



Results overview for Belgium

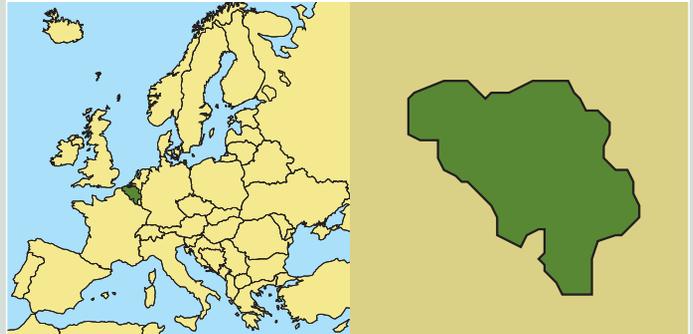
This fact sheet summarises the results of the Water and Wetland Index for Belgium. Information about the project and the different issues presented in this fact sheet, as well as the pan-European results can be found in the WWF Report “Water and Wetland Index - Critical issues in water policy across Europe” (2003).

Water Resources in Belgium

Although Belgium is regarded as a wet nation, in an average year there is less water per person than most European countries. In some parts of the country, groundwater is overexploited, leading to environmental damage. In addition, the considerable increase in impermeable surfaces all over the country and the high level of polluted surface and groundwater, are putting increased pressure on water resources.

Luckily, most administrations in Belgium are aware of the problems and the solutions and a growing willingness to really tackle these problems is slowly leading to improvements in water management.

Water resources in Belgium are managed in three separate regions, the Flemish, the Walloon and the Brussels Region and for specific issues also at the national level. Only the first two regions have been considered in this assessment.



Application of Integrated River Basin Management principles

Public participation in water management

There's a good availability of information, and stakeholders are often provided with information in a pro-active way. In Flanders there are more structures available for information supply, specifically on water issues. Also related to the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD), the information is more comprehensive in the Flemish region. In terms of consultation, the Flemish region is better organised than the Walloon region: two important advisory boards (Mina¹ and Serv²) contain the most important (i.e. politically powerful) stakeholders. They have a strong influence on the process and on the content of regional law, including the transposition of the WFD. In addition to this, the Flemish Government pays the work time of NGO's active in these advisory boards. At the Walloon level, a similar advisory board (Commission Consultative des Eaux) has some influence on some legislation proposals.

As for active involvement it is mainly the drinking and the wastewater sector that is directly involved. Active participation of environmental NGOs takes place and works efficiently in Flanders, although it happens in an informal way. The new Flemish Parliamentary Act on Integrated Water Policy includes the development of new structures to organize active involvement in a formal way. In the Walloon region the active involvement of stakeholders is adequate in only a few cases. At the sub-basin level it occurs under the structure of 'River Contracts', but it depends on the willingness of local stakeholders.

Flanders

Information provision 😊😊

Public consultation 😊😊

Active involvement 😊

Wallonia

Information provision 😞

Public consultation 😊

Active involvement 😞

¹ Milieu- en Natuurraad van Vlaanderen - Flanders' Environmental and Nature Council.

² Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen - Flemish Integrated Water Management Committee.

Integrated management of water resources

There are a lot of different water managers in both regions, a problem that is not going to be solved in the coming years. Nevertheless both regions have a formal structure, VIWC (Vlaams Integraal Wateroverleg Comité - Flemish Integrated Water Management Committee) in Flanders, PPGIE (Plate-forme Permanente pour le Gestion Intégrée de l'Eau - Permanent Platform for Integrated Water Management) in Wallonia, where all water managers are represented. Integration of water policy with other sectors (e.g. land use planning) remains problematic. Although many individual sectoral targets and strategies are in place, no single integrated strategy currently exists for water management that considers the relationships between the different water bodies (surface water, groundwater, coastal waters, etc) and between the needs of all relevant sectors in Flanders and Wallonia. In Flanders there is a new Parliamentary Act on Integrated Water Policy, a good environmental policy plan (2003-2007) and a good water policy plan (2001), although the last one is still in draft form. The proposed structures for sub river basins in Flanders should improve both types of integrations (water bodies/sectors) in the coming years.

International cooperation in the Scheldt and the Meuse River Basin is far from adequate. Recently two new treaties have been signed, but it remains to be seen how these treaties will open the region's mind for well-thought integration. Cross border integration between Wallonia and Flanders is very poor. The closest ties exist between Flanders and the Netherlands on the Scheldt Estuary, due to the high economical (port of Antwerp), ecological (intertidal ecosystems) and safety interests (floods).

Wetland management

There is a growing recognition of the value of wetlands for their range of functions such as flood storage, aquifer recharge, pollutant control, biodiversity, recreation and tourism (recognition through the Flemish Environmental Policy Plan, the Flemish Parliamentary Act on the Nature Conservation and the Walloon Plan PLUIES – the Integrated Plan for Flood Prevention). But, neither in Flanders nor in Wallonia, does a single plan or strategy for wetland management exist. Wetlands are, as a consequence, still insufficiently integrated in water management in Belgium. In both regions, wetlands are only managed by nature protection agencies. Even more striking is the Walloon situation where wetland conservation and nature conservation in general on one side and water management on the other side are managed by different ministries, from different political parties.

In Flanders, the new Flemish Law on Nature (July 2002) offers possibilities for restoration and rehabilitation of wetlands. In general, most wetlands in Belgium are situated in nature reserves and, as such, have their own specific management plans and strategies.

Flanders

Integrated approach in water policy 😞

International cooperation 😞

Wallonia

Integrated approach in water policy 😞

International cooperation 😞

Flanders

Wetlands in water management 😞

Wetland protection 😞

Wetland restoration 😞

Wallonia

Wetlands in water management 😞

Wetland protection 😞

Wetland restoration 😞

Response to key pressures and impacts on freshwater ecosystems

Water quantity problems (household)

The Flemish Region is better than the Walloon region in quantifying, acknowledging and managing the impact of different sectors on environmental issues due to the existence in Flanders of a five-year environmental policy plan (Mina-Plan), a yearly environmental programme, a two-yearly evaluating programme (Mira-BE), an annual thematic research report (Mira-T) and a scenario report (Mira-S).

Even though instruments do exist in the Walloon region to diminish the quantitative impact of households on water resources, these often remain scattered and not very efficient. In the Flemish region, many obligations and subsidies do exist (like for example on rainwater tanks and rainwater infiltration systems) and a lot of information is available (e.g. the national call centre for rational use of water, public awareness campaigns). The positive results of these instruments are often due to the successful 'environmental charter for municipalities and provinces', a voluntary agreement, signed between the local and national authority. The local authority receives financial and other relevant support from the Flemish Region if they subscribe to the agreement. The more elements of the agreement that are reached, the more the subsidies for the local authority.

Flanders

Legal instruments 

Financial instruments 

Information instruments 

Wallonia

Legal instruments 

Financial instruments 

Information instruments 

Water quantity problems (industry)

As for industries, the Walloon region is more dependent on its groundwater resources and deals by consequence more with illegal water wells than Flanders. No specific instruments exist regarding water quantity in Wallonia.

In the Flemish region different instruments do exist, often specifically related to water quantity issues. To obtain or renew an environmental license – through the VLAREM legislation - a Flemish company has imposed sectoral conditions that are based on 'Best Available Technology' reports for that specific sector. However, it is the complexity of regulations, very specific and detailed, and the fragmentation of initiatives among the several administrative levels that decreases the practical effectiveness of the existing instruments in Flanders.

Flanders

Legal instruments 

Financial instruments 

Information instruments 

Wallonia

Legal instruments 

Financial instruments 

Information instruments 

Response to key pressures and impacts on freshwater ecosystems

Water quality problems (agriculture)

The impact of agriculture and household is very important in Belgium. The problems are clearly acknowledged in both regions, but better quantified in Flanders. Due to the economic interests of agriculture and the wastewater-building sector (and its political counterparts - and this probably more in Flanders than in Wallonia), hard measures to tackle the water quality problems are not implemented sufficiently.

Although some instruments are in place to tackle agriculture impacts on water quality, improvements have to date been slow in both regions. Also the declared Nitrate Vulnerable Zones are far from sufficient. Strategies to lower the impacts from pesticides are still in an early stage and so are efficient agri-environmental schemes.

Flanders

Legal instruments 

Financial instruments 

Information instruments 

Wallonia

Legal instruments 

Financial instruments 

Information instruments 

Water quality problems (household)

The lack of wastewater treatment infrastructure and the efficiency of purification capacity is one of the main causes of water pollution. Legal and financial instruments towards individual wastewater treatment systems do exist in both regions. Only Flanders slowly starts with a policy to separate rainwater from wastewater (improving the efficiency of wastewater treatment). Again, due to the 'environmental charter for municipalities and provinces', the Flemish situation looks more promising (subsidies for local authorities to build separated collectors, subsidies for households for rainwater infiltration tanks, a lot of information).

Flanders

Legal instruments 

Financial instruments 

Information instruments 

Wallonia

Legal instruments 

Financial instruments 

Information instruments 

River fragmentation due to infrastructure

Being downstream, the Flemish region is more concerned with flood problems than its neighbour. In the Flemish Flood-protection programme, a lot of attention is paid to the ecological restoration and creation of floodplains using the original concept of 'controlled inundation areas' and 'controlled reduced inundation areas'. These concepts are however not yet accepted by all local authorities. The Flemish region is paying more and more attention to prevent erosion and increase infiltration of rainwater, both in rural and urban areas.

In Wallonia, the draft Plan PLUIES (Integrated plan for flood prevention) looks promising.

Spatial planning however still deals with weaknesses, especially related to construction in inundation and infiltration areas, and this again in both regions.

Flanders

River fragmentation and flood defence 

Wallonia

River fragmentation and flood defence 

Legend:

Very good 	Good 	Fair 	Poor 	Very poor 
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Further information:

The WWI for Flanders was completed by the University of Antwerp and for Wallonia by the Walloon Environmental Bureau (IEW).

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