

From dogfight to protected birds? estuary

Title

After years of political dogfight there finally seems to be hope for the [Western Scheldt estuary in the Netherlands](#), a partly enclosed coastal body of brackish water with multiple streams flowing into it, and with a free connection to the open sea. This very important area for migrating birds and waders has been degrading for years and there is a serious risk that the damage to the ecosystem will be irreversible if the negative trend continues. But in the last months of 2012 the Dutch government decided to take the first serious steps towards nature restoration by approving the inundation of the [Hedwige polder](#).

A big victory for [Vogelbescherming Nederland](#) (BirdLife Netherlands) and [Natuurpunt](#) (BirdLife Flanders) that have consistently called for the implementation of effective restoration measures. [The estuary of the river Scheldt is situated in the south-west of the Netherlands, partly crossing the border with Belgium](#). It is the largest multi-channel estuary of north-western Europe, providing vital habitat for over 40 species of birds. The entire estuary has been designated as a protected area that is part of the [Natura 2000 network](#).

The conservation status of the estuary is poor and continues to deteriorate. Repeated deepening of the navigation channel, land reclamation and other human activities have caused a significant reduction of important estuarine habitats. The Netherlands and Flanders concluded an international agreement in 2005, wherein they agreed to adopt the necessary nature restoration measures. This treaty requires the Netherlands to realise at least 600 hectares of new estuarine nature, including the inundation of the Hedwige polder. Numerous delays followed and continuing uncertainty about the implementation of the required nature restoration measures has led to legal action against the Netherlands by the European Commission (infringement proceedings), the Flemish Government (an international dispute settlement procedure) and BirdLife Netherlands (a procedure before a Dutch court). The first step in the right direction was taken in December 2012, when the Dutch Government formally announced that the Hedwige polder will be flooded.

The new Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Sharon Dijksma, presented a plan with a timeframe for the inundation of the Hedwige polder that is to be completed by 2019. Natuurpunt-director Chris Steenwegen and Vogelbescherming-director Fred Wouters are both content with the decision, but remain cautious. Chris Steenwegen stated "Natuurpunt is pleased with the commitment of the new Dutch Government. But it is not the first time that such a commitment has been made without anything happening. Therefore Natuurpunt welcomes the intention of the Flemish Government to hang on to the international dispute settlement procedure, just in

case?? Fred Wouters adds: ?Moreover, the second 300 hectares of new estuarine nature that have to be realised according to the Scheldt Treaty are not mentioned. And the realisation of the complete 600 hectares is needed to guarantee that the deterioration of the Western Scheldt estuary is effectively halted?. That is why also BirdLife Netherlands will continue its procedure before a national appeals court against the Dutch State on the nature restoration in the Western Scheldt. Find further information on our [case study of the River Scheldt Estuary](#)
