provides no new task-setting indicative targets, but there is a degree of urgency to tackle these problems in certain areas. The boosting choices must be fully considered, at the earliest possible stage, by the provinces, in drawing up the area programmes.

The SEA report will focus on the structuring choices with direct continued effect for the area programmes. In the provincial area programmes, the choices that offer boosting opportunities will be fully taken into account, at the earliest possible stage in drawing up the area programmes.

An overview of the structuring choices with a brief explanation can be found in Table 2 and, with the exception of agricultural land, is visualised in Figure 3-1. Appendix A1 provides a further explanation of the structuring choices, for each individual choice.

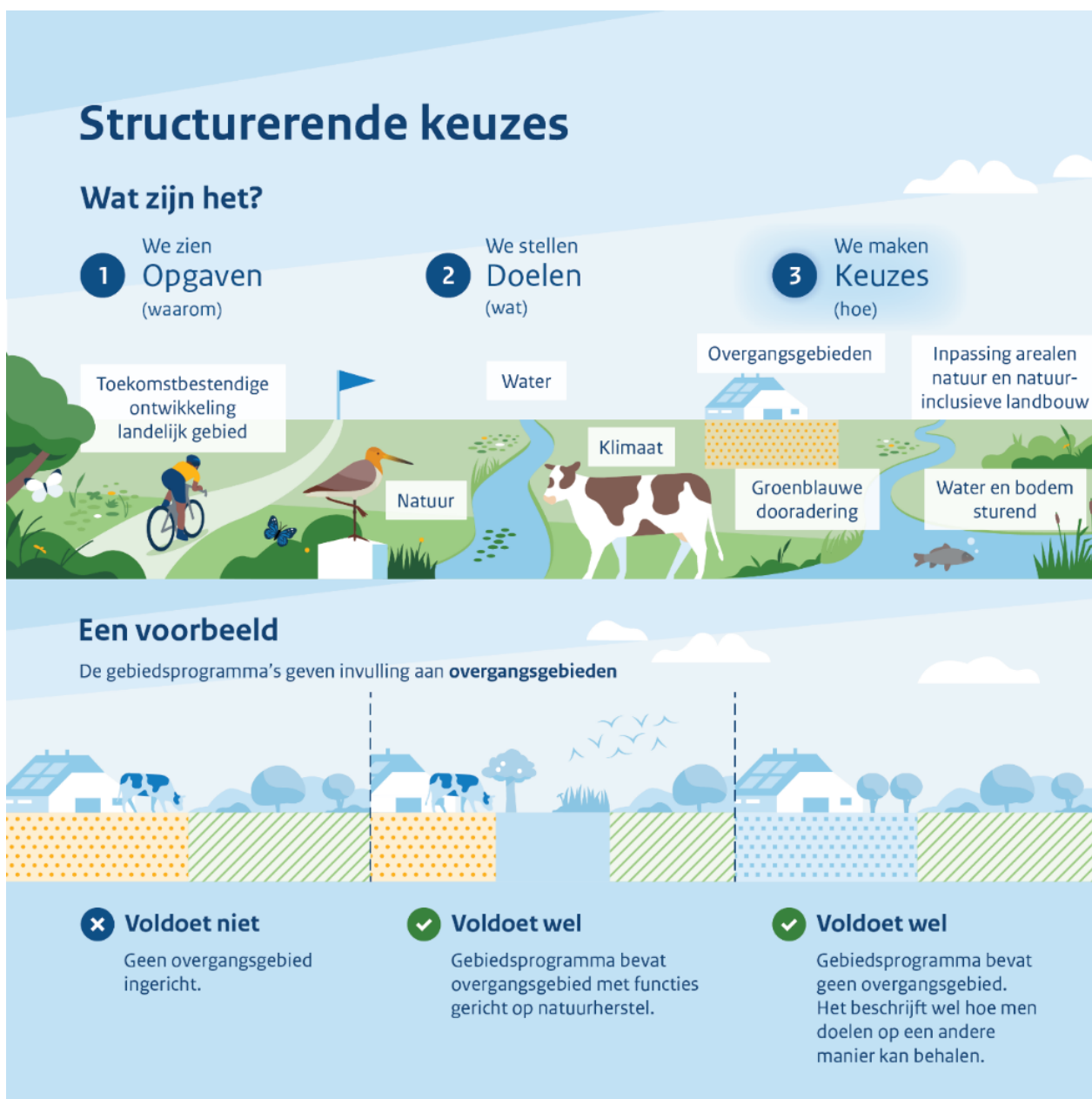


Figure 3-1: Structuring choices (Development Document National Programme for Rural Areas)

Table 2: Explanatory notes to structuring choices with direct continued effect

Policy choices	Structuring choices with direct continued effect	Brief explanation
Nature and nitrogen	Transition areas	An area around nitrogen-sensitive Natura 2000 areas in which functions and activities must contribute to nature recovery
	Integration of areas of agricultural nature/landscaping/new nature	Indicator for the way in which these new areas can be integrated and which characteristics of the area need to be taken into account
	Implementation of 10% green-blue networking	Explanation about the possibilities for integration of landscape elements that contribute to achieving 10% green-blue networking
Water and Soil as Guiding Elements	Buffer zones along stream valleys on high sandy soils	For water quality, spacious buffer zones in stream valleys must be achieved on sandy soils, also as contributors to groundwater infiltration
	Peatland water level plan	Working towards wetting Peatland areas to limit CO2 emissions and soil subsidence
	Space for water containment	Along flood defences and river beds, and alongside large waters in connection with level fluctuations. Better spatial design and for determining the limits on the use of groundwater and surface water. Sufficient space for peak containment
	Water availability in salination areas	Acceptance of temporary rise in regional salination and resultant adaptation of land use
Agriculture	Protection of agricultural land	Protection of agricultural land must receive specific attention in area processes. Principles and consideration framework will be laid down

3.2 Alternatives and variations to be investigated

The NPLG provides the provinces with frameworks and objectives. The targets set are fixed and the principle is that they will remain unchanged. Any variation must therefore be achieved within the frameworks set, and in the structuring choices. These structuring choices are by their very nature choices. They can be accompanied by more or less ambition. In addition, more and/or more detailed choices can be offered by national government. The total set of structuring choices is therefore not yet cast in stone but still offers space for development or adaptation, in the process of developing the SEA report.

In the SEA report for the NPLG, in addition to the **current situation**, in which relevant aspects of the existing status or quality of the environment will be investigated, a situation will also be outlined which shows what would happen if no National Programme for Rural Areas were to be drawn up and implemented. The result of this sketch is a so-called **zero alternative**. In other words, in this zero alternative, only the physical trends

and development (PBL, CBS) over the past decades will be examined and extrapolated to the target years 2030 and 2050. One example of autonomous physical developments is the annual percentage of salination or the decline in biodiversity. The zero alternative will be used as a reference point for the effect description in the SEA report.

The next step will be to describe the proposals, namely the structuring choices. The effects of the proposals and the zero alternative will be mapped out and assessed according to an increased risk or probability in protecting the various themes for the physical environment. This assessment will be carried out according to the 'Wheel of the Living Environment'. The 'Wheel of the Living Environment' is further explained in section 4.3.

Variations according to the level of ambition

Given the iterative nature of the NPLG and the relationship between other national programmes and parties, besides the proposal and the zero alternative, there is no other integrated alternative available.

Why no integrated alternative to the proposal at this time?

The elaboration of the structuring choices in the NPLG and the design of the area processes are part of an iterative process. Feedback from the provinces and area processes on the one hand and the outcomes of the Agriculture Agreement on the other, could deliver important further information. These processes may lead to changes to the structuring choices that have already been included in the NPLG Development Document published in November 2022 and/or additions of new structuring choices. Wherever possible, any changes will be included in the SEA procedure, for which the eventual set of structuring choices will be 'frozen' in March 2023. This version of the NPLG Development Document represents the proposals for which the environmental impact will be sketched out. For any alterations or additions to these structuring choices, a separate process will be implemented within the SEA.

For the inclusion of any new structuring choices, in principle, the NPLG operates the following criteria:

- The choice is the consequence of policy choices made and will contribute to the main objectives of the NPLG: (a) Nature and nitrogen; (b) Water (WFD); (c) Climate: agriculture and land use.
- The choice will set the course for provincial area programmes.
- The choice has a spatial dimension.

Nonetheless, in respect of certain elements, it is possible to consider what influence certain structuring choices could have if they were to be implemented in a different way. The proposal is to conduct a more extensive observation on the basis of sensitivity analyses from various angles of approach.

This can for example be achieved by varying in the level of ambition within the structuring choices.

Examples of structuring choices in which variation is possible include:

- Green-blue networking, the timeline for various areas
- Degree of extensive land use by dairy farming (Agriculture Agreement)
- Surface level for peatland, deviations must be explicitly explainable and verifiable and not be achieved at the expense of the target
- Groundwater level high sandy soils, deviations must be explicitly explainable and verifiable and not be achieved at the expense of the target
- Scope and regime for buffer zones (stream valleys), deviations must be explicitly explainable and verifiable, and not be achieved at the expense of the target
- Scope, location and regime (use/legal status) transition areas Natura 2000
- Extensification sand/clay/peat
- Additional nature-inclusive agriculture and nature, how much and what type of nature and where (the possibility of shifting between nature area and agricultural nature)

Variations on management according to area-specific choices

If one or more structuring choices contribute insufficiently to achieving the targets set, it may be interesting to consider the potential effect if there were to be more control from national government in respect of the (compulsory) application of specific structuring choices for a particular area (area-specific). This is another possible variation on the structuring choices that could be investigated in the SEA report in the form of a sensitivity analysis. Insight into this variation can be useful in considering whether national or provincial government should focus more on a specific structuring choice.

One possible example is the 'protection of usable agricultural land'. There are two possible variations on the choice from the Development Document. One variation relating to the underlying reasons for the choice made (e.g. protecting highly productive land). And a variation for the degree of control from national government, or policy freedom for the provinces (whereby in this case the choice has been made in favour of policy freedom).

Potential solutions in brief:

The structuring choices are central to the NRD and the SEA report and are the parameters that can be adjusted, and which in some cases are subject to particular bandwidths (for example the groundwater level between 20 cm to 40 cm below ground level). In the SEA report, the influence on the effects will be investigated, as a consequence of making adjustments. Wherever possible, the direct consequences in terms of targets will be considered in quantitative terms, or alternatively in qualitative terms, while the boosting targets and environmental quality will be assessed in qualitative terms. On the basis of these insights, more specific choices can be made in the design of the NPLG.

Appendix A3 provides a detailed description for each structuring choice of whether and if yes how variation is possible.

4 Assessment framework and method

In the SEA, the possible considerable effects on the environment, in particular on the physical environment, will be considered from a broad approach. This will take place at strategic, outline level, which matches with the level of abstraction of the elaboration of the NPLG in each phase. Wherever policy choices are outline choices, the effects will be reproduced, in outline.

Given the strategic character and the level of abstraction of the NPLG, the effect assessment in the SEA report will for the most part be a qualitative assessment of opportunities and risks, and where possible of realistic effects. These effects, risks and opportunities will be 'scored' on the basis of expert judgement, making use of already available information. Wherever possible and meaningful, effects will be considered in quantitative terms.

The opportunities and risks and any actual effects are described and subsequently scored in relation to a reference situation. The zero alternative, or reference situation, provides the basis against which the effects of the proposal are compared and contrasted. In the SEA report, for each theme in the Wheel of the Living Environment (see section 4.2 for more information), an indication will be given of the current situation, the current trends and the score for the current situation and trends compared with the existing targets/standards. In addition, the effects of the structuring choices (namely the proposal) on the environmental themes will be mapped out in the SEA report.

4.1 Achieving the targets

The aim of the NPLG is to arrive at an improvement in environmental quality. The NPLG will describe the structuring choices to be elaborated within the provincial area programmes, with measures. The SEA report for the NPLG will show whether the structuring choices represent a step in the right direction, towards achieving the targets as laid down in section 2.2.

Different targets are laid down in the NPLG. These targets determine the themes (nature, nitrogen, water, climate) according to which the zero alternative and the proposal will be investigated (see section 4.4 for more information). Effects will be mapped out both for the zero alternative and for the proposal. The targets achieved will not be investigated in the SEA report, because these will in fact be investigated by knowledge institutions in an ex ante calculation for the NPLG (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency in collaboration with others).

4.2 Assessment framework 'Wheel of the Living Environment'

The basis for the assessment framework will be the 'Wheel of the Living Environment' (see Figure 4-1). This 'Wheel' was also employed in the SEA for the National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment (NOVI). The Wheel makes it possible to develop a broad and integrated approach to assessing the effects for the physical environment. In addition, the Wheel ties in well with the objective of the Environment and Planning Act, namely:

"With a view to ensuring sustainable development, the habitability of the country and the protection and improvement of the living environmental quality, this Act aims to achieve the following interrelated objectives: a) to achieve and maintain a safe and healthy physical environment and good environmental quality, and b) to effectively manage, use and develop the physical environment in order to perform societal needs." [Environment and Planning Act, Article 1.3].

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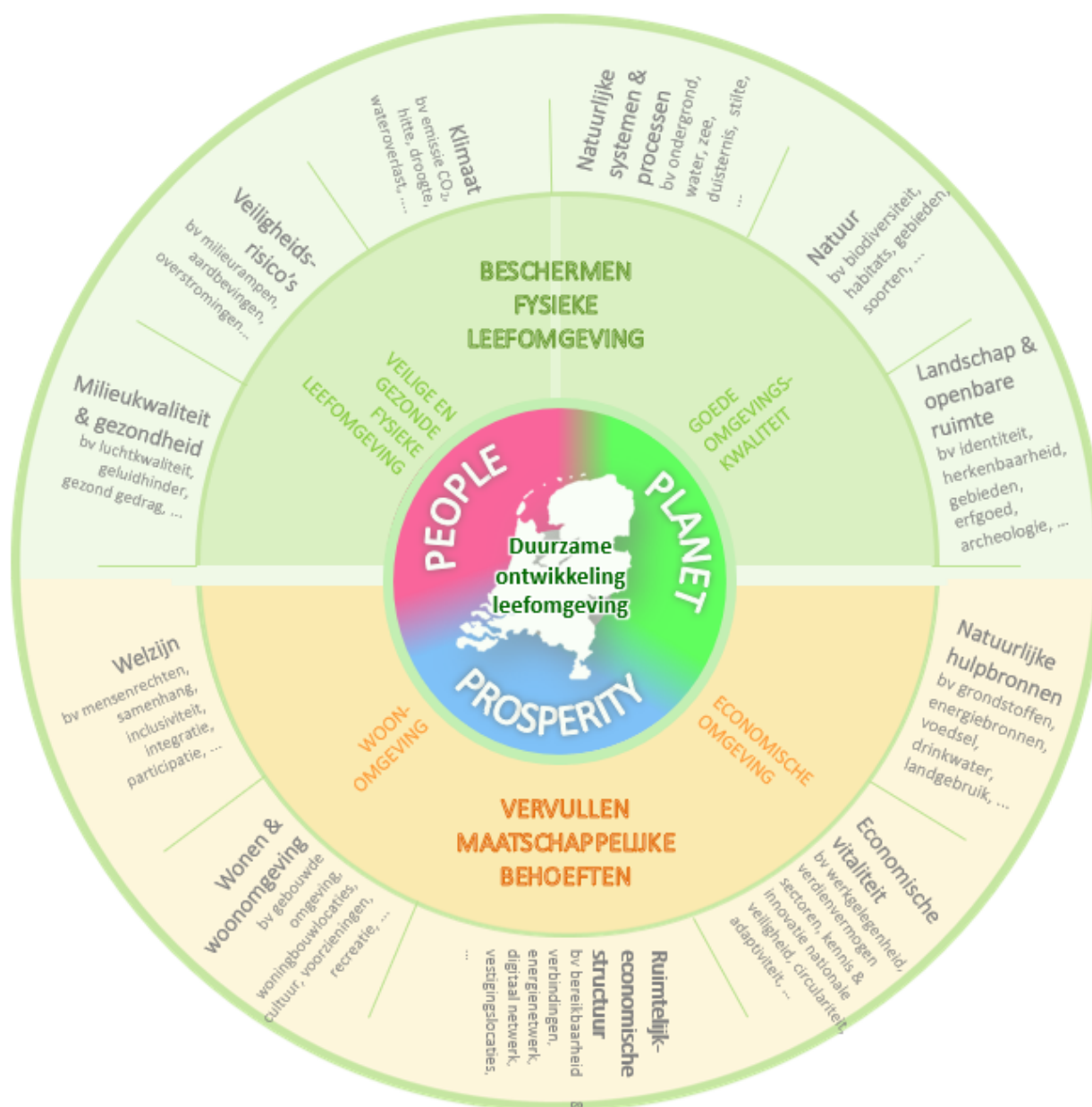


Figure 4-1: Wheel of the Living Environment from the NOVI, for the SEA report NPLG

In the Wheel, the central focus is on sustainable development, in line with the SEA. The objective is to achieve a sustainable balance between 'people, planet and prosperity'. These three aspects form the centre of the Wheel.

The outer layer of the Wheel contains the key aspects and criteria for each topic, grouped into a manageable number of subjects. These subjects can be further specified and supplemented, where necessary. Some of these subjects may overlap or influence each other.

The Wheel of the Living Environment is not cast in stone. At its heart, the Wheel is an outline that becomes more specific towards its outer edge, with space for flexibility; all bearing in mind that the decision-making information that is reproduced in the Wheel is meaningful.

4.3 The Wheel and the NPLG

The Wheel of the Living Environment as employed in the NOVI, is used here as a starting point for the SEA report for the NPLG, although not every aspect is relevant to the objectives of the NPLG. For that reason, each aspect will be considered critically, also in terms of relevance of the aspect for the study. This assessment will take place in sessions with experts and specialists, who among others will be responsible for conducting the study.

In all probability, the focus of the SEA report will be on the upper half of the Wheel, namely the angle of approach 'protecting the physical environment'. This is because the objectives of the NPLG, nature, water and climate, are all about the physical environment. The eventual elaboration will also impact on the aspects from the bottom angle of approach, but it will not be possible to determine these aspects until the NPLG has been elaborated in specific plans, at provincial level. For example, in the elaboration of the area programmes, the socioeconomic effects will be mapped out (see the block below for a further explanation).

Explanation of socioeconomic effects in the area programmes

An insight into the expected socioeconomic effects of the area programme is essential in order to gain an understanding of the broader effects of the transition in rural areas. For that reason, provinces must include a socioeconomic effect analysis in their area programme. The actual nature of the socioeconomic effects of a programme will differ from region to region. It will be up to the provinces to conduct the socioeconomic effect analysis because specifically they are able to make use of the practical knowledge and expertise within the province itself. Results of the analysis can be used by provinces for considering measures, in making choices about the way in which the objectives will be achieved and which possible flanking policy is appropriate. The socioeconomic effects will be considered in the integrated assessment of the area programmes by national government. The Cabinet will consider these analyses in context, and will use them for further assessment and for determining whether additional policy is needed.

4.4 Detail level

Assessment of the reference situation

The reference situation (zero alternative) consists of extrapolating autonomous physical trends and developments against the current situation. On the basis of recent sources, the current status of the living environment (current situation) and reference situation for the key themes will be mapped out. Both the current situation and the reference situation will be described where possible in quantitative terms, and otherwise in qualitative terms, and a score will be awarded. This will be carried out on the basis of literature and expert judgement. These scores are summarised in a circle diagram (see figure below). In the SEA report, the effects of the proposals will be compared with this reference situation.

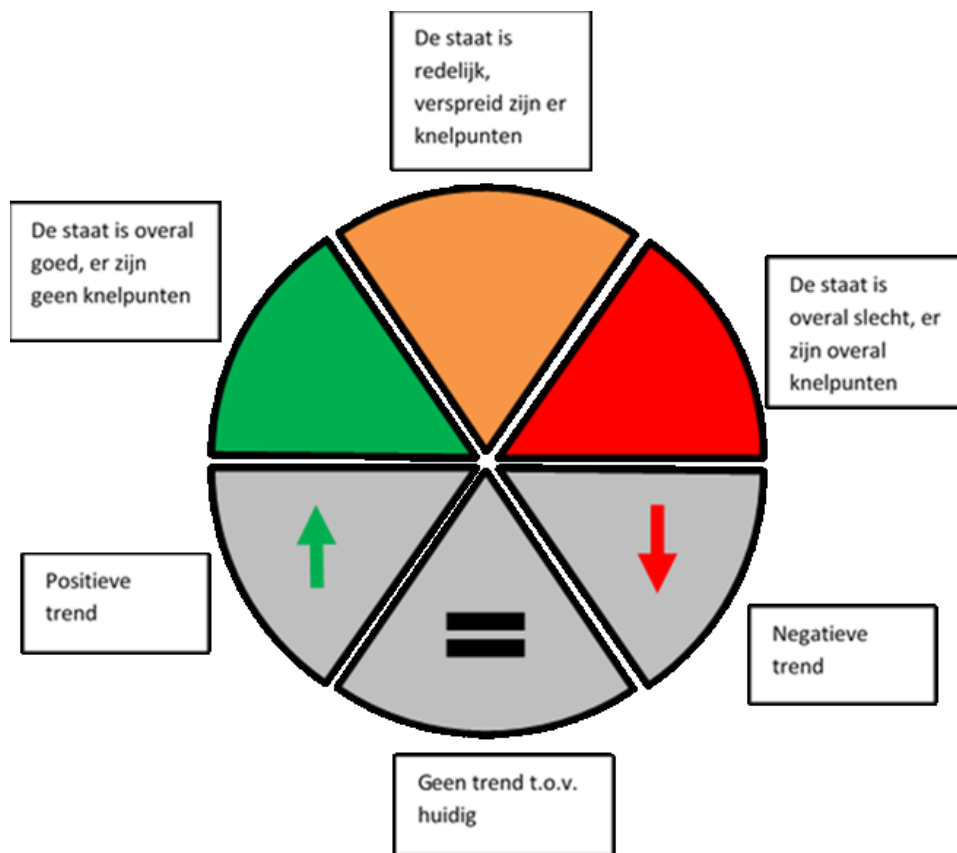


Figure 4-2: Scoring the current and reference situation

Nuancing in respect of the status in Figure 4-2 will be applied according to the review round of the second draft. This will take place in the iReport.

Assessment of proposal

An indication will be given of which structuring choices with direct continued effect for the area programmes and spatial distribution of tasks apply to each proposal. Based on this information, an assessment will be made of expected effects for each theme. The effects are based on literature and expert judgement. The effects can be given a qualitative score, on a five-point scale.

In scoring the effects, the following argumentation will apply:

- The expectation that the structuring choices could result in specific effects; the structuring choices are so specific that it is probable that a decision now can already result in interventions with possible effects.
- The expectation that the structuring choices could result in opportunities of positive or negative effects that must be considered in follow-up decisions. These follow-up decisions are the consequence of the NPLG, and could result in interventions with possible effects. At the moment of writing, it is uncertain to what extent these effects may occur in the longer term.

As part of the process of describing the effects in the SEA report, for each structuring choice with direct continued effect for the area programmes, an estimate will be made of the expected effects, risks and opportunities, for all criteria from the Wheel of the Living Environment. This will also include the themes for the boosting opportunities, including effects for odour, particulate matter, animal diseases and zoonoses. These effects will be elaborated qualitatively and where possible quantitatively, but both will follow the same

method in determining the score. The following five-point scale has been developed for the allocation of the score (see Table 3).

Table 3: Scale for scoring the effects in respect of the reference situation

Score:	Explanation:
•	Positive effect is realistic
↑	Possibility of positive effect, depending on the follow-up decisions to be taken
•	No or practically no consequences
↓	Possibility of negative effect, depending on the follow-up decisions to be taken
•	Negative effect is realistic

Scoring will take place at the level of the indicators from the Wheel In the event of realistic effects, positive (+) or negative (-), as compared with the reference situation, the explanatory notes will provide an indication of the scale of the eventual expected effect and which structuring choice contributed to that effect. The structuring choices must be so specific that they can be evaluated/assessed for (possible) specific effects.

Opportunities and risks are shown as a bandwidth, as the possibility of a positive effect (↑) or as the possibility of a negative effect (↓), compared with the reference situation. For each indicator, both opportunities and risks may occur. It is also possible to apply multiple arrows per indicator. In the description of the opportunity or the risk, an indication is given of the scale and the nature of risks and opportunities. If there is no effect, opportunity or risk, this will be indicated by a white dot; after all, in the event of no effect, the reference situation remains unchanged.

In connection with the strategic character of the NPLG, effects can often only be mapped out in outline and often only on the basis of expert judgement. There is uncertainty about the way in which the policy will eventually be implemented and uncertainty about the long-term implications of policy for the physical environment. It is therefore essential that any effects, opportunities and risks be systematically recorded, as logically as possible, in the SEA report.

In the SEA report, the emphasis in assessing the NPLG will be on the set of structuring choices that form part of the proposal. The results of the assessment of the reference situation and the proposal are placed in a comparison table. The explanatory notes to this table will then zoom in on the most relevant environmental impact for the specific structuring choices. The assessment will take place on the basis of existing studies and expert judgement (reflection sessions with experts and specialists). In addition, for the variations in structuring choices, sensitivity analyses will be conducted. These assessments, at observational level, will take place on the basis of the outcomes of the comparison table.

The SEA report ends with (a) the translation of the scores into a final judgement about the 'effectiveness' of the NPLG; b) what the scoring of the effects as compared with the reference situation means, in terms of points for attention for the area programmes; c) what the scores deliver in terms of points for attention for the ongoing iterations of the NPLG.

4.5 Content of the SEA report

The SEA as laid down in the Environment and Planning Act and the Environment Decree²⁴ is intended to ensure that environmental interests are considered fully and at the earliest possible stage in the decision-making process. The content of the SEA report considers the environmental effects in the broadest sense.

The SEA report contains the information that can reasonably be required, also given the current state of knowledge and assessment methods and the content of the plan or programme. The SEA report at least contains the following information:

- a. a description of the content of the plan or programme and reasonable alternatives, the most important objectives of the plan or programme and the relationship with other relevant plans and programmes;
- b. the relevant aspects of the existing status or quality of the environment and the possible development of that status or quality if the plan or programme is not implemented;
- c. the environmental characteristics of areas for which the effects of the plan or programme may be considerable;
- d. all existing environment problems relevant for the plan or programme, in particular the problems in areas in which the importance of protecting the environment plays a key role;
- e. a description of the way in which the objectives for protecting the environment laid down at international, community or national level, and other environmental considerations, are included in the plan or programme, in as much as relevant for the plan or programme;
- f. a description of the potential considerable environmental impact of the implementation of the plan or programme and of the reasonable alternatives, including an assessment of that environmental impact;
- g. the proposed measures to prevent, to mitigate or as far as possible to compensate for the serious negative environmental impact of the implementation of the plan or programme;
- h. arguments in favour of the selection of the investigated alternatives and a description of the way in which the environmental impact is recorded, including the difficulties experienced in gathering the required information such as technical shortcomings or missing knowledge;
- i. a description of the proposed monitoring measures; and
- j. a non-technical summary of the information issued on the basis of elements a through to i.

The content requirements on the SEA report are laid down in the Environmental Management Act in Section 7.7 (plans subject to compulsory EIA) and Section 7.23 (decisions subject to compulsory EIA).

²⁴ <https://iplo.nl/regelgeving/omgevingswet/omgevingsbesluit/>

5 Follow-up process and procedure

5.1 Process preparation for the National Programme for Rural Areas

The SEA report is linked to the planning procedure for the National Programme for Rural Areas and as such complies with that process. The (process) stages for arriving at a definitive NPLG including SEA report are described in outline below.

- To draw up the NPLG, account will be taken of the provision of enriching information from early participation, careful research for the SEA report and the periods of submission for examination. Sufficient time must be set aside for these steps. The challenge is that a version of the NPLG must be adopted on time (in July) to be used as the substantive framework for establishing the Transition Fund and as a basis for evaluating the draft area programmes from the provinces. It is also expected that further proposals will be formulated within national government processes that will run in parallel, and which must be given a place in the eventual NPLG, for example on the basis of the Agriculture Agreement and the further elaboration of the nature objectives.
- For that reason, the process will be structured with a **main track**, which, among other things, is important for the timely start of the study for the SEA report and careful evaluation of the effects of the proposed policy in the Preliminary Draft NPLG. There will be space in the preliminary draft to include policy changes and new insights. At the same time, a **secondary track** will be initiated, in which it will be possible to add supplements to the Draft NPLG.
- The draft NRD for submission for examination will be adopted at the start of March by the Sub-council for the physical environment and will be released in mid-March by the Council of Ministers, in the form of a Cabinet decision.
- Following permission and submission for examination, the eventual scope of the SEA report will be adopted at the end of June in the definitive NRD, with a Memorandum of Reply from the Minister for Nature and Nitrogen Policy. The studies for the SEA report will already have been started by that time.
- In July, the Minister for Nature and Nitrogen Policy (in consultation with the other ministers) will adopt the preliminary draft NPLG, for the development of the area programmes and the establishment of the transition fund. Any changes to objectives and structuring choices in respect of the moment at which the SEA report is frozen, will be reproduced in this draft version. The changes will then be investigated in the secondary track for the SEA report.
- There will be space within the secondary track for substantive additions in respect of the objectives and structuring choices in the preliminary draft NPLG (the content of the version produced in mid-March, to be adopted in July). These additions will have to be subject to a supplementary SEA report.
- The aim is to have the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment issue interim recommendations regarding any such supplementary SEA report (in respect of their recommendation concerning the draft NRD).
- The draft NPLG and the SEA report will be adopted by the Minister for Nature and Nitrogen Policy in the autumn, in time for submission for the preparation of policy visions.
- Any additions can be adopted simultaneously with (or as part of) the draft NPLG by the Minister for Nature and Nitrogen Policy (in consultation with the other ministers) prior to the submission of the draft NPLG and the SEA report in September, for the preparation of policy visions. If fundamentally new structuring choices emerge, these will be discussed in the Council of Ministers.
- After processing the policy visions and after receiving advice from the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment and any additions that are in line with the SEA report, the definitive NPLG and Memorandum of Reply can be adopted by the Minister for Nature and Nitrogen Policy following discussion in the Council of Ministers, in consultation with the other ministers, ready for discussion in the House of Representatives.

5.2 Initiator and Competent Authority

The decision for which this SEA report is to be drawn up is the National Programme for Rural Areas. For activities that may have serious environmental consequences, an SEA report may be required in the Netherlands. Appendices C and D to the Environmental Impact Assessment Decision indicate which activities this relates to, and under the Environment and Planning Act, it relates to projects referred to in Annex V to the Environment Decree. For this reason, an SEA report will be drawn up (see also section 1.2).

The competent authority for the decision is the Minister for Nature and Nitrogen Policy, in consultation with the Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning (VRO) and the Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management (I&W). Eventual decisions on the NPLG will be taken in the Council of Ministers. The initiator is the Director-General for Rural Areas & Nitrogen (DG LGS).

The following applies to interim decision moments for the NPLG and the SEA report:

- If they represent no fundamental substantive changes compared with the previously adopted frameworks, the minister can decide, as competent authority. Officially, this is determined by the DG LGS as formal initiator, and agreement will be sought in the principals consultation sessions (OGO with directors of LNV, I&W and BZK/VRO), while the principals will secure official and administrative approval in their own organisations.
- If fundamental changes or policy developments are implemented in the programme, the minister will announce these in the Council for the Physical Environment and the Council of Ministers.

5.3 SEA

The SEA is linked to the planning procedure for the National Programme for Rural Areas (NPLG). This means that the SEA report must be drawn up before the NPLG can be officially adopted. The SEA guarantees that the environmental interests are fully taken into account, at the earliest possible stage in the decision making process. This is laid down in law in the Environment and Planning Act and the Environment Decree, which represent a translation of the European regulations on strategic environmental assessments²⁵. Although the SEA must be carried out in the spirit of the Environment and Planning Act, the NRD will be published under current legislation and regulations such as the Environmental Impact Assessment Decree (Besluit m.e.r.)²⁶.

5.4 Participation

The NPLG and the provincial area programmes will have a major influence on the developments in rural areas. The transition in rural areas is a complex challenge that affects numerous topics, subjects and interests, both directly and indirectly. This calls for an approach with a heavy focus on dialogue and sufficient attention for listening and demonstrating understanding for sentiments and interests. Remkes once again underlined this fact in his recommendation²⁷ in October 2022. It is important that the involvement of civil society parties be given a clear place. Close involvement by stakeholder parties will contribute to better decision-making, more enriched policy and better policy implementation.

²⁵ The Environment and Planning Act has not yet come into effect. A voluntary programme adopted between 23 March 2016 and the coming into effect of the Environment and Planning Act applies if a programme is based on the Environment and Planning Act. This does however require that the programme satisfies the requirements imposed in the Environment and Planning Act on programmes. See section 4.11 of the Introduction Act.

²⁶ <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0006788/2020-12-18>

²⁷ https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail?id=2022Z18582&did=2022D39674

Moreover, the NPLG and the Provincial Area programmes are closely interrelated. The trick is to develop the two simultaneously, whereby relevant insights from the development of the area programmes are used for the draft NPLG. The participation plan provides for an approach according to these two policy lines of intensive interadministrative consultation and social participation, aimed at the establishment and enrichment of the NPLG.

The participation plan provides for three rounds of consultation: around the NRD, during the implementation of the study for the SEA report, and finally in drawing up the (preliminary) draft NPLG: a number of moments in the participation plan are focused specifically on the creation of the SEA report, whereby account will be taken of the contribution that can be expected from the NPLG itself. During interadministrative working conferences, feedback will be gathered about the distribution of the provincial targets, and substantive discussions will be held about the structuring choices and the frameworks, including discussions about the indicative budgets and the transition fund. The ambition is to arrive at a shared adoption of the targets and administrative involvement in determining choices. Discussions will also be held with civil society organisations, which will focus specifically on the structuring choices. In this process, the feedback from the civil society organisations will be actively included, and attempts will be made to create common added value.

The periods of formal submission for the development of policy visions will be used for participation, actively approaching stakeholders and civil society organisations. In addition to their contributions via the participation meetings, they will also be invited to submit their own visions. Between the moments of formal submission for the development of policy visions, discussions will be organised with stakeholders and administrative partners. During the second quarter, meetings will be organised for administrative partners and for the civil society organisations, aimed at impact assessment for drawing up the SEA report. In the period around the summer of 2023, the purpose of the meetings will be to generate input for the NPLG.

The overview of participation moments relevant for the SEA report are as follows.

Table 4: Participation moments for the SEA report

What	Who	When
Two information moments (digital) about recent policy development and submission of the NRD for examination	Interadministrative (digital)	2nd half of March
	Social partners (digital)	2nd half of March
Meeting about NRD: discussion of structuring choices and selected variations	Civil society partners	March
Meetings (physical) about (technical) check of the impact assessment of structuring choices. 1 meeting with civil society partners and (probably) 1 large interadministrative meeting	Interadministrative. One meeting, with 5 sub-sessions per area if necessary	May
	Civil society partners 1 physical session	May
NNTB meetings regarding submission of the Draft NPLG and SEA report for examination		September – November

Annexes

A1 List of abbreviations

Abbreviations:

- NRD – Memorandum Scope and Level of Detail
- NPLG – National Programme for Rural Areas
- NOVI – National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment
- OW – Environment and Planning Act
- m.e.r. – Strategic Environmental Assessment (the process)
- PlanMER – Strategic Environmental Assessment report
- SCP – Netherlands Institute for Social Research
- VHR – Bird and Habitats Directive
- WFD – Water Framework Directive
- gSvl – Favourable conservation status
- N2000 – Natura 2000 areas
- NNN – Nature Network Netherlands
- Ha – hectare
- Mtonne – Megatonne
- CO₂ – Carbon dioxide
- LNV – Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality
- LA – Agriculture Agreement
- RO – Spatial Planning
- RHDHV – Royal HaskoningDHV
- DG LGS – Director-General for Rural Areas & Nitrogen
- KEV2021 – Climate and Energy Outlook 2021

A2 Explanatory notes to Structuring choices

Below, the structuring choices are further explained for each choice, namely:

- Transition areas
- Integration of areas of nature and nature-inclusive agriculture
- Green-blue networking
- Water and Soil as Guiding Elements
- Preservation of agricultural land

A2.1 Transition areas

Transition areas are areas adjacent to Natura 2000 areas. These areas deliver a contribution to achieving the conservation objectives in the Natura 2000 areas in question. System recovery is essential in this respect. Challenges for biodiversity, nitrogen, climate, water and agriculture are simultaneously tackled in the transition areas. At present, these areas have a primarily agricultural function.

The structuring choice for transition areas ensures the area-specific approach for Natura 2000 areas for system recovery of the nature conservation area. Because the challenge differs in each area, it is not possible to implement a uniform approach. A vision and a tailor-made approach will be needed for each area, with clear target instructions. The scope and nature of the challenge will determine the approach and as such the contours and size of the area. On the basis of sound supporting arguments, this can even mean that a transition area is not necessary, for example because the conservation objectives are already achieved or can be achieved within the contours of the Natura 2000 area. The designation of a transition area is not an objective in itself, but a means of effectively implementing the central task in a cohesive manner.

The provinces will be called upon to further elaborate the transition areas in an area process. The location, size and package of measures in the transition area will be included in the area programme.

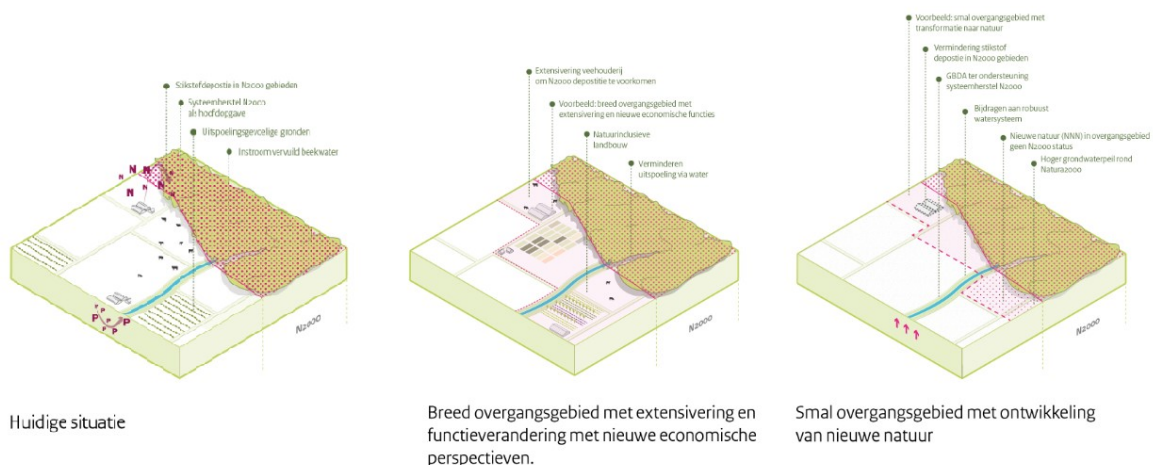


Figure 5-1: Transition areas (source: Development Document National Programme for Rural Areas).

A2.2 Integration of areas of nature and nature-inclusive agriculture

The nature objectives of the Birds and Habitats Directive (VHR) provide for the creation of new (non-Natura 2000) nature conservation areas and new areas of nature-inclusive agriculture, in which an agricultural function can be combined with a nature objective for certain agricultural species and habitat types. The choice is aimed at integrating these areas in locations that tie in optimally with the physical-geographical, hydrological and ecological circumstances in the area. The aim is to support the effectiveness of new areas of nature and nature-inclusive agriculture in achieving the favourable conservation status.

In creating these new areas, combinations can be made with other policy objectives in the field of green-blue networking and hectares of woodland from the [Afforestation Strategy](#)²⁸. Moreover, new areas of nature will help achieve the positioning, size and function of transition areas. This will occasionally call for an assessment of the spatial claims arising from the residual provincial tasks, which also continue to exist for the VHR beyond 2030. The profiles for VHR nature objective types identify the frameworks which must be satisfied in order to comply with the nature objectives. This means that there are optimal and suboptimal locations for achieving a specific habitat. If a suboptimal location is chosen, more space will possibly be needed for satisfying the nature objectives, because the areas thus created are unable to deliver the same nature value. Because of the already existing pressure on space in rural areas, it is often desirable to opt for the most optimal location.

Furthermore, in certain cases, it is possible to choose between creating new nature conservation areas or achieving the nature objectives via nature-inclusive areas, in which a combination with, for example, agricultural functions remains possible. If new areas of nature are achieved, the interface with agricultural areas must be restricted. This will reduce the mutual influence between these use functions.

²⁸ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/11/18/uitwerking-ambities-en-doelen-landelijke-bossenstrategie-en-beleidsagenda-2030>

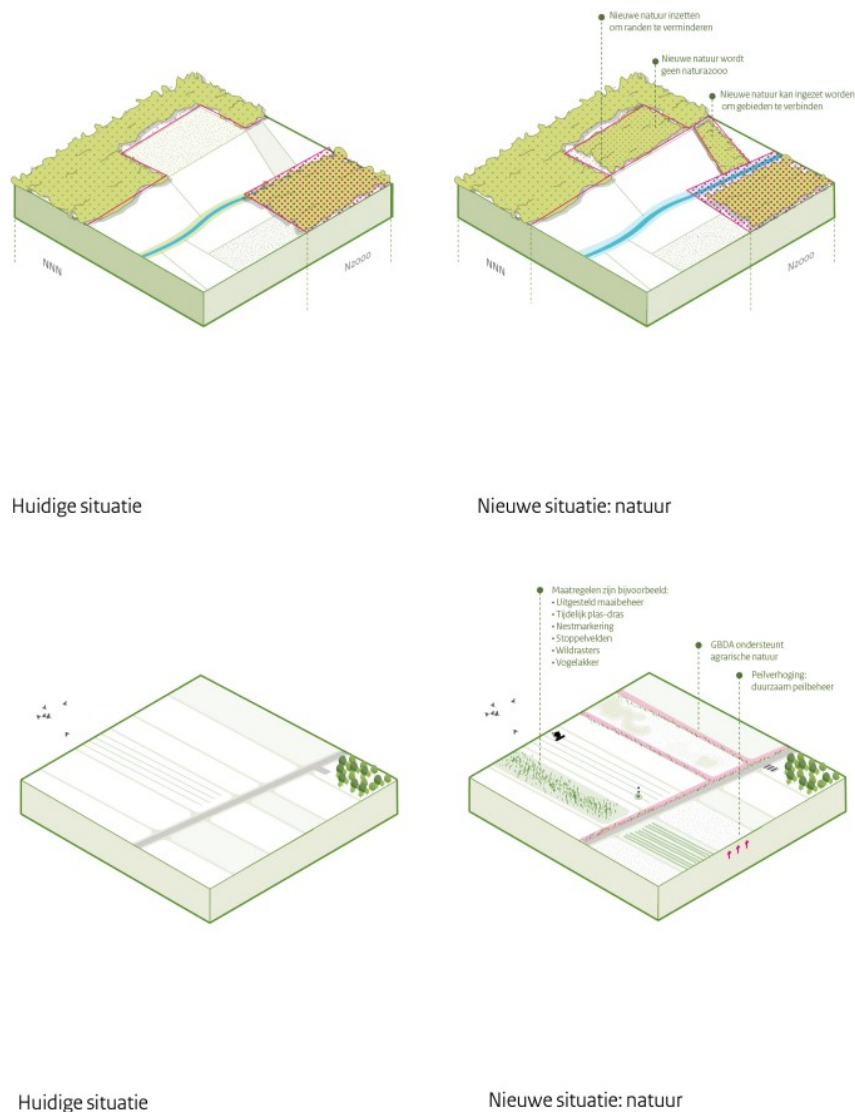


Figure 5-2: integration of new nature and new agricultural nature/agricultural land (source: Development Document National Programme for Rural Areas).

A2.3 Green-blue networking

Green-blue networking (GBDA) refers to the 'small' nature elements that play an important role in creating our landscape. The upper limit is a maximum size of a few hectares. For that reason, these are often referred to as small landscape elements (SLEs). These may take the form of points, lines or field-shaped elements. In addition to woody elements such as avenues, rows of trees, shelter belts, hedges, hedgerows, pollarded trees, wooded borders, willows and high-crested fruit orchards, these are elements with a herby vegetation and rough land and wet elements such as ditch banks, nature-friendly banks and pools. Ecologically managed ditches can also be included in the list of landscape elements, as can such elements as raised beetle banks and herb-rich field edges. These have a more dynamic character that ties in with the characteristics of arable landscapes. As well as making a positive contribution to VHR species, green-blue networking can in many ways make a positive contribution to sustainability in rural areas. Green-blue

networking can, for example, support natural pest control for agriculture, the creation of shadow along streams to improve water quality, carbon sequestration and the network can create a habitat for a large number of plant and animal species, which then serve as a basis for species higher up the food chain.

The structuring choice for green-blue networking helps ensure the optimum physical, geographical, hydrological and ecological circumstances in the creation of point, line and field-shaped elements that should result in the 10% green-blue networking target in rural areas. This means that the spatial distribution and species composition is appropriate to the soil and water in an area, and that green-blue networking, for example, calls for a different approach in water-rich areas than on high sandy soils. A match must also be sought with the characteristics of the landscape, as a way of reinforcing the area's character. The structuring choice also helps ensure the interconnection of point, line and field-shaped elements wherever possible. By creating the landscape elements in such a way that they are interconnected and create links between nature conservation areas and with green-blue structures within the built-up area, an optimum contribution is guaranteed towards the target for the VHR and basic nature quality.

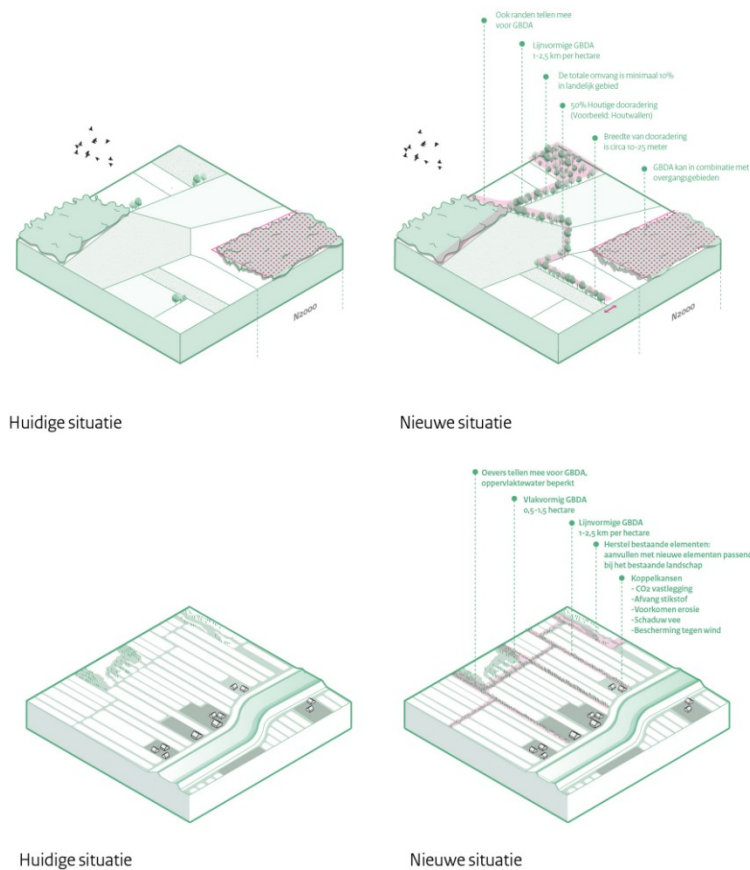


Figure 5-3: Green-blue networking, primarily green and primarily blue (source: Development Document National Programme for Rural Areas).

A2.4 Water and soil, spatial distribution:

In the Letter to Parliament Water and Soil as Guiding Elements, a number of choices are made that affect specific areas. These structuring choices involve a spatial distribution. The most important choices per area are explained below.

For 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. This will be safeguarded in area processes.
- We raise groundwater levels by possibly 10 cm to 50 cm. This will help prevent drying out in high sandy soils. Because this is a custom programme, it will be further elaborated in area processes.
- In the area processes, we will focus on large-scale recovery of stream valleys on sandy soils to improve water quality. This will not only ensure that the goals for water quality are achieved (from the WFD and the Nitrate Directive) but also makes it possible for us to achieve other objectives (such as nature, green-blue networking and water retention).
- We will restrict groundwater extraction around Natura 2000 areas. This will prevent the drying out of these areas. This will be elaborated in area processes.

For peatland

- We will shift 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 will help minimise soil subsidence. This will be elaborated in area processes by all stakeholders together.
- We will minimise the influx of water from outside the area. As far as possible this will keep freshwater available for level recovery and to tackle salination. The provinces and water authorities will create space in their area processes for retaining and storing as much area-specific water as possible. In particular in periods of drought, external supply will still be necessary.
- We manage our agricultural land sustainably. This will prevent irreversible oxidation of peat and preserve valuable agricultural land for the future. We will elaborate measures for the management of agricultural land in terms of equipment, nutrients, crop protection agents, etc. National government will call upon provinces to focus heavily on the preservation of grassland.

For clay areas

- Comply with WFD agreements, based on the existing package and possibly additional measures. New developments should not result in deterioration of the water quality and nature. WFD standards are the guiding principles.

For salination areas

- In the future, temporary and regional salination will occur more often because the supply of additional (scarce) freshwater from outside the area cannot always be guaranteed in all places. National government and water authorities will work to supply freshwater, but will not guarantee or facilitate any new measures to provide salination areas with freshwater from elsewhere.
- This creates the opportunity to adapt the spatial structure and land use in good time according to the extent of salination.

A2.5 Preservation of agricultural land

In line with the recommendations from Remkes, the agricultural sector may not be the final chapter in the discussion on space. Protecting agricultural land must receive specific attention in the area processes. Fertile soils are used for highly productive growth of arable and market gardening crops, mainly food crops

for human consumption, food crops for local livestock farms and crops for bio materials. In addition, over the coming years, land will have to be made available for more extensive farming models and agricultural nature and landscape management, for example in the form of landscaped land. The game rules for these processes will be included in the Agriculture Agreement.

Based on other functions (not only within the scope of the NPLG), there will also be increased spatial pressure on agricultural land. The principle is that we will be cautious in altering the function of agricultural land to other functions and where this does happen, clear explanations must be provided as to why it is necessary.

Protection of suitable agricultural land is also identified in the Spatial Planning letter from the Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning of 17 May 2022²⁹ as a point for elaboration in the NPLG. The soil and water system represents an important starting point in assessing what is considered suitable land.



Figure 5-4: protection of agricultural land (source: Development Document National Programme for Rural Areas).

²⁹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2022/05/17/kamerbrief-over-nationale-regie-in-de-ruimtelijke-ordering>

A3 Description of the approach to arriving at structuring choices

NPLG

The NPLG Development Document outlines the objectives and the proposal in the form of a set of structuring choices. Below, for each structuring choice the origin is described: how was this choice arrived at (also in relation to other programmes), which variants have been considered and what variation is still possible?

A3.1 Transition areas

The structuring choice for transition areas in the NPLG is the result of a lengthy process. Transition areas were already part of the Nitrogen Reduction and Nature Improvement Programme (PSN), which itself was preceded by an investigation and discussion process. The establishment of the structuring choice for transition areas in the NPLG was also arrived at in conjunction with the discussions and findings of a social working group on transition areas, which was established in response to a call from a civil society partner.

Which variants have been discussed?

The underlying principle for appointing transition areas was the necessity of contributing to a range of NPLG objectives in the field of nature, climate, water and agriculture:

- Necessary challenges for nature recovery in adjacent Natura 2000 areas.
- Challenges such as climate mitigation and water quality, through inclusion as essential parameters, taking the soil and water system as the essential starting point.
- Challenges for perspective for agriculture because transition areas can be used to provide socially valuable services.

In arriving at the structuring choice for transition areas, a number of variants were discussed; these included:

- Obligatory nature of designation: requiring the provinces to designate a transition area irrespective of the status of the nature conservation area versus leaving the provinces entirely free in their designation policy.
- Location of transition areas: transition areas only located on agricultural land (adjacent to Natura 2000 areas) versus transition areas that can also be located on other land (adjacent to Natura 2000 areas).
- Size and scale of transition areas: minimum size of an area, ranging from several metres wide, to several hectares.
- Use of the transition area: restrictions on use for agriculture (extensification, integration of landscape elements, manure use).
- Legal status: status of transition areas ranging from separate spatial planning category through to areas where voluntary agreements can be reached, relating to possible subsidies.

Current formulation

In the current formulation of the structuring choice for transition areas, the PSN formulation has been taken as the starting point. This is already the subject of an interadministrative agreement, and it is important to know that the PSN will continue to exist alongside the NPLG. The eventual formulation was subsequently produced on the basis of input from the harmonisation discussions. A formulation has been chosen that does justice to the subjects discussed in the working group on transition areas. This formulation also does justice to the challenges faced by all parties in respect of the NPLG objectives, in which the overall aim is to achieve maximum support among all social and government parties concerned. Maximum flexibility has also been selected (size, number of areas per province), on the one hand to offer provinces the maximum degree of freedom in the area process and on the other because elements of the necessary policy

instruments (including subsidies, downgrading, safeguarding/enforceability, derogation) were still being developed when the guidelines were produced.

A3.2 Integration of areas of nature and nature-inclusive agriculture

The idea of including a structuring choice on integration of areas of nature and nature-inclusive agriculture in the NPLG emerges from the realisation that the way in which these new areas of nature are realised will have consequences for achieving the VHR objectives (nature objectives in the framework of the Birds and Habitats Directive).

The structuring choice New Nature was in principle above all focused on taking account of the prospects in the area plans for the future, to prevent lock-ins. The idea was to prevent the structure chosen now becoming out of date in just a few years' time. This structuring choice was then expanded to include qualitative requirements imposed on nature conservation areas (or agricultural nature) in accordance with the VHR nature target types. The deliberate choice was made to aim for realisation with qualitative obligations in the framework of the unavoidable necessity of achieving the NPLG targets and taking efficient measures. The choice is also aimed at the optimum positioning of hectares with a view to the nature value delivered.

Is variation possible?

Given the scale of the transition, the already existing pressure on space in rural areas, the necessity of retaining support in society and the unavoidable necessity of achieving the NPLG targets, no other structuring choice is possible except a choice aimed at achieving the VHR targets as optimally and efficiently as possible, with the lowest possible impact on land use in rural areas.

Current formulation

The current formulation was chosen on the basis of the desire to give provinces the greatest possible policy freedom within the frameworks (30% nature recovery VHR, quality challenge for nature and area challenges for nature) drawn up.

A3.3 Green-blue networking

The structuring choice 10% Green-blue networking (GBDA) is based on the already reached agreements from the afforestation strategy and proposed European policy (European biodiversity strategy) and has already been included in a number of policy programmes (attack plan for landscape, afforestation strategy and the programme Mooi Nederland). This choice was adopted in order to satisfy the necessary area of new nature and is based on the ambition of improving environmental quality. It is a support measure for achieving the targets set for water, nature and climate.

Is variation possible?

The only variation that emerges is the level of ambition in respect of the timeline for achieving that ambition. Accelerated implementation over the coming years offers the best match with the integrated approach whereby the greatest possible level of synergy and work with work will be created.

Current formulation

The decision has been taken to set the target for 2030 that 50% of rural areas will be 10% green-blued networked. In other words, by 2030, half of the objective will have been achieved, while allowing a longer period of time for the other half (the eventual goal is 100% by 2050). The reason for this is that in the immediate future, there are major boosting opportunities with objectives that have to be achieved fairly quickly, such as the WFD challenge and the necessity of large-scale stream recovery. In addition, the current

formulation supports already reached agreements about realising new nature, and management can be integrated in the earning model for farmers in the framework of more nature-inclusive agriculture.

A3.4 Choices Water and Soil as Guiding Elements

The Coalition Agreement states that 'Water and soil will be guiding elements in spatial planning'. This was further concretised in the Water and Soil as Guiding Elements (WBS) letter. This letter contains a series of structuring choices that together aim to anchor the role of the water-soil system in spatial planning. The NPLG Development Document follows the WBS letter. In writing the Development Document, a selection was made from the WBS structuring choices that are more relevant for the NPLG. The decision on whether or not to include a WBS choice in the Development Document was based on the decision whether 1) the choice is relevant for rural areas and/or 2) the choice contributes to achieving the NPLG goals.

Is variation possible?

All the structuring choices included in the NPLG have the character of 'comply or explain'. The 'comply or explain' principle automatically means that no reasonable alternative to the WBS structuring choices can be excluded in advance. Whenever a structuring choice is deviated from, this must explicitly be explainable and verifiable (the 'or explain' part) and the deviation must not be achieved at the expense of the targets set. For the Water Framework Directive (WFD), the measures must have been implemented at the latest by 2027. For other measures there is space for a customised approach.

Current formulation

The NPLG Development Document includes the full set of WBS structuring choices. Within this set, there are choices that have a substantial impact on the transition in rural areas and choices that are relatively limited or process-specific in nature. In the Development Document a number of choices with major impact are explained.

- Buffer strips/zones along stream valleys on high sandy soils
- Peatland water level plan
- Space for water containment
- Water availability in salination areas

These choices are explained because they play an important role in achieving the NPLG targets. For this reason, in the SEA, the focus on the structuring choices for water and soil will be placed on the abovementioned choices.

A3.5 Protection of usable agricultural land

The protection of agricultural land is included as a structuring choice in the initial NPLG memorandum³⁰ (June 2022, Parliamentary Papers 34 682 and 35 334, no. 96) and initial substantive explanations are included in the NPLG Development Document (November 2022). In the Netherlands, land is a scarce commodity and the demand for land is high. This calls for a careful consideration in the use of space. Including the protection of agricultural land as a structuring choice is based on three reasons:

- There is considerable spatial pressure from other spatial functions such as house building, the energy transition, infrastructure and nature on agricultural land. In accordance with the recommendations from Remkes, the agricultural sector may not be the closing chapter in the discussion on space.

³⁰ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2022/06/10/startnotitie-nplg-10-juni-2022>

- Agriculture itself faces various tasks that require space, for example, extensification of livestock farming and arable farming or the production of crops for vegetable proteins or biobased materials for construction.
- Preventing the shifting of responsibilities to agriculture in removing areas of land from agriculture.

Over the past few years there has been a slight reduction in the area of land used for agriculture in the Netherlands, and this reduction is expected to continue over the coming years. The policy development was therefore mainly focused on the question: **How do we ensure that the change in function from agricultural land to another function than agriculture is achieved with due care?** This is expressly not a matter of protecting the area of agricultural land as a whole or with a view to a specific level of production, but concerns the importance of agricultural land in working on various challenges.

The elaboration of this structuring choice in the NPLG Development Document took place in harmony with the drawing up of the Letter to Parliament on the Future of Agriculture (25 November, Parliamentary Paper 30252-77), which provides the initial answer to the question presented above.

Is variation possible?

In drawing up this choice in the NPLG Development Document, discussion on the one hand focused on the definition of 'usable agricultural land'. Given the different reasons for including this choice, a broad definition was taken. In addition, variation is possible in respect of the degree of control from national government or policy freedom for provinces, whereby in the current formulation preference has been given to policy freedom.

Current formulation

In the Development Document, the term 'usable land' features three subcategories:

1. Protection of highly productive agricultural land
2. Protection of land required for the extensification challenge
3. Protection of land required for nature conservation objectives.

The choice then allows freedom to the provinces to make their own considerations in protecting usable agricultural land. This ties in with the area-specific approach of the NPLG. It has however been announced in the NPLG and the letter about the contours of the Agriculture Agreement that further operating principles will be drawn up in this connection.

It has been officially agreed that a working group will be established under the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, in co-partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, to develop the abovementioned underlying principles, that together form the consideration framework. These underlying principles and this consideration framework should result in a product that ensures that the changes in the function of agricultural land to another function than agriculture takes place in a clear, transparent and balanced manner.