

To the Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Mrs C. Van Nieuwenhuizen-Wijbenga  
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**date:** 20 november 2020 **contact person:** R. Hillebrand  
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**enclosure(s):**  
**Subject:** Rli Work Programme for 2021-2022

Dear Mrs Van Nieuwenhuizen,

On 1 August 2020, the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure, in its new composition, entered its third Council term. In the initial meetings, the Council members talked about possible subjects for the 2021-2022 work programme. The discussions took note of interests expressed by the ministries during the preparation of the work programme. In its new composition, the Council's aim is still to contribute towards achieving government objectives for improving sustainability in the physical living environment. Because the associated challenges in the physical environment are closely intertwined most of the Council's advisory reports will transcend the boundaries of the four ministries responsible for the physical domain.

Two advisory programmes that the Council is currently implementing may continue to run in 2021:

- Digitisation (work programme for 2018-2019)
- Integrated approach to accessibility (at the request of the House of Representatives)

The Council has not yet addressed the advisory topic 'Biodiversity recovery in public spaces' from the work programme for 2020-2021. The Council wanted to focus this advisory report specifically on the 'public spaces route' in the *Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery [Delta Plan biodiversiteit]*: the arrangement and management of existing and new infrastructure, business parks, water management and other aspects of public space. In this new programme proposal, the Council suggests that it advise you more broadly about reviewing nature conservation policy. Promoting biodiversity in public spaces will form part of this advice.

The Council proposes selecting five new topics for its 2021-2022 programme. We explain them briefly in this letter:

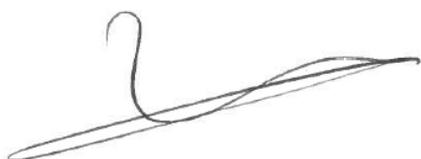
- Review of nature conservation policy;
- Position and future of the housing corporation system;
- Managing scarce space;
- Future prospects for agriculture;
- Nuclear power stations.



In addition to its earlier advisory reports, *Towards a sustainable economy: the governance of transitions* and *Opting for a green recovery, after the corona crisis*, the Council is considering publishing a further advisory report on the question of how the government can best manage the transition to sustainable industry.

The Council also envisions that the further development and aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis will create a need for additional advice, and it would be happy to make time to advise the government and parliament on questions that arise in relation to current issues in the physical living environment.

Yours faithfully,  
Council for the Environment and Infrastructure,



J.J. de Graeff  
Chair



R. Hillebrand  
General Secretary

### **Advisory topics for 2021-2022**

For information purposes, we have identified the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) addressed by each topic.

#### **1. Review of nature conservation policy**

The importance of nature is wide-ranging: nature is not only beautiful, but also essential, for example because it ensures healthy and fertile soil, it plays a role in the drinking water supply or it helps with fine-particle reduction in the air. It is becoming ever clearer that biodiversity in nature is of vital importance to us.

However, the European biodiversity strategy notes that the network of legally protected nature reserves is not large enough to safeguard biodiversity and argues that at least 30% of the land and 30% of the sea in the EU should be protected. There is alarming news on a regular basis about the decline in biodiversity, for example among insects and plants. Nature conservation currently focuses on the Natura 2000 objectives (long-term survival of specific species and habitats), but it appears that due to climate change and the persistence of the nitrogen problem, these objectives are not being achieved.

For various reasons, conservation and development of nature and biodiversity are under increasing pressure. The costs of nature management and especially those of nature restoration are high and to date, the effects in terms of biodiversity restoration, for example, have been limited. Climate change alters the living conditions of species and changes developments in nature generally. In spite of reduction measures, emissions into the air, water and soil continue to threaten nature restoration. The high nitrogen load in particular hinders the restoration of biodiversity in a number of areas.



Although scientific publications are increasing our understanding of the huge importance of biodiversity, it also remains an abstract concept that for many people fails to reflect how significant nature is for them. The perspective of experts appears to be too limited for the changing values in society. We can see this, for example, in public responses to the shooting of large game in the Oostvaardersplassen nature reserve in the province of Flevoland, the arrival of wolves or the felling of trees. Controversies about separating or combining functions, or about the viability of smaller nature reserves, stand in the way of further development in nature policy. Also, calls are growing louder for a nature policy focused on larger areas where plants and animals can thrive better.

In this context, nature policy objectives in the Netherlands are under pressure. Current nature policy, which aims to counter fragmentation (creation of the National Nature Network), improve environmental conditions (fighting groundwater depletion, contamination and acidification) and prevent disturbance, do not appear to be sufficient to achieve the Dutch and European objectives for nature conservation and biodiversity. Restoration and conservation of nature and biodiversity touch on broad interests in a national and international context, but must ultimately be assessed and shaped at a regional, decentralised level. A joint effort by the national government and local and regional authorities is therefore needed and the Environment and Planning Act must provide the frameworks for it.

In doing this, it is important to choose the right basic principles. Current nature conservation policy mixes a species-specific approach with an area-specific approach. The question is how best to work towards the conservation of valuable nature in the longer term. A more comprehensive approach is perhaps necessary, in which ecological values on the scale of the landscape (both in nature conservation areas and elsewhere in rural as well as urban areas) are linked to other societal goals and spatial developments.

*What changes to nature conservation policy are desirable or necessary in view of the current understanding of the importance of biodiversity, changing climate conditions and changing values in society? What consequences do these have for governance in nature conservation policy?*



## **2. Position and future of the housing corporation system**

Much has changed since the Dutch Housing Act of 1901 with respect to the organisation of housing associations, housing policy and the housing market. The policy-defined target groups, the financial frameworks within which the housing associations operate, the legal frameworks and regulation – all these matters have changed repeatedly and fundamentally. At the same time, the social needs met by the housing associations have changed. Examples are developments related to the aging population, care, the demand for housing and the affordability of homes, the necessity of making homes more sustainable, and the need for flexible housing. The current organisational form, legislation and financial rules have been shaped to a great extent by the privatisation of the housing associations in 1995 and the Dutch Housing Act of 2015. The question now is whether the current system is still in line with society's wishes in relation to the provision of housing, affordability, sustainability, social cohesion, and other social goals.



A special area of concern is the housing shortage. This shortage has been a substantial and urgent problem for years, and various groups of citizens are increasingly being prevented from accessing accommodation in cities. In 2015, the Council advised on the question of how the government can help ensure that housing needs are optimally met from a social point of view. Current developments in the housing market and those to be expected in the future call for an update of that advisory report. The role of housing associations is important for the availability and affordability of housing.

*What role can housing associations play in meeting social needs in a changing housing market? What organisational form, legislation and financial and other rules are appropriate?*



### 3. Managing scarce space

The Netherlands is facing major spatial planning challenges in the areas of climate adaptation, energy transition, sustainable economic development, strong and healthy cities and regions, and future-proof development in rural areas. In the National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment [Nationale Omgevingsvisie] (NOVI), these challenges are linked to ambitious goals for the quality of the living environment.

As the NOVI is regionally elaborated, difficult choices will have to be made in the battle for scarce space. However, there is as yet no usable structure for properly weighing up all the available options. It is clear that a coherent approach, working as one government, and area-specific implementation are important in this context. This calls for intensive cooperation between public authorities at all levels. The desire of citizens to have their say about the division of the limited space available must also be a priority.

*Considering the way societal issues (housing, mobility, energy, climate, the economy, nature, water) are developing, how can public authorities jointly make difficult, area-specific choices? How can they safeguard the necessary comprehensive spatial planning in the search for solutions to these issues with effects on how space is arranged? What consequences does this have for the relationship between public authorities and with other stakeholders and citizens? How can cooperation between ministries be strengthened in area-specific approaches?*



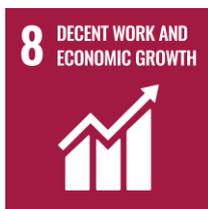
#### 4. Future prospects for agriculture

Agriculture faces major challenges on the road to sustainability. The Dutch government is committed to achieving closed cycles at the lowest level possible by 2030 and for the Netherlands then to be in the vanguard of a circular economy in agriculture. This ambitious goal requires Dutch farmers and market gardeners, but also agri-business, the food trade and consumers, to make fundamental changes to their business structures and daily activities. It also raises questions about the future use of agricultural land.

Efforts to achieve this goal are accompanied by a lack of recognition, protests and a multitude of views. These views range from the opinion that the agricultural sector has reached its limits as regards the amount of space it can occupy, to idealistic views on systems for local production and consumption, or systems in which the sector does in fact play a prominent role in supplying the world with food. What is lacking in these discussions is an analysis of, and a discussion about, possible prospects arising from this policy. The added value to society of sustainable agriculture is not easily translated into an economically feasible production model, either for the primary sector or for other parties in the value chain. The current discussions have not yet resulted in shared perspectives on the position and future of the Dutch agricultural sector, the position of the people who work in it and the future use of the land. These are perspectives that have to fit in with requirements in the areas of the environment, climate, biodiversity, the soil, water, animal welfare, the landscape, and public health.

Recent advisory reports on agriculture examined the pricing of external effects, among other things. The Council previously advised on making the food supply system sustainable and on structuring the Common Agricultural Policy in order to move towards a circular economy in agriculture. The Council's advisory reports on soil vitality and on soil subsidence in peat meadow areas focused on the problems presented by the use of space by agriculture. The Board of Government Advisers carried out a few pilot projects to study how to arrive at an agricultural sector that secures farmers' livelihoods in an attractive and healthy landscape with strong cultural and historical values and restored biodiversity. None of this, however, offers any insight into an economic perspective for the Dutch food system or into the way in which restructuring should be tackled.

*What are the future prospects for the Dutch agricultural sector, for the people who work in it and for the land managed by agriculture within the preconditions of sustainable land use? How can the added value to society of sustainable agriculture be expressed in economic prospects for chain parties in the food sector? What frameworks are needed for this and what conditions does this set for managing the various links in the value chain? And with what instruments can the government actively contribute to achieving the aspirations for a sustainable and innovative top sector?*



#### 5. Nuclear power stations

Nuclear power stations are back in the societal and political spotlight. This time, the primary question is whether and how nuclear energy can contribute to the transition to a sustainable energy



system. The Council notes that nuclear energy is a highly charged topic and that its possible reintroduction – or expansion – as part of the energy supply system requires a broad appraisal to unravel the facts, opinions and emotions involved. An advisory report by the Council, that will lay out the various arguments and consider them as objectively as possible, can add value to the societal and political debate.

In developing this topic further, the Council will include the results of the study commissioned by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy on the role of nuclear energy in the energy mix. The Council will also explore whether other advisory councils or knowledge institutes, such as the Rathenau Institute, can be involved.

What role can nuclear power stations play in the Netherlands, for example in making the energy mix CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral? Which technical requirements need to be met? Which societal and political considerations play a role? What is an appropriate government policy?

