

OVERVIEW

The *Environmental Outlook for Wallonia 2014* provides an overview of the situation and environmental performance of Wallonia via a number of criteria and with certain limitations. As it stands, this assessment provides an overview of the situation which is neither complete nor directly interpretable in terms of the efficiency of the policies implemented. Nevertheless, it allows us to highlight topics where the situation appears favourable from an environmental point of view and those where problems still exist, with or without improvement. The analysis of all indicators featured in the *Key environmental indicators for Wallonia in 2014* allows us to draw a few main conclusions regarding the environmental situation in Wallonia presented *in extenso* below.

Towards a more efficient use of resources?

The efficient use of natural resources is one of the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy¹, the aim of which is to encourage the transition to a low-carbon economy using resources (air, water, soil, ecosystems, fuel, metals, minerals, food products, etc.) in a rational way with a view to evolving no longer tenable production and consumption models. The climate, soil and subsoil of Wallonia provide it with relatively abundant resources in terms of minerals (quarry deposits), water and forest and agricultural biomasses. Supply security is however not guaranteed when it comes to metals and energy resources: (i) imports and indirect flows of metals represented almost 30% of the Walloon economy's total material requirement in 2011, and (ii) some 90% of primary energy sources are imported (fossil and fissile fuels), with the remainder coming from renewable sources. Though the latter show constant growth (x 5.4 between 1990 and 2012), their

potential remains limited in Wallonia. In terms of how the pressures exerted on the Region's resources are evolving, we are seeing (i) the continuing artificialisation of agricultural land (19 km² a year on average between 1985 and 2013) basically in conjunction with the expansion of home-building (increase in the number of households and space per inhabitant), (ii) an increase in the exploitation rate of forestry resources which exceeded the equilibrium threshold in the period 2000-2012 (106%) due to the sustained exploitation of coniferous trees, and (iii) a water exploitation rate which remains stable and below the water stress level defined at European level². Moreover, in a context where demographics and economic activities are evolving, the indicators for the use of raw materials remained relatively stable in the period 2001-2011.



While the decoupling observed between the intensity of economic activities (GDP) and demand for materials (DMI and DMC) is certainly a result of business cycle fluctuations (the financial and economic crisis, the overall decrease in the consumption of final energy³, the closure of industrial plants, etc.), it is also the result of the growth of the service sector and of the focus of industrial production on goods with high added value and consuming less material.

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/resource-efficient-europe/index_fr.htm

[2] Despite exporting 40% of total drinking water abstractions to Flanders and the Brussels-Capital Region

[3] This allows the targets set in the Walloon Plan for Sustainable Use of Energy up to 2010 to be met.

Good waste management performance

Preventing the production of waste and better managing waste similarly belong to an approach making more efficient use of resources. Various measures have been taken in Wallonia in this direction: targeted prevention measures, a take-back obligation and a landfill ban for certain kinds of waste, dissuasive taxation and fines, subsidies for local collecting centres (container parks), development of separate waste collections, recycling and recovery.



Quantities of household refuse have gone down and are in line with PWD 2010 targets, while the quantities of heavy fractions (green and bulky waste) collected are higher than the specific targets set due to the success of local collecting centres. Separate waste collections continued to gain ground, achieving the targets set in the PWD 2010. The exceptions here regard textiles and organic kitchen waste, where further progress is needed. The PWD 2010 targets for the recovery of municipal waste and waste with a take-back obligation have also been broadly achieved. As regards industrial waste, the quantities generated are on a downward trend, decoupled from the development of gross added value in the sectors concerned due to a range of factors (new processes, branch agreements, closures of certain industrial plants, etc.). Their recovery, now at a rate exceeding 90%, is particularly high. A Waste Prevention and Management Plan with new targets is currently being prepared.

It foresees a list of measures aimed at combating different forms of wastage and promoting more sustainable forms of production, distribution and consumption.

A continuing increase in road transport

The transport of people and goods, where demand has been steadily increasing over the last 20 years, subjects the environment to a great amount of pressure (land fragmentation, atmospheric pollution, noise, etc.). Road transport, favoured by its versatility and the extreme density of the Walloon road network (± 500 km of main roads/1,000 km²), dominates. The evolution of business practices (just-in-time) and lifestyles, the development of scattered housing and limited public transport in rural areas are other contributory factors.



As regards freight transport, the growing use of road transport (82% of total demand in 2011) is taking place at the expense of rail freight (11% of total demand in 2011), while transport by barge, preferential from an environmental point of view, is not increasing (7% of total demand in 2011). As regards the transport of passengers, we have hardly seen any progress over time in the share of public transport, which remains stable at around 20%, while the remainder of journeys are done in private vehicles. Nevertheless we are starting to see a decoupling between vehicle ownership and vehicle use: despite the growth in the number of vehicles, households are tending

to make less systematic use of cars. Moreover air transport is also greatly increasing, with regard to both freight and passengers.

Emissions of atmospheric pollutants down

Since the 1990's, atmospheric emissions of various pollutants (GHG, SO₂, NO_x, NH₃, VOC, PM, MTE, ODS, etc.) have decreased significantly in Wallonia, leading to an overall improvement in air quality, even if pollution peaks are still seen every now and again. This drop is allowing Wallonia to broadly meet the targets set by European legislation and various international protocols.



Though structural factors have certainly had a positive influence on this evolution (better-performing boilers, engines, industrial processes and exhaust gases processing, the prevalence of catalytic converters, the use of cleaner fuels, the development of renewable energy sources and CHP, etc.), the current state of the economy (financial and economic crisis, a drop in final energy consumption, plant closures, etc.) has also contributed a lot. Structural efforts need to continue if Wallonia wants to comply with the stricter targets now outlined for the future, whether these are set in the context of a more voluntary Walloon policy (the «Climate» Decree, the Air-Climate-Energy Plan currently being prepared) or soon to be imposed by European legislation and the revision of certain international protocols.

Slow improvement in the quality of water

The evaluations carried out for the period 2009-2013 indicate that 57% of the surface water bodies and 40% of the groundwater bodies in Wallonia are not in an overall good status in the sense of the European framework Directive on water, even if the first River Basin Management Plans (RBMP) had the goal of limiting these proportions to 49% (surface water) and 30% (groundwater) by the end of 2015.



The situation is particularly difficult to improve in the river basin district of the Scheldt and in certain sub-basins of the Meuse, characterised by high population densities and intensive farming and industrial activities. The biological indicators are not showing any marked improvement in the ecological quality of the water, despite the efforts put in to reduce local pollutant discharges from industrial companies (drop of 5% to 51% between 1995 and 2011 dependent on the type of pollutant subject to the tax) and from urban agglomerations (98% of the pollutant volumes collected and 87% treated in urban waste water treatment plants in 2013). Diffuse inputs remain difficult to control even if we have seen a reduction in the flows of nitrogen and phosphorus into the water bodies due to various factors, in particular those helping to reduce the use of fertilizers. Moreover, the evolution of water quality is highly dependent, in the short term, on weather factors (run-off after spreading, the rise and fall of groundwater levels, dilution and concentration of pollutants dependent on

water flow rates, etc.), and, in the long term, on the exchange dynamics with large quantities of sediments potentially able to become a source of secondary pollution. Finally, the improvements take time (the long soil-to-groundwater transfer times and the slow restoration of aquatic ecosystems). Three mainline programmes are in place to promote these improvements: the RBMP (the second set of which is currently being prepared for the period 2016-2021, the Walloon Pesticide Reduction Programme and the Programme for the Sustainable Management of Nitrogen in Agriculture, which was recently revised.

Soil marked by human activity

Approximately 90% of agricultural land is showing signs of a deficiency in organic matter (TOC < 1.5%), with negative consequences for soil structure and its resistance to erosion, its fertility, its filtering capacity and, ultimately, its ability to provide ecosystem services. This situation can contribute to major soil losses by water erosion, especially in the soil of the loamy and sandy-loamy regions, where anti-erosion farming practices and soil remediation solutions need to be stepped up.



Among other threats affecting soil, pollution from local sources, mainly associated with Wallonia's industrial past, have over the last few years been the subject of management measures, backed up by legislative and financial instruments. Though the situation is improving, there are still considerable problems that are remnants of past environ-

mental situations. An inventory of these is currently underway. In contrast to the other environmental components, the soil is not the subject of any overall plan aimed at conserving or improving the current state (even if a Soil Code is currently being drafted). This is expected from specific measures taken in various contexts (application of the «Soil» Decree, cross-compliance for CAP direct payments, agri-environmental programmes, recycling of sludge from urban waste water treatment plants, etc.).

Biodiversity: further efforts needed

With the conservation status of Continental habitats of Community interest considered as bad for 66% of all habitats concerned and 31% of animal and plant species studied threatened by extinction, the European 2010 goal to stop the decline in biodiversity was not achieved in Wallonia.



This situation is linked to various factors, of which the main ones are: (i) the still increasing fragmentation of Walloon territory (a growing percentage of built-up land, roads, areas planted with monocultures or subject to intensive farming, (ii) the continuing existence of local or diffuse sources of pollution (e.g. eutrophication nitrogen, pesticides), and (iii) the increasing number of invasive alien species that tend to colonize ever more land areas in Wallonia. The major drop in wild and honey bee populations (more than 30% mortality rate in 2012-2013) is particularly worrying due to their importance as pollinators. Populations of various species

of birds and small mammals associated with farmlands are also decreasing. On top of the factors already mentioned, the destruction of certain habitats such as hedges, banks or edges of fields negatively affects these species. There are also factors specific to certain species, such as the *Varroa destructor* in the case of bees.



Turning to forests, defoliation is continuing, probably due to the cumulative effect of the stresses trees have been facing for several years (the chemical poverty of certain soils, attacks by predators, water deficiencies in certain years, delayed effects of acid rain which impacted forests up till the early 1990's). As regards wild ungulate populations which have been on the increase since 1980 and have caused various environmental and economic problems, it would seem that they are starting to slightly go into decline. Faced with these challenges, forestry practices are evolving to give greater priority to maintaining biodiversity.

An improvement in the situation of fauna, flora and habitats is expected through the setting up of the Natura 2000 network (13% of Walloon territory), the development of the network of protected natural sites (though still not very dense in Wallonia, accounting for < 1% of Walloon territory), and the development of agri-environmental programmes which are being taken up well by Walloon farmers (55% involved in an agri-environmental measure at least, in 2012)

Momentum set to continue

Summing up, the majority of indicators developed in this outlook reveal that a certain momentum for improving the quality of the environment has been initiated and kept up over the last few decades in Wallonia, though to different degrees dependent on the subject concerned. This momentum is reflected in particular in the form of eco-efficiency gains in several economic sectors, with a decoupling being registered between their activities and the pressures on the environment thanks to water and energy savings, the use of cleaner fuels, more effective treatment of discharges, the use of best available practices/technologies or the reduced use of fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture. It also allows Wallonia to meet or come close to several performance and resource targets defined in current legislation or in the various strategic plans and programmes. However, the situation remains problematic on various levels: certain environmental pressures are growing (land use, transport activities), the management of sites featuring remnants of past pollutions is proving to be extremely costly (sediments from inland waterways, contaminated soil) and certain features of the environment are in a poor state (surface water bodies, groundwater bodies, farmland soil with little organic matter, biodiversity in decline, etc.). However, there is still room for manoeuvre for accelerating or enhancing the improvement momentum observed, especially via the development of approaches directed more towards prevention, integration, synergy, efficiency, accountability and control.