



Bundesministerium  
für Umwelt, Naturschutz  
und Reaktorsicherheit



## **Precautionary Flood Protection in Europe International Workshop**

5 – 6 February 2003, Bonn

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# **Precautionary Flood Protection in Europe**

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**Speech by Melanie Schultz van Haegen, State Secretary for Transport, Public Works and Water Management, during the international workshop 'Precautionary Flood Protection in Europe' in Bonn, on Wednesday, 5 February 2003, at 11:20.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last Saturday in the Netherlands, we commemorated the 1953 flood disaster. On the night of 31 January, the combination of a high spring tide and heavy storms caused the North Sea to inundate the southwest of the Netherlands. The disaster took 1,835 human lives and caused immense loss of property. Huge areas of our country were submerged. The flood was the worst 20th century natural disaster in the Netherlands, and is indelibly stamped on the Dutch people's collective memory.

The flood disaster helped the Netherlands become alert to the dangers of flooding. Although danger may have come from the sea in 1953, the disaster made us keenly aware of our vulnerability to flooding due to our low land levels. The major rivers to the south and east also present a flood threat.

In 1993, 1995 and again in 1998, we witnessed the threat become reality when the Rhine and Maas rivers flooded. Entire villages were evacuated in some cases. In the wake of these events, we realised that it was time for a new water policy. The measures taken after the 1953 disaster were technical in nature and led to the far-reaching and extremely effective Delta Works, a structure unlike any other. It should come as no surprise that we decided to give technical measures priority during the 1990's, and that solutions predominantly focused on elevating and reinforcing dikes. Now however, we realise that this alone no longer offers long-term security. The changing climate is causing river volumes to increase, but the rising sea level makes it more difficult for the water to drain away.

In response to these developments, we have been working on a new water policy in our country over the last few years. This move needs little justification. In our country, with its low-lying polders, the damage caused by a flood can easily mount to 55

billion Euros, not to mention the losses and damages that cannot be measured in material terms.

In connection with today's topic, I would like to describe two important starting points for this new water policy. The first is that we must give water more space. Although dike reinforcements and other technical solutions sometimes prove necessary, we are now taking concrete steps to make our water system more flexible. I have three examples to share with you, which illustrate how we are tackling obstructions in our rivers to allow safer water drainage, now and in the future.

The first example is a plan that has already been realised. This project concerned relocating a dike surrounding an old brickworks at Arnhem, close to the river. The dike formed an obstruction when water levels rose. The river could not be widened on the north side, where businesses were located. The parties involved therefore decided to move the dike. As a result, during high water the river now has twice as much room, and the water level has dropped by 7 centimetres. As an added benefit, the spatial quality of the area has improved. The municipality of Arnhem has plans to create a residential area behind the dike, and my department is planning a side channel in the foreland, including a footpath.

The second example is a project currently underway. The railroad tracks between Arnhem and Nijmegen cross the river in the Rosandepolder near Oosterbeek, the northern foreland of the Nederrijn. The track is built on an earthen dam extending about 700 meters and across five steel bridges that span a total of around 250 meters. The dam obstructs the flow of water through the foreland when the river rises. The south side is a mere 50 meters wide and the dike cannot be relocated. So the answer was to move the rails to bridges for another 400 meters. In other words, an additional 400 meters of underpass will be created for water. The water level will be lowered by 10 centimetres near Arnhem during high water levels. The project will be completed by October this year.

The third and final example, involves a project in its preparatory stages in Lent, which is outside Nijmegen and close to the German border. The river is constricted here, too, which prompted the same type of dike relocation approach. This plan, however,

initially meant the loss of 50 homes. It is not surprising therefore, that the public are closely involved in the planning. In the meantime, less draconian alternatives have been proposed. Earlier, the municipality of Nijmegen was forced to cancel its plans to build a residential area behind the dike, at the moment construction was due to start. This is the price we must pay for our new water policy, but we are more than willing to make such concessions. The parties concerned in Nijmegen are currently working together to develop a plan that takes all aspects into consideration, including river engineering, financial, social and spatial. An introductory memorandum will be issued this year, and construction is set to commence in 2007.

The last example illustrates the administrative difficulties involved in projects designed to give water more room. Solid co-operation is indispensable at all levels, which is why the Dutch government, municipalities, provinces and district water boards will shortly enter into a National Water Administration Agreement. This policy will assign new water policy responsibilities to the various government bodies. Because projects often affect citizens and businesses, their input will be included in so-called environmental effect reports.

The Lent plan, like the other examples, also illustrates how important it is to pay attention to spatial planning as part of the new water policy. In the projects mentioned, we are aiming for the sustainable design of river areas. Plans to develop the areas along the rivers must reflect sustainability, and offer high quality in terms of spatial planning.

That sums up the examples of concrete measures related to giving water more room. In the new water policy, a second important starting point is that possible problems must be solved at their source. Aside from being a point of departure, this is also an important precautionary measure. For example, areas located up- stream may no longer funnel water to areas downriver. This principle must be applied at every level: regional, national and international. A unified approach geared to the overall river basin network is the only viable solution. Everyone, from source to estuary, must be involved, for neither the Netherlands nor any other European river country, can solve these problems alone. The other countries are likewise well aware of the devastating damage water can cause: here in Germany you witnessed this at first hand last

autumn. Eastern Europe and Southern France also endured tremendous flooding. In their turn, Belgium and the Dutch province of Limburg were inundated less than a month ago.

This is why I believe the European Union must recognize the importance of water management. The European IRMA programme embodies an effective collaborative European effort. Together with the subsidy of 141 million Euros from Brussels, no less than 419 million Euros' worth of projects have been realised. The Rosandepolder railroad project I mentioned, is just one of these concrete and effective endeavours. The total cost amounted to around 52 million Euros. A request was made for a 14 million Euro subsidy from the IRMA programme.

In the Netherlands, part of the IRMA money went to designing the Bislicher Insel retention area near Xanten in Germany. In my opinion, this is a perfect example of the type of practical co-operation that the rest of Europe would be well advised to follow. It is high time for European river countries to intensify their joint efforts and work together on concrete projects.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the Netherlands, memories of the 1953 flood disaster and the close brushes with flooding at the end of the last decade are still fresh in our minds. I know for a fact, that many of you here today have similar indelible memories since last autumn. International co-operation and a new water policy akin to the one we have in the Netherlands are the means of preventing these disasters in the future. This international workshop will hopefully play a part. Let us all determine to make progress today, for the sake of all Europeans who have been confronted with the harsh reality of flooding.

Thank you for your attention.