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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURE

Joke Schauvliege

Flemish Minister for Environment, Nature and Culture
Flanders is a productive and industrialised region. Expressed in gross domestic product per inhabitant, the level of production has largely exceeded the EU average these past years. The Flemish economy is open and strongly oriented towards the export of goods and services. However, as a result of this it is also sensitive to international developments. More than ever, the environment will become an engine for this new economic development. By focussing on eco-innovation and a drastic increase in eco-efficiency we must prepare the economy for the future.

Flanders is and continues to be an energy and material-intensive region. Renewable materials and technological developments may contribute to more environmentally responsible and material-efficient production processes and products.

Today, Flanders is one of the most densely populated regions in Europe and the population is still growing, whereas families are becoming smaller. This has an impact on consumption patterns, mobility and energy needs and changes in housing. Moreover, Flanders is densely built up. This has consequences in terms of increased fragmentation of the open space, soil functions and quality, water management, biodiversity and the microclimate in the built-up environment.

Moreover, Flanders has a very extensive transport infrastructure. The density of roads and railways is among the highest in Europe. Transport and traffic still are important sources of environmental damage as a result of the emission of noxious substances, the use of energy and the environmental nuisance that is caused. The ambition to turn Flanders into a logistics hub in Europe will have a substantial impact on the environment, unless additional mitigating measures are taken and more advanced technologies are used.

In addition, Flanders has an intensive farming sector, in which the stock breeding and horticultural sectors account for over 80% of the production value. The available agricultural area is highly fragmented, as a result of which agriculture is very much interacting with other forms of land use.

The basic goal of the Flemish environment and nature policy is to pursue a high level of protection for current and future generations. This is done through the protection of man and the environment, the sustainable use of raw materials and nature, the preservation and promotion of biological and landscape diversity and the concern for the climate.

My policy memorandum places central focus on the policy initiatives regarding the environment and nature policy in implementation of the Flemish coalition agreement 2009-2014. An important pillar pertains to the breakthroughs of the Flanders in Action project. Other key building blocks of my policy memorandum are the objectives of the Pact 2020.

Furthermore, I also intend to work on a further simplification of environmental regulations. Today’s challenge is not to create more rules, but to optimise their quality and applicability.

Meanwhile, the European Union is the main source of Flemish environmental legislation. Examples of European Directives that have a great impact on Flemish policy are the Directive concerning urban waste-water treatment, the Water Framework Directive, the EIA Directives, the Nitrates Directive, the NEC Directive, the Habitats Directive, the Birds Directive and the Waste Directives.

When evaluating the current status of the environment in Flanders, we find that clear progress is being made, but that huge challenges still remain. For this reason I would like to take a number of steps forward with regard to the following challenges:

- Flanders will be working on a green economy.
• We will aim at an increased quality of the living environment and a balanced risk management.
• The biodiversity and integrity of ecosystems must be comparable to those of other European economic top regions by 2020.
• Flanders will become a climate-positive society.
• Flanders will further participate in European and international action and limit the environmental impact on other countries.
• Finally, we want to turn the administration into an effective administration, also with respect to the environment.

This will be translated into a series of thematic goals that are specified below.

I would like Flanders to make substantial progress in terms of climate policy. We will reduce greenhouse gas emissions and at the same time design an adaptation policy. We will also draw up a climate policy plan for the next decade and develop a Flemish adaptation plan in which several policy areas and social actors are to be involved.

In terms of air policy I will take any measures necessary to make sure that Flanders meets its European obligations. To this end, exceedances of particulate matter and NOx standards, among other things, will further reduced. Local emissions of dioxins, PCBs, heavy metals and PAHs will be tackled as well. Across the policy areas we will help focus on a mobility policy which pays attention to the environment.

As for the integrated water policy, the policy and management of water systems will be improved and grafted onto an integrated vision and the knowledge of water systems. I will improve the effectiveness of procedures and structures. The biggest challenge is still to achieve the good ecological status of surface water and the good status of the groundwater by the set deadlines. To this end, continued major investments will have to be made in extending the water treatment system in Flanders in order to make up lost ground.

The waste policy is further reoriented towards a sustainable materials policy. For this purpose I will promote eco-efficiency production and maximum waste recycling. ‘Leakage currents’ which cannot be avoided will be directed to the most efficient processing method. Through integrated chain management we aim to reduce the environmental impact as much as possible.

Available space and high-quality groundwater continue to be scarce and valuable goods in Flanders. An active soil policy may contribute substantially to meeting this need in a sustainable manner. Apart from the maximum prevention and limitation of soil pollution, we will make sure that transfers are facilitated to the highest extent and that building projects on high-risk land continue to be possible, ensuring the integration of official soil sanitations into possible development plans.

Erosion control continues to be the spearhead of the soil protection policy during the next term of office. A preventive erosion policy is extremely important to support efforts made by municipalities in terms of sewerage and to control sediment input in watercourses and waterways. For every Euro we invest in erosion control, we will win two by reducing both the damage and remediation costs.

In the field of biodiversity Flanders will be able to stand the comparison with the European economic top regions in 2020. We work ambitiously on the preservation, restoration and reinforcement of biological diversity. Through a targeted policy each Fleming must have basic natural quality in his or her immediate environment. Conservation targets will be set for this purpose.
Taking account of the ecological capacity, additional efforts will be made by the nature, forest and green areas policies to further improve the viability and accessibility of natural areas, forests and parks. One of the challenges in the creation of socially warm cities is the realisation of multi-purpose forests in (sub)urban areas.

To me, environment and health continue to be inextricably linked. The Pact 2020 stipulates that as a result of the gradually decreasing pressure on the environment and nature the number of healthy years that are lost due to environmental pollution will be falling significantly by 2020. In order to achieve this goal we will place central focus on the improvement of the quality of the indoor environment, the living and working environment and nutrition as well as on the improvement of the quality of outdoor air, water and soil.

The manure policy is of vital importance to realise good water quality for nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P). A new action programme (2011-2014) within the framework of the Nitrates Directive with preservation of the derogation will contribute to this.

Finally, within the LNE (environment, nature and energy) policy area I will be aiming at a vigorous public administration. Proper policy preparation and evaluation – without exaggerating, however- will help us to establish a sound basis for policy decisions. The ultimate goal will therefore be effective and efficient policy implementation and enforcement. To this end we will work on vigorous, efficient and effective processes and procedures.