SUMMARY

Netherlands Court of Audit

Nature policy for peatlands: a quagmire?

Challenges and opportunities for peatland policy

October 2026

The Netherlands Court of Audit has conducted an audit of nature conservation and restoration policy, focusing on peatland areas.

Natural peatlands are in poor condition; the government's targets for their extent and quality are not being met. The three main causes are drying, poor water quality and nitrogen from the surrounding area. Nature conservation and restoration are having a positive but insufficient effect.

The Jetten government recently presented a draft package of measures for agriculture, nature and nitrogen, which also covers the areas surrounding Natura 2000 sites. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature (LVVN) is responsible for nature policy and for meeting the targets. It is therefore the responsibility of the minister to direct efforts towards achieving these targets and thereby restore natural peatlands. The provinces share responsibility for shaping and implementing the policy. This involves taking measures within the nature site and reducing adverse factors from the surrounding area. If this succeeds, the minister will get the resulting avoided CO_2 emissions into the bargain.

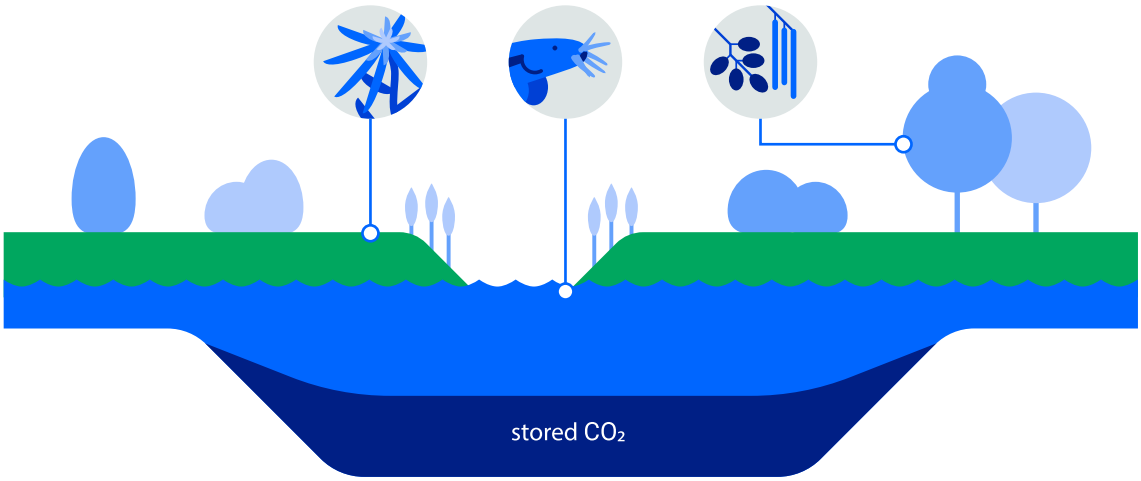
The importance of peatlands

Approximately 3.5% of the land area of protected nature in the Netherlands consists of natural peatland. Despite their relatively small area, peatlands are important for protecting and preserving biodiversity. They are habitats for rare and endangered animal and plant species. Some endangered species of plants, amphibians and reptiles cannot survive anywhere else. Targets have therefore been set for each area

to maintain or improve the extent and quality of peatlands. Peatlands are also important for the climate because they store large quantities of CO_2.[1] When peat dries out, it decomposes and the stored CO_2 is released. This is detrimental to the climate.

Peat is important for biodiversity and CO_2 storage

Peat forms a unique wet habitat for rare and endangered plants and animals, such as peat moss, the European weatherfish and black alder.



Peat consists of accumulated plant material that does not fully decompose under wet, oxygen-poor conditions. As a result, peat stores carbon dioxide and no CO_2 is released into the atmosphere.

Many parties involved in nature policy

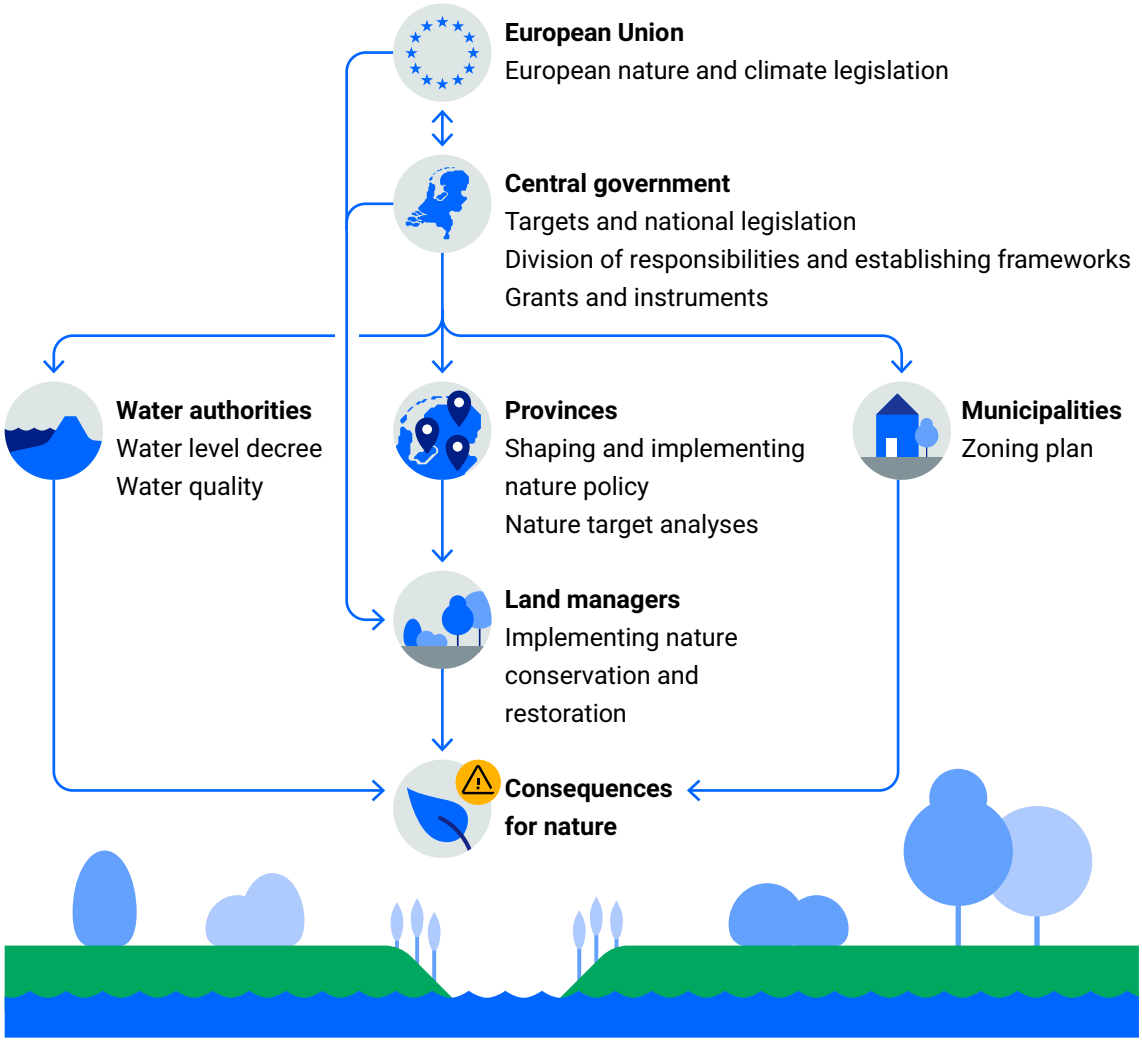
The poor condition of natural peatlands can be attributed in part to drying, poor water quality and nitrogen from the surrounding area. These external pressures are partly due to the presence of residents, businesses and organisations in the surrounding area whose interests are not always compatible with maintaining healthy natural peatlands. For example, local residents and farmers have an interest in a low groundwater level to keep basements dry and cultivate the land.

The various levels of government involved in nature policy balance these interests. The minister is responsible, among other things, for compliance with the European Birds and Habitats Directives, the European Nature Restoration Regulation and the Environment and Planning Act. In addition, nature conservation and restoration are largely funded by central government. Between 2014 and 2023, for example, central government disbursed almost €4 billion to the provinces for shaping and implementing nature conservation policy (Berenschot, 2026). In recent years, the

minister has made various funds available for nature restoration, including almost €2 billion for the specific-purpose grant under the Nature Programme. Conservation and restoration measures are generally implemented by provinces, land management organisations and private individuals.

Since nature policy was decentralised in 2013, the provinces have been responsible for shaping and implementing it. Other levels of government, such as water authorities and municipalities, are also relevant to nature policy. The minister is responsible for achieving the policy objectives and accounting for the central government funds used. In many areas, natural peatlands are in poor condition, yet we find that the minister plays only a limited role in directing efforts towards achieving the objectives. The minister does not use the available steering instruments when this decentralised approach fails to ensure that the objectives are achieved.

Many stakeholders are involved in nature conservation and restoration

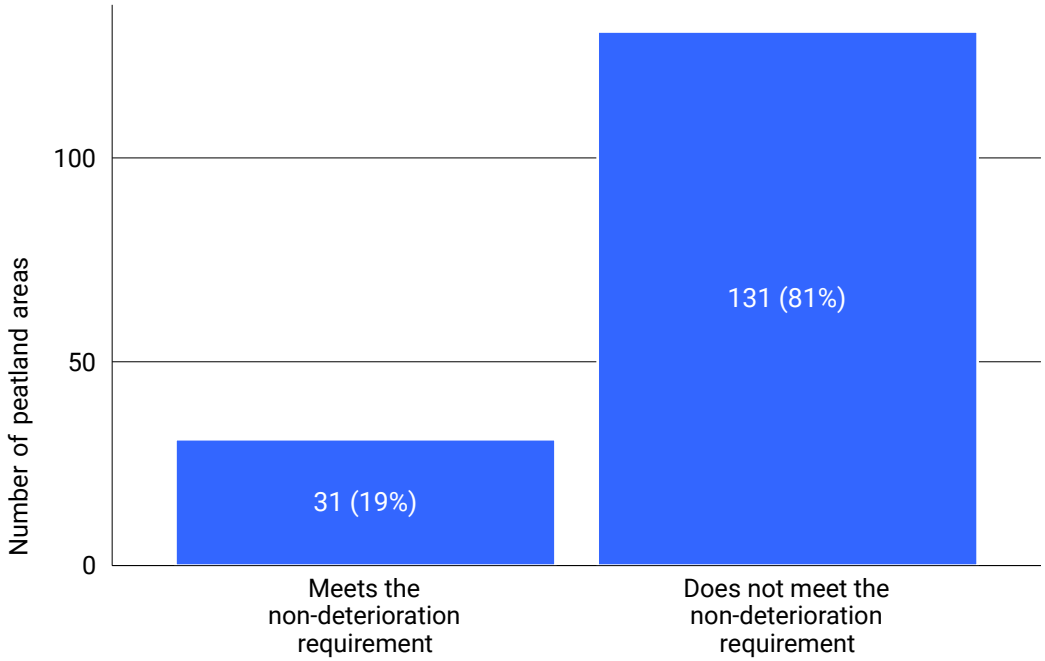


Our conclusions

The conclusions of our audit are:

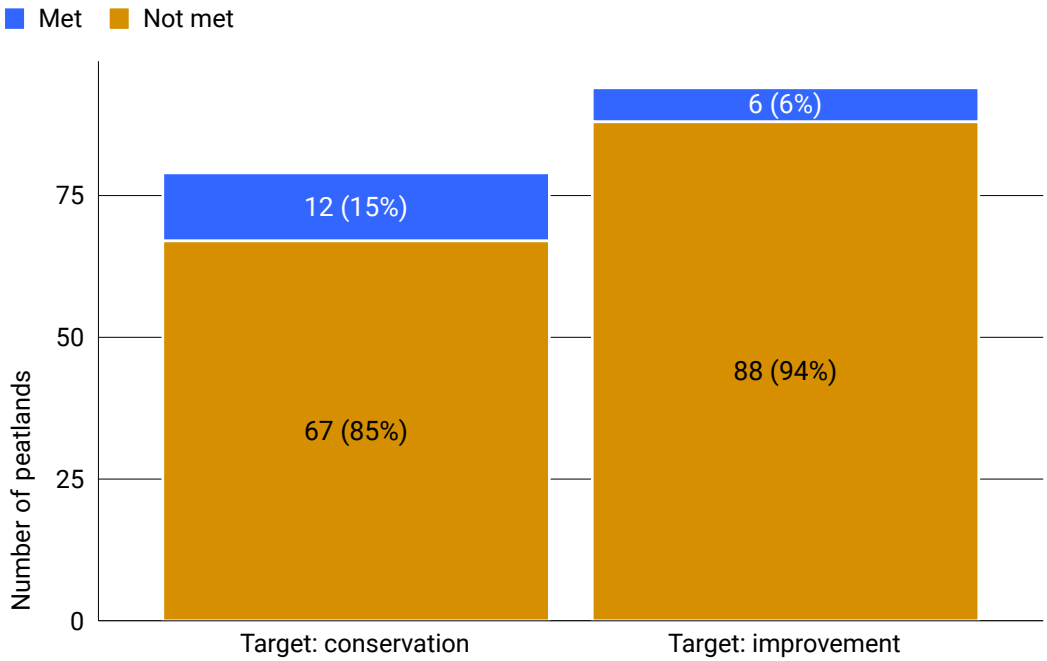
- **The targets for the extent and quality of natural peatlands are not being met.** There are statutory targets for the conservation and restoration of natural peatlands. In more than 75% of the areas, the targets for the extent and quality of natural peatlands are not being met. Moreover, 81% of the peatland areas do not meet the non-deterioration requirement. This means that deterioration cannot be ruled out in those areas, contrary to the requirements of the European Habitats Directive and the Nature Restoration Regulation.

Only 19% of peatland areas meet the non-deterioration requirement



Please note: No or insufficient information was available regarding the non-deterioration requirement for 11 peatland areas; these areas are not included in the figure.

The quality targets are not met for the vast majority of peatland areas



- **Conservation and restoration have a positive but insufficient effect.** In natural peatlands, land managers carry out various conservation and restoration measures to meet the nature targets. Based on research by the Ecological Authority, we conclude that the conservation and restoration activities have a positive effect, but that this positive effect is insufficient to meet the targets. Land managers often seek a solution that involves limiting further damage. This leaves them unable to undertake sustainable ecosystem restoration that could help achieve the targets in the longer term.
- **The minister does not provide sufficient direction**. The minister is responsible for meeting the (international) obligations within nature policy. Natural peatlands are in poor condition in many areas, yet we find that the minister plays only a limited role in directing efforts towards the targets. The minister also needs to focus attention on the area surrounding the nature site.
- **CO_2 storage is an added benefit of peatland conservation and restoration**. There are 73 Natura 2000 sites containing peat. For four of these, we calculated the reduction in CO_2 emissions when restoration measures are implemented. For these sites, the total reduction in CO_2 emissions from recently implemented and ongoing measures is 147,047 tonnes, including the buffer zones. Potential future measures would avoid 220,395 tonnes of CO_2 emissions in two of the four sites. For example, at Fochteloërveen, the CO_2 emissions avoided through potential future measures would be equivalent to the average annual emissions of almost 10,000 households. The extent to which restoration measures can prevent CO_2

emissions varies between natural peatlands. Based on our audit of four sites containing peat, we cannot draw conclusions about the potential reduction in CO_2 emissions across all Natura 2000 sites containing peat.

Our recommendations

We recommend that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature do the following:

- **Use instruments in the areas surrounding natural peatlands.** The minister is responsible for meeting the nature targets. In most peatland areas, these targets are not being met, mainly because of pressures from the surrounding area that adversely affect the natural peatlands. Improving the quality of natural peatlands requires investment to reduce the pressures in these 'buffer zones'. We find that the minister plays only a limited role in directing efforts towards the targets. The minister needs to have influence over the area surrounding the nature site. To this end, the minister should make better use of the current steering instruments, namely the designation decision or intergovernmental supervision. Should this fail to produce the desired results, the minister should review these instruments and consider adjusting them.
- **Explicitly consider CO_2 when making decisions about nature restoration**. Peatland restoration is aimed at improving the quality and extent of these areas. We would add that restoring natural peatlands also helps to reduce CO_2 emissions, which benefits the climate. We recommend that the minister also take into account the CO_2 emissions avoided through peatland restoration when determining the urgency of nature restoration projects.

Endnote

1. For readability, we refer in the text to carbon dioxide (CO_2) stored in the peat. In reality, it is carbon (C) that is stored in the peat and, when oxidised (as the peat decomposes), is released as CO_2.